

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

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SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

SANDRA PHILLIPS

SFMOMA Staff, 1987-present (2010)
Curator of Photography, 1987-1999
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[Portions of this transcript have been sealed until January 1, 2035]

Interviews conducted by Richard Cándida Smith, PhD
in 2009

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Sandra Phillips
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 Interview 1: March 2, 2009

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Cándida Smith: We like to start with basic background information, where you were born, when you were born, where you were raised.

01-00:01:09

Phillips: I was born and raised in New York City. My parents were involved in the arts. My mother was a landscape architect; my father was an architect. They used to take us to museums all the time. I loved museums from the very beginning. I remember my mother taking me to see “The Family of Man” when I was ten years old and being very embarrassed by all those nursing ladies, but also frightened by a room of the atomic bomb, photographs of the atomic bomb. I also remember actually seeing the show called “New Documents at the Museum of Modern Art” when I was in college, which was the first time I had seen Diane Arbus’s pictures. I remember seeing a man spit at those pictures, so that was pretty shocking.

Cándida Smith: In the gallery?

01-00:02:15

Phillips: In the gallery.

Cándida Smith: They had glass on them, I suppose.

01-00:02:18

Phillips: Yes, they did have glass on them, thank goodness. I was going to be an artist.

Cándida Smith: A studio artist.

01-00:02:30

Phillips: Yes, I was. I married a man who was a painter and who taught at Bard College. Then I went back to graduate school after I had my son and decided I wanted to study art history; that was more interesting. It was harder to be an artist.

Cándida Smith: Where in New York did you grow up? Which part of New York?

01-00:03:05

Phillips: I grew up in the neighborhood that Helen Levitt photographed, which is the Upper East Side. It’s where Walker Evans lived, it’s where she lived when she was living with him. It was blocks away, literally.

Cándida Smith: Is that near Germantown? Or Yorkville, I guess.

01-00:03:24

Phillips: It was Yorkville, that's where it was. That apartment still is there; my son lives in it now. It's a neighborhood that's changed enormously, but it was definitely a neighborhood then.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps we should get the names of your parents.

01-00:03:51

Phillips: My mother was Nelva Weber. She used to write for the *New York Times* a little bit and had bit landscape projects all over. My father worked for Edward Stone, the architect. He was a project architect. His name was Joseph Sammataro.

Cándida Smith: What art did you do? You were a studio art major?

01-00:04:18

Phillips: I was. I went to the Art Students League as a kid. The New York Studio School was evolving then, I was part of that. When I went to Bard as a student, I was a painting student. As a painting student, you're supposed to take art history, too, so I took art history and that was pretty interesting.

Cándida Smith: Were you an abstract painter, representation?

01-00:04:47

Phillips: Both, actually, but mainly abstract.

Cándida Smith: Where did you do your PhD studies, then, your art history studies?

01-00:04:58

Phillips: I got my master's degree immediately after I left Bard. I got a fellowship to go to Bryn Mawr. I got my master's degree, but that was a horrible place to have gone. I guess that runs in the line of saying things that you probably don't want repeated! Then after my son was born, a few years later, I went to the City University of New York, which was great. The Graduate Center. It was one of those graduate schools that had just been started. They were tinkering with how to make it work. You could really write your own program. They were interested in odd people like me, who had come back to do some work, and interested in me, who wanted to do strange things like study photography.

Cándida Smith: So you already knew you wanted to study the history of photography.

01-00:06:06

Phillips: I did. I wanted to at least explore that.

Cándida Smith: What was it about photography in particular that attracted you?

01-00:06:14

Phillips: It's a very interesting question, and I'm sure it has something to do with the fact that I had been wandering around in New York museums, especially the

Modern, and I probably, by osmosis, picked up what John Szarkowski had been doing. Because I remember this book he did called *The Photographer's Eye*, which I still have. I still have this book from 1963, maybe. An amazing book. My mother must have given it to me. It showed how photographers work, how photography is different from painting. How photographers work with certain innate tools, like the idea of motion, which is not something that painters naturally think about. Or the point of view, the viewpoint. Or the detail. These are photographic ideas. I always thought, and still think, that's a very, *very* interesting way to be thinking. The book is divided into ways that photographers see and make pictures that are different from other ways of putting pictures together. So you look at the detail, for instance, and the vantage point. These are ways in which photographers work that are different, that are particular to their field. The other thing that was so amazing about that book is that it wasn't just about great artists. It included the work of amateurs or people who were unknown. They just were *great* photographs, that's the thing. There was an amazing generosity to his vantage point, which I found inspiring and true.

Cándida Smith: You had also mentioned something about motion being—

01-00:09:21

Phillips: Motion is another photographic idea that is not something a painter would necessarily be interested in representing. But photographers have been, historically.

Cándida Smith: So these ideas were occupying your thinking as you go to CUNY, then, that's what you want to explore.

01-00:09:52

Phillips: Among other things. The other thing that was so interesting to me is when I was at Bryn Mawr, I was interested in looking at the beginnings of the Renaissance in Italy. My father was Italian, so that was personally interesting to me. I became fascinated with the evolution of people like Giotto and Duccio. My training was to be as detailed and particular as possible, and I was advised not to study somebody like Giotto or Duccio because there were already thirty-five books on Giotto, some of them in Italian and some of them in German, et cetera, and I would be adding just a little drop to the larger consciousness. I thought, well, photography, it's an old medium, but it hasn't been widely studied. You could write major studies on important people. You could make the first book on the equivalent of Giotto. Well, maybe not, maybe the second or third. But how exciting that would be, to engage these people as they were, serious artists. So that was exciting.

Cándida Smith: What was your dissertation about?

01-00:11:35

Phillips: It was about this guy named André Kertész, who was Hungarian, a Hungarian Jew, who left Hungary in 1925 to come to Paris, where he flourished

artistically and somewhat financially until the thirties. Then he had to leave and come to New York. So here he was in New York. He was, by then, an old guy and I could talk to him. I did. I went and visited him. I lived upstate; I went down to visit him and have lunch with him every week for a year and a half. I knew everything about him. Even things that he didn't know. It was completely interesting to me to study somebody who I admired enormously and whose work had been known in a popular way, but whose work had never been really taken seriously. It was surprising even to him. I remember I did a show with a friend of mine, David Travis at the Art Institute of Chicago. I gave André my text, which was part of my dissertation.

Cándida Smith: When was this show?

01-00:13:05

Phillips: This was in 1985. He said to me, "Oh, you make me sound like an interesting man, an interesting artist, very serious." But he *was*! I was giving him his due. That was an exciting project, to get photography regarded in that way.

Cándida Smith: As?

01-00:13:36

Phillips: As a serious form of expression.

Cándida Smith: As opposed to just social documentation.

01-00:13:46

Phillips: Yes. Yes. Just some documentation, commercial documentation.

Cándida Smith: I think of *The Concerned Photographer*, which you probably know because everybody had it for a while.

01-00:14:02

Phillips: Yes.

Cándida Smith: With Kertesz and—

01-00:14:05

Phillips: [Robert] Capa. All those Hungarians, lots of them. [Kertesz] was not really a photojournalist. He's more interesting than that, more complicated than that, more ambiguous. He was an interesting guy.

Cándida Smith: Who were your advisors? Who did you work with?

01-00:14:27

Phillips: CUNY had this relationship with Princeton [University], and Princeton had recently hired Peter Bunnell from the Museum of Modern Art, where he had worked with John Szarkowski. Peter opened a line of study for people who were interested in photography and in doing graduate work on photography. As I said, I lived in upstate New York, so I'd come down to the city on the

train, and then I would take the train down to Princeton after my class and stay overnight with a friend, and then go deal with Peter and his class, and then come all the way back up. It was a lot of work, but it was *great*, it was fun. [Bunnell] was on my committee.

Milton Brown was my advisor. Milton was an old communist, Harvard [University] trained, who spoke with an absolute Brooklyn accent. He was an amazing man. He was a good friend of Paul Strand, and he was interested in photography through his friendships. He had been the first person to really seriously consider American modernist art as worthy of study. When I was at Bryn Mawr writing my MA on—Well, that's another story. But I wanted to study American modernism and jettison the Italian Renaissance guys. They let me do it with great difficulty, because they said, oh, we can't let you study anything that's written in English. So here I was studying with this guy who spoke French fluently, German and all that, he could read everything. Yet he had studied American modernism. This was a long time ago. Here we're putting on a show of [Georgia] O'Keeffe and Ansel Adams that would have been absolutely unheard of thirty years ago. How far we've come, to considering these people are really serious, important people now. It wasn't then. It was considered very radical, a little bit risqué. I thought, well, if I can do American modernism, maybe I can do photography, too.

Cándida Smith: At the time that you've entered into this study, Walter Benjamin's been resurrected and the famous essay on mechanical reproduction has come out. Was that important for you?

01-00:18:09

Phillips:

It was. In a way, it was important. The other person—she was not on my committee, but she was definitely teaching there—was Rosalind Krauss. She was a very tough person, very theoretically heavy, very critical of me because I think she thought of me as an old-fashioned romantic. She told me I wasn't theoretical enough. But she also gave serious consideration to photography. For me, that was an important addition. I am not theoretically engaged. I'm certainly interested in Walter Benjamin, and I'm grateful to his study of mechanical reproduction and the role of photography in it. It was certainly all part of that moment, you're right.

Cándida Smith: I'm not trying to put you on the spot, but to the degree to which, say, Gisèle Freund was—

01-00:19:25

Phillips:

Yes, I knew Gisèle Freund, yes. Around this time, I was actually teaching in Paris for a couple of summers, and I used her book as my basic text. We got her to come in and talk to the American students in Paris. She was quite a character. I enjoyed her very much. A very sharp woman. But her work was really almost exclusively sociological. She was uncomfortable with the art part of it, which I found interesting. It was a little too outré for her.

Cándida Smith: That is interesting. What about Susan Sontag, *On Photography*?

01-00:20:15

Phillips: Oh, yes. *On Photography* came out after the show of Diane Arbus, which occurred in 1972, after her death in 1971. The book *On Photography*, I think, was published '77, but it came out as articles in the *New York Review of Books* first. It would be interesting to go back to those. I have them all torn out somewhere in my office. It'd be interesting to read those articles sequentially, because I believe the first one was about Arbus. You will recall how visceral that was. She was really very offended by Arbus, and it's this visceral response to Arbus that recalls her childhood response in Southern California to pictures of Auschwitz. It's a very interesting lead into how to discuss photography, because photography does have this visceral attentiveness to things that we don't—Well, it's voyeuristic is the special part of it; or part of it is voyeuristic.

Cándida Smith: A concept you're exploring now.

01-00:22:03

Phillips: Right. Anyway, I was shocked, perturbed, moved, and interested that she could have such a disturbed reaction to photography. That's part of it. I think that's what's so interesting about this medium, is that although we try and make it into an art form, it's not always so convenient. Maybe it's important not to consider it only as art or part of it as art. It's messy. It's a larger thing, really.

Cándida Smith: If we think about what's happening in painting, let's say—but it's also happening in sculpture—the move toward purification that was underway at least since the forties, but really is speeding up in the sixties and the seventies.

01-00:23:17

Phillips: Definitely. Minimalism, conceptualism, all that.

Cándida Smith: That's such a big part of what was going on in New York at the time, post Pop art. Was that affecting you?

01-00:23:34

Phillips: Absolutely. I was the wife of a faculty member who happened to be the head of the art department. I knew these people. They would come up, they would give talks. I remember when Clement Greenberg came up. He was a disturbingly arrogant person. All of our friends were minimalist painters with great ambition. Photography was something they batted down. Why would you be seriously thinking about all that? Photography is a modest little interruption, nothing serious. When I was writing about Arbus, this was interesting for me to remember, because they were the big guys. There's something very male about making this stuff. They were treating women very badly, even though the women's movement was also burgeoning at this time. Their work is pure and without reference to the larger issues that were going

on that were so interesting. Then you have the women—Louise Bourgeois and all those people at the same time that were bringing up all this odd, scary stuff. It wasn't the guys, it was the women who were doing it. I saw, I still see Arbus as part of that.

Cándida Smith: That's very interesting.

01-00:25:24

Phillips: Jay DeFeo was part of that, too.

Cándida Smith: Yes, very much. Or Lee Bontecou.

01-00:25:29

Phillips: Lee Bontecou, indeed.

Cándida Smith: Were you personally involved in the women's movement, would you say?

01-00:25:37

Phillips: I wasn't personally involved, though I knew lots of people who were. I had a kid. We had very little money, and we lived outside of New York, so it was hard. I was trying to go to school, too. It was a lot to do. I was very interested in it, but—

Cándida Smith: So that moment of feminist consciousness-raising, you were aware of, but maybe it moved around you.

01-00:26:11

Phillips: Indeed. I certainly knew a lot of those people.

Cándida Smith: In terms of minimalism and photography, what did you feel about the way in which photographers were beginning to—perhaps particularly some of the younger photographers—were picking up some of these ideas? Or purification. Maybe that's a better word.

01-00:26:38

Phillips: Photographers?

Cándida Smith: Photographers who were dealing with the issue, the purification of media. Were there any that you—

01-00:26:47

Phillips: I'm trying to think of who. Well, there was a group that were called the New Topographers, the New Topographics movement. That's in the seventies.

Cándida Smith: I was thinking of the seventies. Developments in photography and the generation that's coming of age or stepping forward in the seventies, which of course, is the high point of conceptualism, as well.

01-00:27:22

Phillips:

I saw a lot of this stuff. I certainly saw the New Topographics show; I was up there in Rochester, because the show was in Rochester. I was more involved in modernism. I was working on André Kertesz; that was my dissertation. That's probably why I wasn't so involved in the women's movement and all of that, because I really had to try and finish that dissertation. It took me ten years to do that. I was interested in a lot of historical stuff. I was processing the contemporary photography stuff, but I wouldn't say I was part of it then. That was later. I was more comfortable with older people and more historical people. The first shows that I did when I came to San Francisco, just to jump forward a little bit, would be people like Helen Levitt and Wright Morris, because they were part of my modernist understanding. Then only later did I deal with the more contemporary stuff.

Cándida Smith:

I guess there was a canon of modernist photographers that was forming at that time, but in addition to Kertesz, who would be the most important figures for you, that articulate what was really the great masterpieces of modernist photography? Not necessarily American. I'm really interested in what your tastes were or what your critical evaluation was, let's say in the mid- to late seventies.

01-00:29:45

Phillips:

I came out here in 1980 for a semester, to teach at Mills [College]. I became interested in what Van [Van Deren Coke] was doing. Which is, I'm sure, why he asked me to apply for this job. I was very interested in European modernism. That was something that wasn't really considered that well in New York. John Szarkowski was not interested in that. He knew André and had given André Kertesz a show, but for me, it was natural to move from Kertesz into the German European modernists—Moholy [László Moholy-Nagy], all those other Hungarians. The show that we eventually took called—What was it called? It was from the Ford collection of modern photography that was bought by the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. That was the material that—[Charles] Sheeler and all those people, who were mainly East Coast artists or European artists, who were making a statement about photography as being new and an opportunity, and very involved within the background of painting and sculpture at that time. So the twenties and thirties was my big interest then. Surrealism, too. That's where I come from.

Cándida Smith:

It's all nice work.

01-00:31:46

Phillips:

Oh, it's *great* work! Man Ray. Just after I got my degree—I was at Vassar [College] for about a year and a half. I was asked to write an essay on Man Ray and photography in the twenties and thirties (for a show at the Smithsonian [Institution]). That was natural for me to do.

Cándida Smith:

You've talked a little bit about photographic ideas or ideas that people who are dealing with the photographic medium have to confront. I wonder if

you've given any thought to what artists, photographers working with photographic medium, have to say about political and sociological conditions that no one else can. What is the unique knowledge that photographers present, share with others?

01-00:32:55

Phillips:

Well, you see, that's why finally, I'm committed to photography. Because at least when we were all growing up, at least until right now, photography—If you made a photograph of something, you had to have *some* relationship to what you were photographing. It had to have something called truth, right? It wasn't really truth, it wasn't "absolute truth," but it had an aura of truth, a truthful report of what you saw, what you experienced, who those people really were. The interesting thing about that, as with all truthful reporting, is that it's ambiguous, right? But it does get you out there. The photograph has a wonderfully interesting relationship between the person making the picture and what is out there.

One of the things that you haven't mentioned, but when I was also hanging around at Bard, at the same time as all of this stuff was emerging about art, there was also something called new journalism. There you had people like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer, trying to do a similar thing with real events, with real things that they were reporting on. They were trying to deal in a new way with objective reporting. Obviously, there's no such *real* thing as truly objective reporting. So that idea, in visual terms, is what we call documentary photography. How it's been tweaked and changed and manipulated is *completely* interesting to me. Just to give one obvious example, is Diane Arbus, who was making pictures of real people, but whose projections of them—The relationship of those people to who she was is *extremely* interesting and totally relevant. It can only be a photograph. It's the photograph that gives it its power, its truthfulness. It's the tension between who those people are and who she is that makes it so interesting.

Cándida Smith: How did you respond, then, to the rebirth of—I don't necessarily have the right vocabulary—but the rebirth of tableau photography that seems to happen as part of the postmodern turn?

01-00:36:23

Phillips:

Not very well. It's still something that as a historian, I can admire, but it's not something that I have any personal responsiveness to. Of course, we mount exhibitions. We put Cindy Sherman up, and we collect that work. I don't have a personal commitment to that work. It doesn't move me or speak to me or engage me in the way that Arbus does, or Helen Levitt does, or Walker Evans does, or Robert Adams does. There are younger photographers who also have to deal with these issues. It seems to me that's the real issue of photography. But I wouldn't even call them photographers. I wouldn't call Cindy Sherman a photographer, as I know it. She's interested in cultural ideas more than in real experience.

Cándida Smith: Representationality, I suppose. I was going to ask you what photographers have to say about aesthetic questions that other artists can't say. I think I get a sense of where you're coming from on that issue. It is that intimate connection between a real experience—

01-00:38:15

Phillips: The world.

Cándida Smith: —as opposed to an imagined experience.

01-00:38:16

Phillips: That's what's so interesting about photography, at least for me. You have to be there and see what you're seeing, what you're representing.

Cándida Smith: Well, perhaps we could talk a little bit about your employment history coming to the museum. You've given us bits and pieces, but I wonder if there was a trajectory, if there were key jobs that you held before you came here that were important in the shaping of how you thought you would go about managing a collection of this nature.

01-00:38:53

Phillips: Well, I never thought I was going to go about managing a collection. I thought I was going to be a college teacher. It didn't work out that way. It turned out that I was very lucky. It suited me not to be teaching. I love teaching, actually. I loved it when I was teaching. I had great students. It was very exciting because photography was being really rediscovered then. People would like to come to hear me talk about the history of photography. I thought that was very cool.

Cándida Smith: This was at Vassar, at Mills, in Paris?

01-00:39:38

Phillips: Actually, I taught at the New School [for Design], I taught at Parsons. I would come down into the city. I taught for years at New Paltz, which was not too far from where I was living. Then I was in contact with David Travis at the Art Institute of Chicago. Now, how did we do that? I had seen a book that he had done on the Julien Levy Collection. Julien Levy was a very interesting guy who had gone to Paris in the twenties, after he had graduated from Harvard, and knew [Marcel] Duchamp. Duchamp had taken him around, introduced him to Man Ray. He discovered [Eugène] Atget, and he discovered photography's existence as a new art medium in the twenties and early thirties. He brought this material back. He had a gallery and tried to sell photographs as art. That proved a terrific failure. But he continued and he became a very important figure for the opening of the Museum of Modern Art and for surrealism and for abstract expressionism, after all that. In any case, that collection of photographs was still hanging around, and David Travis at the Art Institute of Chicago purchased it and put on an exhibition. I found this catalog, which, since I was interested in that field, was naturally totally

interesting to me. So we had been hired to go to Mills. We were at Bard. This was in January, late December or early January. We drove across the country, and we hit Chicago. I remember meeting David. He was in this tiny, little like office/closet. He had all this stuff floating around on a table half the size of that [narrator points to the table in front of her]. He said, “Well, what are you doing?” I said, “Well, I’m going to do this thing at Mills, and then I’m going to come back.” “What are you going to do when you come back?” I said, “Well, I’m going to try and write a dissertation on something.” And, “Well, what is the dissertation?” I said, “Well, I think it’s going to be André Kertesz, but I don’t know. I’ve only started corresponding with him.” He said, “Well, if you ever do that, call me up and let me know.” So I did. So I came back, and I called up David. I said, “Yes, André’s letting me do a dissertation on his work in Paris.” He said, “Well, would you like to do a show with me?” I said, “Sure. Of course, I’d like to do a show with you. That would be fun.” So that’s what we did. My dissertation actually was the show that was at the Art Institute of Chicago and then went to the Met. It was, I would have to say, a very early, very serious consideration of this guy, beautifully produced. That seemed to me a whole lot of fun.

01-00:43:36

After I got my degree, there were no teaching jobs that I felt I could take, but there was a little job at the Vassar College Art Gallery, as the curator. I thought, “Well, this could be fun!” It was actually a great way to learn how to be a curator because you had to do everything. I had to write the press releases, I had to help the guy pound in the nails and hang up the pictures, and I had to deal with donors and fundraising—the whole thing. Everything. I had an extremely awful director, which made the whole process even clearer, because he was a complete incompetent guy. It also made it easier to move when Van Deren Coke called me, since I had known him a little bit. This was a couple years later. He said, “I’m going to retire. I thought you might be interested in my job.” I’d been back in touch with Van because of a guy named Martin Munkácsi, a Hungarian man who had died, but his daughter was living in Woodstock and had all this material. I was going to do a show because it was easy and because I knew Hungarian modernism and I knew this guy was really important. Van knew about him and had been buying some of his work. So we were going to do this show together. We didn’t, but I did come out and I took long, deep breaths and decided, well, maybe that was an adventure we could all deal with.

Cándida Smith: Well, how did the process of coming here unfold? I presume at some point you had to talk with Jack Lane.

01-00:45:56

Phillips:

I had an interview or two. Well, I figured out that maybe I should send in an application and maybe I should really think about all of this. I met Jack. and he was also interested in modern American painting. He’d done his work on [Stuart] Davis, and I knew that work. I had seen the show that he had done at the Brooklyn Museum. It seemed that there was a serious fellow person there.

I had known of SFMOMA. I knew Van. Van was a important guy. It turned out that finally, he couldn't stand what I decided I wanted to do when I came here. Because I didn't stay a modernist; I became something else. It seemed a little nerve wracking, but very exciting to come out here. It was a community where there was a lot going on in contemporary stuff, too, not only historical materials. I found out very quickly that there was so little money out here it was amazing that *anything* could have happened. But then it seemed like it was possible to do historical work, as well as whatever else one wanted to do. That there was a lot going on here that was interesting. I wasn't going to get anything in New York, that seemed a little bit too far away, too impossible to do.

Cándida Smith: Well, still, it must have been wrenching, as a New Yorker, to leave the island.

01-00:48:29

Phillips:

It was *absolutely* wrenching. It was wrenching for a number of reasons. My husband and I separated about a year after. That was wrenching. But by then, it was too late to leave. I couldn't leave. It was very exciting out here. It was very new. It was challenging to me because it wasn't what I had known in New York. It was really different. *Everything* was different. *Everything* was different. It was a challenge to understand it.

Cándida Smith: What was Jack Lane's interest, in terms of the photography collection?

01-00:49:18

Phillips:

Jack and I, when I was working with him, did not get along, as it turned out, because he decided that having filled this position, he didn't need to help me. He just cut me loose—with virtually no support. I was pretty disturbed by that. He said, "Well, I just don't like photographs." I thought, "Oh!" I just stuck it out, I guess, because I felt it had already started here and I couldn't just let it go. I couldn't go back to New York. There was potential here, you know? There was always the question of money. And Jack, I think now justifiably, saw that photography here had already got its little group and there were people interested. He could take charge of the painting and sculpture part of [the museum]. That's what needed work. That had his attention, and he hired John Caldwell. Of course, John and I became good friends. That made up for the feeling that I'd been completely put out to pasture by the director. It wasn't done so nicely, but it was probably a good thing because it made me *completely* self-reliant. Oh, there was another incident which was not much fun. In those days, we had an accessions committee. I don't know if this is completely boring.

Cándida Smith: No. It's part of the reality, right?

01-00:51:44

Phillips:

So Jack Lane, when he came to the museum, made it very clear that he wanted to do two things. He wanted the museum to move out of its then quarters in the Herbst Theater building. He also wanted to develop the permanent

collection. Of course, developing the permanent collection for him was painting and sculpture. He hired John Caldwell to do that. He insisted on having a committee that would buy serious modern art, contemporary art. So all departments had to report to that committee. The head of the committee was Don Fisher. There was one moment when I was presenting. Because I had been given, I can't remember if it was \$5,000 or \$10,000, to spend for a year. It was like nothing. I was presenting my \$500 photographs and a \$1,000 photograph, et cetera, et cetera. All of a sudden Don Fisher said, "I'm not interested in this. I want to have a special session. I want the photography department and the architecture and design department out of the room."

So there we were, banished. The architecture and design department was also a younger person, starting a department then; he had the same amount of money that I had, whatever it was, either \$5,000 or \$10,000 to spend. So he was reduced to donations of things and plans that he could buy and a chair here or there.

Jack said, "Well, you guys have been thrown off the committee." I said to Jack, "So does that mean I leave? Do I stay at the museum, or do I leave?" He said, "Well, well, maybe you should think about starting your own committee." So I thought, well, I guess I could do that. So I did. It was actually the best thing in the world because I found I had support. I got people to donate money. They would be part of this committee. I found Paul Sack, who had already been helping me out. He was the first person in charge of the committee. We had a small group of people at the beginning, but we became a constituency that needed to be addressed. So it's really from that moment that the department was able to flourish, in a way that it hadn't before.

Cándida Smith: It's interesting. I've had glimmers of these stories. You've added an important piece of information. Paolo Polledri said something to the effect that Jack's attitude was, "You do the best job you can; I don't really care."

01-00:56:08

Phillips: Exactly.

Cándida Smith: "Don't cause me problems."

01-00:56:11

Phillips: Now Jack is a good friend. We've converted him into being somebody interested in photography.

Cándida Smith: The alternative could have been, "Well, now you're going to collect contemporary German photography, because I want to collect [Sigmar] Polke and [Gerhard] Richter." You could have been actually much more constrained.

01-00:56:38

Phillips: Indeed. Indeed.

Cándida Smith: But you did have a reasonably significant collection here when you arrived, right?

01-00:56:48

Phillips: Well, that's an interesting question because we've been reviewing this collection now. It's interesting to think of it historically, because first of all, there was never very much money here. The trustees have never been generous supporters, until five years, ten years ago. Even still not as generous as I think they really should be. But that's me. But photography was going through a change, too. Van came in 1980.

In the seventies, there was a guy named John Humphrey here. I've been trying to figure out who John Humphrey really was. A lovely guy with not a whole lot of ambition, but aware of what was going on nationally. He knew John Szarkowski, for instance. He knew Peter Bunnell, and he knew Van. He was electrified by all that was going on locally, because there was a lot going on. He wasn't very discriminating. But the other important point is that photography itself wasn't discriminating. By which I mean everyone—John, Peter Bunnell, Van—were not terribly clear on getting the right print. The vintage print, for instance, if it was especially beautiful. Spending that much money on an old photograph was an outrageous indulgence, if you suddenly wanted to do something with all this material coming on. You felt if *Aperture* was publishing a recent portfolio reprint of famous Strand photographs, and Strand was barely alive enough to approve of some of this material, that that's what you would buy, rather than a single Strand photograph, which you probably couldn't afford anyway. So we have a lot of that stuff. And Van was also part of that.

The whole turn toward connoisseurship in photography was occurring as I was moving from the East to the West, really. I remember being interviewed, or being on a panel somewhere, and the whole issue of vintage prints came up. It was a new concern, a relatively new concern. So yes, we have some important early pictures, but we don't have as many as we should have. Van went to visit Juliet Man Ray and he said, "Oh, I went to see Juliet Man Ray. I brought with me a wad of money, and I slapped it down on the table. Then I start putting this stack of pictures—She says, 'Oh, no, that's not enough. Put more.' So I put more pictures on. She'd say, 'No, add some more.' So I added some more." So now I get to look at the stack of pictures. Yes, there are some remarkable pictures, but maybe four out of the twenty-six or whatever. Well, maybe five.

Cándida Smith: You mean remarkable in terms of print quality or overall?

01-00:60:56

Phillips: That I would put up. That I would put up on the walls today. The others are later prints, they're indifferent pictures. He was interested in quantity more than quality.

Cándida Smith: If we think of photography as a medium where perhaps the—I mean, there were obvious exceptions to this, but maybe for many photographers, the publication was the critical thing rather than the gallery show.

01-00:61:27

Phillips: Who would show pictures on their walls? There was this one lady that I met here. I can't remember her name now. Helen—I forget her name. She had the Focus Gallery. She was an important figure. But she couldn't make money doing this. She was mainly a book person. She sold books. That's traditionally how photography has been seen, as what you make books out of.

Cándida Smith: Or magazines, of course.

01-00:62:00

Phillips: Or magazines, sure.

[Begin Audio File 2 03-02-2009.mp3]

Cándida Smith: We were mentioning the question of print quality. But to the degree that then you're part of a generational shift that you're helping to have happen, but of course you're not the only one, where connoisseurship, getting the best quality print is really part of the story, that's an interesting thing. Of course, some photographers who would print X number of prints off of a negative and then destroy the negative, right?

02-00:01:10

Phillips: Brett Weston did.

Cándida Smith: Then what do you do with somebody like Walker Evans, who really didn't care about the craft of printing? Or so they say. Or so *he* said.

02-00:02:04

Phillips: Well, that's what he said. In some cases, it doesn't really make that much difference, it's true. But things change. Papers change, the quality of the print is different. I do think that a picture that he printed in the 1970s was made by a person that was not the same person as the person in the 1930s. I think you can see that. It's not that I'm a fanatic about it, either, because we do have pictures that were made later. We have later prints of people like Robert Frank. But we try and make them by the artists themselves, for instance. Actually, someone like [Edward] Steichen, when he did "The Family of Man," he knew all those people, most of those people. He had his own commercial printer make the prints of those. Dorothea Lange and Ansel—That's why he and Ansel couldn't get along, because he had his commercial printer print the big Ansel pictures in the show, and they didn't look like Ansel Adams pictures.

Cándida Smith: They looked like "Family of Man" pictures.

02-00:03:37

Phillips: That's right. So it's a very interesting and complicated question.

Cándida Smith: Were these already issues that were bubbling in your mind when you came here?

02-00:03:51

Phillips: It was absolutely part of the times. I remember having these conversations with André Kertesz, because you could buy a photograph that his printer, who was an Armenian violinist turned printer, made. He did have some of these early prints, and he didn't believe that they were that important. Or he knew but he wouldn't acknowledge it. I remember there was a guy who wanted to buy a very early photograph, a very beautiful abstraction of a violin or a cello, the bridge and the strings. The guy was willing to pay \$3,000. André thought, "Can you imagine? Can you imagine? Do you think I should give it to him? Maybe it's worth much more." Nobody knew. Nobody knew what was going on. It's like the internet today. Where do you make money off of this? It was a new idea, it was a new issue, and the market hadn't figured it out.

Cándida Smith: What were your collecting priorities as you came in? I presume the first thing you had to do was really get to know the collection and make an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses. So maybe we should continue with that, but then where did you want to go with the collection?

02-00:05:53

Phillips: One of the first things I did was I went—By that time, André had just died. He had died a couple or a year before. I had been making a little bit of money, before I got my job at Vassar, by helping to organize his estate. We had discovered he had a show in Paris, 1927, that was one of these first gallery shows for art photographs. He had all these friends—[Piet] Mondrian and the futurists—who came to the show. Obviously, even though he was just a photographer, he was considered part of the art world. I discovered a portfolio of these original pictures. I thought, "How great it would be to have these in the museum." All of a sudden they were really expensive. The foundation that he had set up didn't want us to do—They didn't know—they still don't know—they didn't know how to deal with museums. They wouldn't give us money for a catalog. Obviously, you had to have a catalog, even if it was a small one. You had to study this, you had to make a defense of what it was. So we didn't do it.

It made me realize that the time had come and gone for that [type of] photography at this museum. Otherwise, I was going to be spending all my time raising a lot of money for very, very expensive objects. That seemed ridiculous.

In fact, I remember finding a Man Ray rayograph. A guy I'm still friendly with came by. A guy I had known upstate New York was a dealer, and he had a Man Ray rayograph. It was a copy that Man Ray had done. We still have it.

He said, “Well, now Sandy, this is going to be a little expensive.” Maybe \$4,000, I don’t remember now. Maybe less. I knew that if I didn’t get it, that would be it. This was my last opportunity. So I said, “Okay, I’m going to see if I can raise some money for this.” So we put it together piece by piece. I was working away, trying to get some money. I told him that we were working on this and we’d already raised I don’t know how many hundreds of dollars or whatever it was. Then he calls me and he says, “The person [who owns the picture] realizes that this is an important picture and the price is going to be double.” I said, “You can’t do that to me. I’m raising money. I can get this picture, but it’s going to take me some while, but you can’t—That’s not allowed.” So I realized through that, also that if I was going to do something dynamic here, I couldn’t hang in with the modernists only. I had to find another venue, even though that work was completely a development of what was here, what Van had done.

02-00:10:07

It seemed to me that the next area that was under-studied and under-priced was documentary photography. So that’s the line of attack I quite deliberately went on. There already had been an interest here. Bob Fisher, for instance, has always been a collector of Walker Evans. Don’s son, oldest son. All of his three sons collect photographs, not painting and sculpture. Which is very interesting. So that became my focus. It seemed to work with the collection, too. It was an extension of the modernist idea that Van had evolved. It seemed to me a good opportunity. It also was congruent with my own interests, an obvious development. It represented a new focus for the photography department here, which had ramifications for where we lived, which I thought was very interesting. In other words, I started out with Helen Levitt; then I went to Wright Morris, who lived here and photographed the Midwest, but also here; and then I started looking at documentation of the land, the landscape, the anti-Ansel Adams art of the land. That’s how I got to Robert Adams. So even though I didn’t know it consciously, it made perfect sense. It turned out to be a very interesting way to deal with the heritage of f/64 and the history of art photography here in Northern California.

Right now because we’re trying to figure out how to represent the photography department in our anniversary year. The collection has evolved. There have only been three photography curators here. The first was John Humphrey. He inherited and developed the collection that came in pieces from the very beginning, which was essentially an f/64 collection. People like Albert Bender and Mrs.[Elise] Haas who were patrons of Ansel’s gave us material that was local, that were made by the great modern artists of the area, who were the photographers. Let’s face it, there weren’t great painters here in the 1930s, but there were great photographers here. Humphrey was able to shape it a little bit. He was also able to add in, insofar as he could scrounge up money, a larger support of what was going on. I’m sure you know that we got, through Ansel, the Stieglitz photographs, which enormously helped our reputation as an important place to show photographs. John Humphrey, in the sixties, was an enthusiastic supporter of what was going on locally. What was

going on locally was people like Judy Dater and Jack Welpott and some of the continuation of the landscape—Herb Quick and the later, somewhat lesser, but also quite interesting figures who were working in landscape and the cultural landscape. Then added to that there was this—certainly, in the seventies—the conceptualists, who sometimes were using photographs. There’s a lot of junky stuff, but people like Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan did this project called *Evidence*, which was exhibited here. So there was some interest, some awareness of documentary work, but in an odd way here.

02-00:17:47

But in being interested in documentary photography, I came to understand the work of Robert Adams. And Robert Adams’ work, I realized, was a documentary critique of Ansel Adams. That suddenly enlarged the whole thing. That made me understand that this division that I had seen between art photography and documentary photography was a false division. You should see it as John Szarkowski had seen it, the whole thing. In fact, the division between modern and older photography was a false division and you should just collapse that whole thing; everything that photography has done was modern. Even nineteenth-century photography was modern. Modern art or modern. This led me to do this exhibition called “Crossing the Frontier,” which was about land use, which embraced ways in which the land had been photographed as it was used to make railroads, to mine, to farm. Oh, the other ingredient here is the Dorothea Lange show. Because that turned me around to her concerns, or her husband’s concerns, which was the social structure of California farming and water rights. Doing that show and then looking at this larger issue of documenting land and land use, and the importance of Bob Adams in all of this, made me revisit the whole subject of Western history and Western photography and the history of Western photography and what’s happened here and how it’s special and how it evolved and all of that. How important the documentary stream has always been, even though it was denied by Adams—not Bob Adams, but Ansel—and Weston.

Cándida Smith: That’s interesting. Of course, I think of Robert Adams as being a photographer who’s working within an art environment. You’re saying that perhaps his predecessors might be railroad survey photographers in the nineteenth century, who were working not in an art environment.

02-00:21:55

Phillips: Right. I guess one of the things that tipped me off to all of this was in speaking to Bob. I said, “So who’s your favorite photographer?” He said, “Dorothea Lange.” I said, “Really? Not Walker Evans?” He said, “No, no, no. Dorothea Lange.” So that was pretty interesting.

Cándida Smith: So as you settle in, you’re beginning to know some of the local photographers, I presume. You’re also beginning to know some of the local photographic collectors?

02-00:22:32

Phillips: And [SF] Camerawork then, when I first came, was very important, very, very interesting. Not so anymore, alas.

Cándida Smith: Were you seeking out collectors, or were they already here, to some degree?

02-00:22:50

Phillips: Van had a little group of people that I inherited, he had formed. Maybe ten people who would help throw a few thousand, maybe a few hundred dollars, at a picture for the museum or who would buy pictures for themselves and be amused by them. We would go on trips together. It was a small collectors group and it was called Photo Forum. That was my source of extra money. Those were the people that I knew and would go to when I needed to buy that Man Ray.

Cándida Smith: Were you also hoping that there might be donations to the museum? Were you cultivating donations of particular work to the museum?

02-00:23:52

Phillips: Do you know, Richard, I have not a clue what I was doing when I first came here. Yes, I suppose, I guess.

Cándida Smith: I think in painting and sculpture, it goes without saying because you're never going to get the Jackson Pollock unless someone gives it to you.

02-00:24:08

Phillips: Indeed. Indeed. I think I was probably more naïve and I was just thinking, these people seem fun and nice people and they're willing to help me out a little bit. They didn't have enormous means then. Photography wasn't that expensive yet, either. I mean really, really expensive. I remember there was a guy, David Robinson, you probably know David Robinson, the architect who's now died recently. He gave me \$5,000 a year the second year I was here and promised it for the next three years. I don't know, he got miffed at Jack, and it was only good for one year. But I bought three, four beautiful vintage Helen Levitt photographs with that. It was great. Of course, I thought we needed much more, but we still have a pretty okay Helen Levitt collection. I was helping people like Bob Fisher, getting them involved. After this catastrophe with Don Fisher throwing everyone off the accessions committee except the painting and sculpture people, then yes, then I did figure out that I needed people who would help me. I guess the very first person who came through was Paul Sack. He's been amazing. He's just been wonderfully understanding and generous, and all he wants for us is to use his pictures and put them up on the walls. I can do that.

Cándida Smith: Were there things you wanted to do that proved to be more difficult, that had more obstacles to them? Aside from buying a whole bunch of Man Rays or—

02-00:26:51

Phillips:

Well, it was hard to get—There was a division here. There was such obvious anxiety on the part of the director and the main trustees to be taken seriously, to make a real serious collection and a real serious museum in a place that had been neglected, it seemed neglected, that my major anxieties were that I was going to be completely ignored and that my program was going to be effaced or virtually effaced. Of course, it turned out not to be true, but I was always very anxious about it. So I was up there fighting for my program all the time. I felt as though we were not appropriately acknowledged. We had the largest collection, we had the best collection. We were not supported by the director, we were not supported by the trustees. We were not supported. That's why I needed that little committee, because I needed more people than just me saying that to everyone.

Cándida Smith:

So the photo accessions subcommittee came from the board of trustees, correct, or—?

02-00:28:20

Phillips:

The photo accessions subcommittee came from that incident that I described, where I walked out thinking, maybe I have to go back to New York now. Then calling up Paul Sack and saying, "Can we have lunch? I'm trying to think if I have to go back to New York or if I should start a committee and maybe I could stay around for a while and develop the photography department here in a way that maybe it hasn't been." He said, "Sure."

Cándida Smith:

The members became members of the board of trustees?

02-00:29:02

Phillips:

Well, there was one person who was a trustee for a while. That was Shirley Ross Davis. I think Byron [Meyer] was a trustee, also. But most of them were younger people who had no ambitions to be trustees. I figured out that the only way to get power in this place was to get these guys who were young and ambitious and elevate them to real board members, so that they could defend us and make sure we got our exhibitions and our allotment of publications money and all that stuff.

Cándida Smith:

Did that happen?

02-00:29:56

Phillips:

Yes, it did.

Cándida Smith:

The photo accessions subcommittee, how did it operate differently from the main accessions committee, which identified its only concern as P&S?

02-00:30:15

Phillips:

Well, it was a long process, actually, trying to figure out what the main accessions committee would do and what these other subcommittees would do, and who should report what and if we should have money from the main committee. Jack Lane managed to say, "Well, we can throw these guys off the

committee, but they have to have at least some of the money.” He said both architecture and design and photography should have 10 percent of the main budget. Which I thought was okay, I can deal with that, because that was just about what I had been given before. So I think I had \$10,000. So I was guaranteed that money.

Cándida Smith: You have \$10,000, which isn’t a lot, but I suppose in photography, at least it would allow you to get some things.

02-00:31:23

Phillips:

So what I did with those people is I said, “Okay, we’re going to use the \$10,000 as the base, but every member of my photography committee has to give me \$5,000 to be a member.” So I suddenly had more money. I figured out the more people I could ask, the more money I could get. Which is what I did. What I saw as my job was trying to find as many people as I could, that were honest, good, and trustworthy people that I could actually believe in, to give me money to spend on photographs. What we would do, what it finally came out to—and now this being discussed again—is that any member of the main accessions committee [who] wanted to participate in this by their own dues could come to attend my committee meetings. They didn’t have to. We would present something. We would give a report, either at the end of each meeting of the main accessions committee or once the whole year or something. We would give a report on generally what we stood for and what we had done with that money.

Cándida Smith: So let’s say with your accessions committee, the photo accessions subcommittee, you would present, “Oh, I found some interesting photographs by Pirkle Jones and I’m interested in buying them”—and you want their approval?

02-00:33:02

Phillips:

No. I would find the photographs, I would present them and I would say, “This is what we have of Pirkle Jones. This is why I think we should add these. That’s what I’ve done.” I didn’t give them a chance to—

Cándida Smith: Then in terms of the org chart, did you then have to go to Jack Lane, David Ross, or Neal [Benezra] to get approval?

02-00:33:36

Phillips:

Jack Lane and David were not interested. They would come to my meetings. If there was something controversial or difficult that I thought I was going to present, that was maybe costing a lot of money, I would tell them about it, they would come to the meetings. Usually, they would fall asleep, and I would get whatever I wanted.

Cándida Smith: Well, it could be called benign neglect.

02-00:34:11

Phillips: That's what it was. It was benign neglect.

Cándida Smith: With photography, this is true with P&S, of course, but with photography, it could be even more so, there's the possibility of material that some people in the community would feel offensive for sexual reasons, for race reasons, for political reasons.

02-00:34:36

Phillips: Do you know, I've always been able to get that material whenever I've wanted it. I've never had a problem I don't know why.

Cándida Smith: I have heard Jack had to deal with these issues on the main accessions committee with some things.

02-00:35:00

Phillips: What was it? I don't remember.

Cándida Smith: Jeff Koons and Matthew Barney.

02-00:35:03

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Those people were so uptight. My committee is real. They're real people. Here again, photography has an advantage, because you don't have to be a very, very rich person to buy photographs. You can just be a normal person. My committee members—some of them are very wealthy—are interested in photography, I think, for the right reasons. They're not interested in it because they can be famous collectors. They're interested because they like photographs.

Cándida Smith: What about commissioning work? Was that something you started doing? Was that something the museum had already done?

02-00:35:59

Phillips: The museum has never commissioned a photographic project. They've accepted commissions. We've tried. It's hard. We just did one with Gabriele Basilico a couple years ago, where we invited him to go to the Silicon Valley and photograph it. A few years before that, 1999 or 2000, something like that, we had done the same with Judith Joy Ross, a photographer who comes from Philadelphia. She's in part of our show upstairs. ["Face of Our Time: Four Shows – Photographs of Yto Barrada, Guy Tillim, Judith Joy Ross, and Leo Rubinfien"] We commissioned her to make pictures of people in Silicon Valley. Those were less successful. We may be commissioning another project by a Japanese photographer to come here. It's complicated, but it's also very interesting and I think it's important to try and do.

Cándida Smith: You had mentioned that photography was a fish out of water, and I thought maybe we could wrap up today with the various ways in which you meant that. I think you've been alluding to it all along, so maybe this is more of a summation of some of the themes.

02-00:38:09

Phillips: The photography collection here is pretty good. It's hard to evaluate it in comparison to other institutions. It's certainly not as great as the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Met or the Art Institute of Chicago, but it's the next level down.

Cándida Smith: What about the [J. Paul] Getty [Museum]?

02-00:38:44

Phillips: The Getty? Well, that's an interesting question. They have a lot of stuff. They have a *huge* collection. It's extremely uneven. They do have very good classic stuff, but they have a lot of junk. *Real* junk. They have great pretensions. I would say our collection, though certainly a tenth as big as theirs, probably stands up pretty well. Not in every case. We don't have nearly the quantity. They have, how many? Seventy August Sanders? We have maybe two that are great. But we're okay. We're okay. For instance, I was just looking at their [Carleton] Watkins show. They have a lot of Watkins, many in very bad condition. We have maybe eight great Watkinses. So we're okay. The painting and sculpture collection is virtually nothing until the postwar period. It's just a handful of good pictures. The [prewar period] is, of course, our strength. We got it in the thirties and we were able to develop it. From the twenties through postmodernism, with obvious holes, we're in good form. It's a question of how to balance us, which is a larger field, with a rather discreet collection of strength in the other part of the collection that thinks of itself as more important.

Cándida Smith: I wonder the degree to which photography has its own language that makes it difficult for there to be translation of your evaluative standards, of what it is you're trying to do.

02-00:42:38

Phillips: I think it's a problem. It's become clear in forming this exhibition and catalog for the anniversary because at the beginning, you have all these photographs that represent the collection; then all of a sudden there's Robert Rauschenberg and there's no photography. So what happens there? It's something that we're working on. I don't know that there's a solution.

Cándida Smith: So you don't have photographs that are contemporary to—

02-00:43:26

Phillips: Oh, sure we do. It's just that for maybe economic reasons, the purchase of the Rauschenbergs seemed more important and therefore, will get more space.

Cándida Smith: I see where you're going.

02-00:43:49

Phillips: We have a very good collection of conceptual photographs and contemporary photographs, and I think we're extremely attentive to all the issues that are being raised by photography as a medium now. We're not purists here. We

look at everything. We even look at photographs that are not—and this is very radical to my colleagues in the other departments—that are not considered art, that were not made as art. We try to represent a thought process, a visual thought process in photography.

Interview 2: March 18, 2009

[Begin Audio File 3 03-18-2009.mp3]

Cándida Smith: I wanted to start with your exhibition program when you arrive. I have a list of exhibitions that the museum community has flagged as very important.

03-00:01:49

Phillips: Oh, yeah?

Cándida Smith: We'll see if they correspond with your ideas of this.

03-00:02:06

Phillips: When I arrived, it was almost the—What would it be? The 150th anniversary of the discovery of—

Cándida Smith: You come in 1987, right?

03-00:02:20

Phillips: *Photography* was published and presented to the French senate in 1839. So it would be about 150 years. I thought it would be great to do a show called “A History of Photography from California Collections.” Is that on your list, Richard?

Cándida Smith: Yes.

03-00:02:46

Phillips: *It is?*

Cándida Smith: Number two.

03-00:02:53

Phillips: It seemed to me a great way to learn about what was going on here, just what there was available. It would give me a great excuse to go into all sorts of private collections, public collections. Which is, of course, what happened. I was going down to LA so often, I couldn't remember where I parked my rented car because it had changed color so many times in a month. I discovered a lot of major collections. The Rubel collection was very important and there were others. Obviously, there were collections that were affiliated with the museum, but other collections that had nothing to do with the museum. There were some collections down in Southern California. I think for me, the most interesting part of it was to discover what was in the non-private collections, by going to university collections, by going to the state library, the state archives, the archives of these little—Where did I go? I found the state archives was maybe the most interesting. There were different parts of it in Southern California and Northern California. Then these little historical societies that had amazing stuff. It was great. It certainly taught me a lot about California. It was a great way to learn not only what was here, but how California was different, or the West was different.

Cándida Smith: In photographic terms?

03-00:04:58

Phillips: Because it reflected what had happened here in the history of the West or the history of California.

Cándida Smith: What was your earliest photograph in that show, do you remember?

03-00:05:17

Phillips: There's a guy who still has this daguerreotype collection in Berkeley. We had amazing early daguerreotypes. We also had some very early police pictures, which I found fascinating because it showed the diversity of people who had come to California. All their strange names, where they had been born, what they had done; records of children who had committed crimes or who had been in orphanages, and their history. Oh, it was just all so fascinating. I knew some of this in New York, but it was much different. Here was really still tangibly gold rush and post-gold rush. Also the huge presence of politics. What happened to Bobby Kennedy was very well documented, very much a part of the history, what had happened in the sixties, generally. The whole migration from Mexico up to California and back, the waves of migration. That was so interesting. It was completely new to me, but totally fascinating. The fact that there was a different plantation economy here that had been going on since the 1870s, that was completely unknown to me and totally fascinating. I had a ball.

Cándida Smith: You published a catalog?

03-00:07:10

Phillips: We didn't. Because I had only figured all this stuff out, really, on my feet. No, we couldn't have. There wasn't enough money. I went way over budget. I was called into the director's office and he said, "This is the one and only time I'm going to tell you this, but don't ever do it again. You're allowed one mistake like this, but not a second one."

Cándida Smith: How much of the museum did—that space was not all that big.

03-00:07:56

Phillips: Well, it was in the big museum, the fourth-floor galleries that had big paintings. It was in a lot of space.

Cándida Smith: So it took over most of the gallery space?

03-00:08:10

Phillips: Not the domed area, but the big gallery space, yes. The big, long gallery space.

Cándida Smith: It sounds like you were balancing different types of sources.

03-00:08:26

Phillips: Yes.

Cándida Smith: How did you juxtapose these sources? Art photographs versus police photographs versus newspaper—

03-00:08:37

Phillips: It was done chronologically. I remember going to the museum or the library up at [University of California] Davis and finding this picture of a huge potato, a daguerreotype of a huge potato. So I put that in with the daguerreotypes. It was great. Of course, a lot of this stuff I went back to when I did my “Crossing the Frontier” show or the police pictures show. But it started out with the beginnings of photography. Of course, it was interesting because the indigenous photography here was very concrete and vernacular. Then there was this incredible collection by William Rubel, who had worked with Sean Thackrey of Thackrey & Robertson, and he had put together an amazing collection of calotypes, very elegant, mainly British Victorian photographs. [Fox] Talbot and that kind of thing. There were some French, but not many. So there was the beginning of photography, this diversity from the beginning, with this guy who was a landed gentleman, who had discovered an alternative process, the paper negative, with all these crazy—Some of them very elegant daguerreotypes, but many that were very rough and tumble, all put together. There was logic to it, of course. I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to do a book because it was very characteristic of where we are. It was very, very exciting.

Cándida Smith: At the same time, you’re beginning to explore the contemporary photography scene. Which you would have done anyway, but you’re seeing it as coming out of a larger historical context.

03-00:11:08

Phillips: There’s always been a lot of photography here. I knew in advance, some of the people that were working here. I knew who Henry Wessel was, for instance. I’d been told about John Harding. I met Larry Sultan very early. All of these people had shows. We gave them shows very early. They were parts of two- or three-person shows very early.

Cándida Smith: So what were your thoughts on an exhibition program—the pace of exhibitions, the scope of the different shows you could do? Did you have an agenda about how you were going to proceed with filling whatever wall space that you could claim? Did you have a dedicated gallery at that time?

03-00:12:11

Phillips: I had a tiny gallery that was really a corridor. It was called the Humphrey Gallery, named after John Humphrey. That was supposed to be just permanent collection. That was supposed to be what I was doing, just having permanent collection shows, with an occasional other show that I could throw in. But it was very clear that the third floor, which was just a long corridor around the

auditorium, was probably the best place suited for photography. It was more suited to photography than it was suited to anything else. I remember taking an exhibition from the Art Institute of Chicago called “Road and Roadside”. I think that was the first show I hung that was my show. It was literally around this long hallway that encircled the building. It was all about pictures by Walker Evans and contemporary people who had taken as part of their idea, what it looks like to be on the road, either makings pictures of people driving or cars or scenery that you see along the roadside. It was totally perfect. Somebody said, “Oh, you should’ve painted a yellow meridian line along the carpet and it would have been *perfect*.” But that was my main gallery. It was actually very useful, because nobody else really wanted to deal with it. We did a lot of shows there. Most of our shows were there, our big shows. We took the Minor White show from the Museum of Modern Art. Peter Bunnell was not very happy that it was there, but that was the space. We tried to make it look as good as it could.

Cándida Smith: You came in with the idea that you’re going to be rotating the permanent collection, and it sounds like you quickly decide that you need to do a variety of special exhibitions.

03-00:14:35

Phillips: Since I came from New York and since I had worked with David Travis at the Art Institute of Chicago, it was completely natural for me to want to get exhibitions from them. We got, very early, the [Garry] Winogrand show from the Museum of Modern Art, which also went around this funny space. As we spoke about last time a little bit, it occurred to me quite early in the game that it would be very, very expensive for us to lay out a lot of money bringing in Man Ray pictures in any form, either exhibitions or purchases, and that it might be more worthwhile to think about this other aspect of photography, which we call documentary. So early on, we did a show of [Sebastião] Salgado; we gave him his first show.

Cándida Smith: In the United States or—?

03-00:15:46

Phillips: In a museum. It was lucky, because I could talk back to him and tell him that that’s not the way museums work. Now he’s so completely out of control that nobody can mount a good show with him.

Cándida Smith: How did you come to know his work at that time?

03-00:16:06

Phillips: I knew Fred Ritchin. I think Fred was still the picture editor of the *New York Times*, or maybe the magazine section of the *Times*. He had, and still does have, a fine reverence for old-fashioned, photojournalistic, idealist photography. It was also a moment when there was a lot of interesting work coming out of South America. We would shortly give Graciela Iturbide her

first museum show, also. I fortunately had working with me this wonderful woman who spoke absolutely fluent Spanish, so that helped.

Cándida Smith: Her name was?

03-00:17:04

Phillips: Diana du Pont. I inherited her from Van. Our show of Salgado's was a really wonderful, wonderful show. Also the Iturbide show. Van had known about this renaissance in photography in Mexico because he had made some friends down there and had gone there and did exhibitions. I can't remember now what, but there were some shows that he had done, too. So that was a very logical continuation.

Cándida Smith: I have here that one of your first major shows was with the photographs by John Coplans. I presume the body photographs.

03-00:17:59

Phillips: That was actually technically my first show.

Cándida Smith: Was that your show?

03-00:18:04

Phillips: Yes. I knew him just slightly. I knew the work. I can't remember how I did this. I had met Peter MacGill, and Peter was, I think, his dealer. I went to visit him. I thought he was a *really* interesting man. He had spent some time in San Francisco. He had gone from South Africa to London to San Francisco, and he had started *Artforum* magazine here. Then he went down to Southern California and then he went to New York, and had tried to work originally as a curator and then as a museum director in Ohio, in Akron. He was such a brilliant and strange man. I was extremely interested in him as a person. He was so thrilled that a museum would take his work seriously that he would do *anything* for me. He talked me through how to approach donors, and he said, "Well, my friends at the Museum of Modern Art, Susan Kismaric and John Szarkowski, are interested in having a show, but you started the idea first. Why don't you talk to them and see if they would take your show? Why don't you also, since you're a friend of David Travis and he's also been interested in this work, why don't you talk to them and see if your show can go to there, too?" He was just wonderful that way. We remained friends, good friends. I would see him once a year, take him out for dinner in New York. He was a great bon vivant. I can imagine a difficult person to live with on a more daily basis, but I was fortunate I didn't have to do that. He was incredibly generous and very grateful. We did this very early brochure that traveled, along with the exhibition. I know it went to three places, it may have gone to four institutions, I can't remember now. The same thing happened with the [William] Wegman show that we did. We did a show, again in the Humphrey Gallery. These were those tiny shows. One side were the early Polaroids of the original Man Ray, and then the other side were the more recent portraits of Fay Ray, the second dog. Peter MacGill suggested, "Well, why don't you do

the same thing that you did with the Coplans work? Why don't you call up your friends at the Modern and see if you can make that into a traveling show, too?" Then it happened that he was getting other shows and bigger shows, and they would be including paintings and stuff like that, so we didn't. But we also had somewhere, in some corner of the museum, we also had videos. You could go into the museum and hear people laugh. It was just so great.

Cándida Smith: When you decided to do an exhibition, was that it? Presumably, you had to get it cleared from Jack.

03-00:21:55

Phillips: From Jack Lane, yes.

Cándida Smith: Was there ever any real problem with that? Was it pretty much pro forma? If you wanted to do something, it was going to happen? Assuming you stayed within budget.

03-00:22:07

Phillips: It was pretty much what I wanted to do. I remember having a problem with Wright Morris. I think that was mainly because by then, I wanted to have a good publication. That was going to be expensive. We'd wanted the pictures to be really well reproduced, because that's what Wright wanted. John Szarkowski was in there, too, and wanted to get paid something. So that was a bit touch-and-go for a while there. Jack had hired somebody to be not the chief curator, but some big administrative person, who was a disaster. He just didn't know how to talk to people. So then he left. Then suddenly I could do my show again.

Cándida Smith: Another early show—well, it was '89, so you were there two years—was John Gutmann.

03-00:23:20

Phillips: That one we also didn't do a book for. There were a couple books out there already on John, so we used those books. But I didn't want to wait around and do another book. Those other books had done the job. I discovered John—or didn't discover him, he was already discovered; he made everyone else discover him—essentially when I arrived, because I had worked a lot in trying to understand what was going on in Germany before the war and during the war. There was a huge florescence of photographic activity in the twenties and thirties in Germany, not only affiliated with the Bauhaus, but also because of the economy collapsing. A lot of people who were scrambling to find jobs and who were also refugees from other parts of the world could find some way of making ends meet by being photojournalists or photographers for these magazines that were weekly magazines, that became the prototype of *Life*, for instance. John knew that material. His work is, in some way, related to that material. In fact, when he moved here and became a photographer, he supported himself by sending those pictures to those German magazines that I

had studied before I came to California. So we knew where each other was coming from, and I became a very good friend of his. A really good friend.

He was a maniac, but he was wonderfully interesting. Very interested in control, but that's okay. I could deal with that. I think the show was amazing. I think the show was really wonderful. That show also went to the Museum of Modern Art. So when you have two shows with the Modern in a few years after you arrive, you've established yourself as having a relatively okay track record.

Cándida Smith: I wonder if you could speak a little bit about the degree to which you feel you need to be introducing the photographer to the public, maybe even if they've been shown before, and the degree to which you're more interested in showing new developments or new work and new trends.

03-00:26:42

Phillips:

When I first came to the museum, I had been, as I said before, working at Vassar as a curator, and didn't have to much to do with the programming there. I had a little bit. But I called my friend David Travis at the Art Institute of Chicago. I had worked with him. I said, "So how do you plan for shows?" He said, "Well, it's best to think of it as a salad. You mix it up." That's all he said, but it made sense. If you thought about having a Helen Levitt show, for instance, you wouldn't want to have it followed too soon by something very similar. If you mixed it up, you had to include people both from the Bay Area and from outside the Bay Area, and maybe different centuries, even, or certainly different time periods. So I tried to do that. In looking back at the history of the museum exhibition program in photography, it was pretty much like that because you still could do that. You could have major shows that cost \$3,000, \$5,000 to rent [Eugene] Atget, and you could put on a show of John Gutmann for maybe \$15,000, \$20,000. We had no money. It's only quite recently that the budgets for these things have grown so enormously. If you had good ideas and had some pluck and imagination, you could put together these interesting, very diverse programs. It wasn't that hard.

Cándida Smith: Now, in terms of your relationships, would some photographers be more insistent on how they want to be presented?

03-00:28:59

Phillips:

Oh, well, a lot of these photographers, since they had been neglected for so long, had very strong personalities. John was one of them. He made certain suggestions about how his work should be shown. I moved things around and essentially, he agreed to what I had done. I can deal with that. There's always some give and take. Usually, if you feel strongly enough about the way you see things, they will, too because they'll see it's okay.

[The next paragraph of this interview is sealed until 2035.]

Cándida Smith: Some of these questions may sound really obvious, but at the same time, if you're not actually the person hanging the show, the answers may in fact be very obscure. So how did your thoughts about how to present work develop?

03-00:31:39

Phillips: Well, that's a very interesting question.

Cándida Smith: How do you hang a show? What's readable, what's not readable.

03-00:31:48

Phillips: By making it look good, is the circuitous but only answer I can give you, really. It took me a long time to figure it out. Now I can do it very quickly. But you have to have a certain sense of theater, of stages, of narrative. But most of all, it has to make an immediate visual sense. It's more an abstract thing. It's more going into a room and seeing just how to put it all together so it makes sense. I'm sorry I can't be more articulate than that. It's really nonverbal.

Cándida Smith: If I think about the second floor galleries or the fifth floor galleries, the works are often large.

03-00:32:54

Phillips: Yes, in a procession.

Cándida Smith: In a procession.

03-00:32:58

Phillips: Really, we don't have that possibility. If you go to the third-floor permanent collection galleries, of course, there's a procession from nineteenth to twentieth century to contemporary work, obviously. But if you go to the show "Face of Our Time," that work is put together in a non-narrative way, just so those pictures, when you look at them together, they make sense. So that no picture strikes you as being out of place, that there's a cohesion, that it's knit together, that it *should* look like that; that entering the gallery, it has a wonderful fabric that makes you want to look at the pictures closer.

Cándida Smith: Well, but intimacy is an important part of photography, I think, whether it's the snapshot or the family album or *Life* magazine. The viewer and the photograph have an immediate personal connection that you don't normally have with a painting or a sculpture.

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Phillips: That's true. That's true.

Cándida Smith: A museum gallery is pushing in another direction.

03-00:34:32

Phillips: Indeed. Indeed.

Cándida Smith: So you have to balance that and you have to create intimacy in an environment that's not necessarily intimate. So that's probably part of what I'm wondering, how you—

03-00:34:47

Phillips: How you do that.

Cándida Smith: How *you* go about doing that. Or if you might even question whether intimacy is even a realizable goal.

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Phillips: I'm not sure I would call it intimacy, but I would call it maybe personal meaningfulness. Because intimacy means that you have to look at a small picture. That, I think we can only do in cases. I don't think putting a small picture up on the wall is easy to do. But we do it sometimes. But I think all photographs, or at least the photographs that I'm interested in, have some both abstract quality and also something about what it is you're looking at. That's what you want people to know, that the abstract part is what you see when you walk into the room and makes you think, oh, well, there's maybe something interesting here to look at. Then you walk up and look at each picture.

Cándida Smith: I'm also thinking about the change in the scale of photography that, to some degree, at least in terms of exhibition photography—I know there were large photographs, "Family of Man" would be a classic example. But the idea of somebody like Thomas Struth, Jeff Wall, or Cindy Sherman making—

0303-00:36:31

Phillips: Well, Cindy Sherman, from the beginning, made small photographs, but— Well, yes. That's photography deliberately made to rival the attention of painting. I think maybe a more interesting question to me is to go upstairs again, to the third floor, where we have this exhibition. There are two photographers. One Leo Rubinfien, who works on the street and makes quite large photographs of people that he sees and photographs with his 35mm camera. The other is by a small gallery of work by Judith Joy Ross, who makes pictures with a tripod and an eight-by-ten camera. Very clunky, old-fashioned way of doing it. Those pictures are very intimate. They're psychological. They're made in an old-fashioned process. They're gold toned, so they have an extra layer of psychology there. There, you do have to look at the exterior design of those pictures, and then go and see what those pictures individually look like. When you go into the room with Leo's pictures, you can pretty much see what he's about by just being in the middle of the room. But not in Judith's side. So yeah, photography's gone through all these changes and you have to deal with it all.

Cándida Smith: "Dorothea Lange," 1994. I wonder, even at that time, how does one go about saying anything new about Dorothea Lange? That's my naïve question.

03-00:38:41

Phillips:

Well, it actually was really easy. Because everyone had been looking at her and not paying attention to what she was photographing. They were paying attention to the people, but they weren't paying attention to the circumstances that she was trying to describe. She was working with her husband, who was a very smart man, who knew exactly the economy of the West and was very much an old time Rooseveltian Democrat and very opposed to the plantation economy that had been traditionally in the West, and thought that maybe this was the time to think about changing it. Nobody in the East Coast—I think nobody *still* realizes that. Because they don't read. They never read my text; they could have cared less about that. But that's what's important about Lange, I think, that she was not so much a humanist—I think she has been romanticized and maybe even trivialized because of that—but because she was really interested in the issues. That's why she went to the South, because the South had the same plantation economy that we had here. That was *easy*.

I think one of the things that was so interesting for me to learn about when I was working on that show was to go through Paul Taylor's papers. Someday I'll have the time to *really* go back into that material, because that's *enormous* stuff and *extremely* interesting stuff. It's all about environmentalism, the seeds of all of that. He was trying to understand the water policies of the West and trying to save the small family farm. Very brave of him. There he was, Paul Taylor, with his handmade sandwich he brought in his little paper bag, [going] to all these big conferences where the big water people were taking over the whole state, you know? Nobody in the photography world has got a *clue* about that, even still.

Cándida Smith: Did that or has that informed your interest in people like, say, Pirkle Jones?

03-00:41:47

Phillips:

Oh, sure.

Cándida Smith: So was that something that led you—

03-00:41:52

Phillips:

To Pirkle. Indeed.

Cándida Smith: So it wasn't the photographs first and then filling in the backstory, in that particular case.

03-00:42:07

Phillips:

Well, no. I think it was the photographs *and* the story. Just like it was Lange. Well, Lange's photographs first. But half of those pictures from *Death of a Valley* are Lange's. And Pirkle's, the ones that he did with her were pretty good, for the most part. Then to fill that out a little bit with what happened before and what happened later, it seemed very obvious and clear.

Cándida Smith: Well, it sounds like, from the way you're talking about the shows as you're conceptualizing them, that a catalog would have been absolutely necessary to really complete the communication that you wanted to make.

03-00:43:05

Phillips: We did have a catalog for the Lange show.

Cándida Smith: But it also sounds like you had to fight to make catalogs a regular part of your program?

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Phillips: Yes. I think the Lange catalog is okay. It wasn't distributed very well and the reproductions were not great. I had a hard time to constantly work on that part of things. The reproductions in "Crossing the Frontier" were, for the most part, better. There's one picture still that I look at and my heart completely sinks every time I see it. It's a beautiful Watkins picture of San Francisco. It's just a travesty. But the other pictures are pretty much okay. It should have been a bigger catalog, but it's all right.

Cándida Smith: Well, money is part of this. But then if one looks at the museum more generally, there's a moment in which we seem to go from an occasional catalog to—

03-00:44:27

Phillips: Every time you have a show, you have a catalog. That's crazy.

Cándida Smith: If you're having smaller shows, a brochure might be more than adequate?

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Phillips: Well, let me think. We did a show with Robert Adams called "Turning Back." This was in the last five or so years.

Cándida Smith: 2005 is what I have.

03-00:45:02

Phillips: Bob was a wonderfully interesting, smart guy. He doesn't care about his shows so much; he wants total control over the book. So I said, "Okay, we have the book, and I'll put up the show." He wasn't coming down anyway. He lives up in Oregon. I offered him a book and to put up the show the way I wanted to. He would never come to see the show himself. Then in the middle of the summer, when I was away in Europe, I get an anxious email from somebody in my office saying, "Bob wants a brochure. He wants you to write the essay." So I take a deep breath and I write out a text and I say, "Use this picture and that picture. If it's okay with him, it's okay with me." It was fine. It was an interesting show, because—[pause] Bob is a photographer whose work is not only reactive to what he's seeing, but—Well, it is reactive, but it's deeper than that. It comes with a narrative. He wants you to understand why he's making 200 pictures of dead trees in lumber areas; where that comes from and if there's a narrative that is shaped out of this; and why lumber is

important and why the economy of the Northwest since Lewis and Clark has been essentially shaped by salmon and fir trees. You can't really get that from wall labels. Or you can't get it when you go home and buy the book. So he did want something that you hold in your hand. I thought, that's fine. So that's why we did that. So we had to go out on a little bit of a limb, spend a little bit more money than we thought we were, and make this nice brochure. He was very happy.

Cándida Smith: What about events accompanying exhibitions, though? Talks, whatever. Just the range of things that museums seem to do increasingly in addition to the exhibitions.

03-00:48:31

Phillips:

I am a classical curator type. I'm mainly interested in putting the show together. If I do anything, it's to help the artist speak better to the work. We have now a very important program for education, and they're in charge of all sorts of events and showing movies and that stuff. Sometimes they run these things by me and sometimes they don't. But by that time, I'm on to the next four shows and I don't have the time to deal with what's up on the walls right now. I can take people out to lunch or dinner and do tours and things like that, but I don't have the time, really, to conceptualize events around shows. I leave that up to other people.

Cándida Smith: Some of the photographers you've worked with—I would assume, actually, quite a few of the photographers—you've met them when they were quite young, or reasonably young. You were one of the first people to take an interest in their work and give them an exhibition. You've probably worked with them subsequently, multiple times over the years. I'm wondering if that curator/photographer relationship has an effect on the work of the photographer or the perspectives of the photographer. Does the curator have a role in that photographer's career, other than just showing the work? If so, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

03-00:50:49

Phillips:

Well, I think sometimes it can be a very bad thing for both the curator and the photographer, so I try to step back. Some have become my friends. Bob Adams is one of them. Some of them I work with in different capacities—for instance, somebody like Leo Rubinfien. I'm in touch. Not a lot, but again, I feel as though I've been protected by being out here, not in the mix of things in New York—which I think is actually very good for everyone. But I do see and I'm in touch a lot with people here—with Larry Sultan, with Hank Wessel, with people that I know and support here, I see them a lot. Jim Goldberg.

Cándida Smith: Do you encourage them in specific directions that they're taking? Or do you present a more neutral face to them and their work?

03-00:52:00

Phillips:

It's like being a mother, I think. You try and let them be themselves and grow and develop. When you think they're doing something they shouldn't be doing, or if they come to you with a book project and ask for help, you give it. But you don't say, you have to take this advice or whatever. These are suggestions. I think it's actually like being an interested friend and a support there for people. I think they know that. But if they come to a point where they have work to show, they feel the museum should take an interest in it, I will look at it. Or if they are putting together a book and the book isn't quite— It's maybe too big. If they show it to me, then maybe I can point them in the right direction. I think it's like being a den mother, actually.

[The next paragraph of this interview is sealed until 2035.]

Cándida Smith: Of course, galleries have become increasingly important during the twenty-plus years of your career. To what degree are you spending more time with galleries—

03-00:54:55

Phillips:

Oh, man!

Cándida Smith: —than with the photographers themselves? How has that changed what you might be doing, if it has?

03-00:55:03

Phillips:

I prefer to work with the photographers. Sometimes through the galleries, or not. I'm still in the galleries all the time. Not as much as I probably should be. It's crazy. There's always interesting work being made around here. You try and get to know the photographer. There's a young man now we're trying to follow named Sean McFarland. He's won a couple of prizes locally. One is at the [SF] Camerawork, I think, right now. So yeah, he's come in, he's showed us work. Showed his recent work; he showed his work before that. We have a policy where we accept portfolios and look at them twice a month. A lot of work, but—

Cándida Smith: So that's potentially hundreds of photographers every year?

03-00:56:07

Phillips:

We prefer looking at real work, rather than stuff that's CDs or slides, but we get those, too, and we try to pay attention to it. We have a log book. We write everything down, so at least we know who's passed through and how to reach them. Or at least what their then address is.

Cándida Smith: It's a *lot* of work.

03-00:56:36

Phillips:

Well, it's important. We do discover people that way. There was a guy, Michael Jang, who was a student of Henry Wessel, or something like that. He was in Southern California and came up here and photographed his Chinese

American family here. The pictures are such a riot. Then he became a school photographer, like University High School. He made very credible money that way. Now he's retired, and he's looking through his old pictures. He sent us a stack of them through portfolio review. We've bought some. We're going to buy some more. He's coming out with a book. He's totally thrilled, and we're thrilled to have found a new photographer.

Cándida Smith: We talked a bit last time about the new space and I just wanted to confirm; you really did not have much input into the design of your third-floor galleries.

03-00:57:53

Phillips: No. I was shown what it was going to look like and asked if it would be okay. Jack said, "You know, they're small-scale galleries, but they're perfect for photography." I said, "Okay."

Cándida Smith: Was it an improvement over—

03-00:58:13

Phillips: Oh, they were real galleries. First of all, when Jack was still here, there was this problem between the photography department and the painting and sculpture department, because the painting and sculpture department thought it was all-powerful and would take over the whole museum, including part of our galleries. So there was never any actual dedicated space to photography, so it was always a hassle trying to fight for your space. Now that's been solved. People left, I was left to my own devices, I took over the place, and now I'm happy. The other problem is an architectural problem, that those are essentially immovable galleries. There's no beginning and ending. You could go left or right and it wouldn't make a difference. You can't really read the galleries. It's both a good thing, but also a bad thing. There's no direction, obviously, that you have to go through to get from a beginning to an ending. We call them the fangs and the teeth galleries. There's two fangs, the north and the south fang, and then there's the teeth in the middle that are smaller and chunkier looking. There're just three of those. So you often have a fang exhibition, which is usually permanent collection; the teeth gallery, which is not permanent exhibition, usually; and another fang, which is usually not permanent exhibition, either, and can be different from either. Then the fang shows can be two permanent collection galleries or one or nothing. So it's good that it's flexible, but it's also strangely inflexible.

Cándida Smith: Though I thought that, for instance, the Diane Arbus show had a very strong directionality in it.

03-00:60:42

Phillips: But that was on a different floor.

Cándida Smith: Okay. You solved the problem by seizing somebody else's space.

03-00:60:48

Phillips: Well, that's the space where we put exhibitions that come from outside, or where we make shows that travel.

Cándida Smith: We talked somewhat about "Crossing the Frontier" and "Police Pictures," because they were both indicative of your desire to make documentary the center. I noticed in some of the minutes that were shared with me that—I found the consistent pattern is that you seem to begin your presentation with the history of the photography collection. I also found a consistent refrain of you would take—Carleton Watkins, is it?—as an example of—

[Begin Audio File 4 03-18-2009.mp3]

Cándida Smith: So back to Carleton Watkins. Because it is a refrain, expressed multiple times, that the way his very body of work challenges this distinction between art photography and documentary. Maybe you've already said it, but maybe I could just get you to elaborate on that a little bit more, about what the relationship is and why it's important to smooch the boundaries.

04-00:01:06

Phillips: Well, Carleton Watkins is an interesting example because he was such a wonderfully inventive photographer, or imaginative or unique or original, or however you wish to describe it. He's got a very distinctive style and very distinctive interests. You wonder what he was making these pictures for. Obviously, he had a hard time earning a living and he was probably a terrible businessperson. But he was also a very interesting photographer. He starts out clearly being trained as a daguerreotypist. Notwithstanding the exhibition that just closed at the Getty Museum, there's no extant daguerreotypes that we know for sure by him. But clearly, he was hooked on making pictures of landscape and of the California landscape in its variety. By which I mean both as it was used and as it existed in its pristine glory. He makes this camera, however he can afford to do it. It's tremendously expensive to hire all the burros and the people and the chemistry to go up to Yosemite or wherever he's going and make these enormous pictures. Then who's going to buy them? They're *enormous*. They're clearly made to rival painting. So he has a gallery in San Francisco. It's called The Gallery of Photography. He shows these enormous pictures. He has them in beautiful, big, carved frames. He also has every other photograph—he has the stereo view, the smaller pictures. He goes completely bust. He also has these different subjects. There are these big, beautiful pictures of Yosemite that fall into the landscape tradition. Whether he knew very much about that or not, we really don't know. We certainly know a lot more about somebody like [Eadweard] Muybridge, who did know about the landscape tradition. Then you have all these industrial pictures, which are also huge and also full of a wonder. The same wonder devastating the land, bringing out these massive gold mines in Nevada County. The question is, why would you do this if you didn't have sufficient backing? Who is your audience? Why are you making these pictures that rival painting and

have this ambiguous message? All of those issues are issues that are totally relevant today and were relevant to him. He was, if not articulating verbally, he was posing the same questions that we're facing today. So I think he's completely relevant.

Cándida Smith: I noticed that—and it may be coincidental, but—when you move to the new building, you have an increased interest in Japanese photographers, or at least photographers with Japanese last names.

04-00:05:49

Phillips: That is completely coincidental.

Cándida Smith: I know that Jack Lane had an interest in looking west, at a certain point.

04-00:06:06

Phillips: Well, and so did my colleague Paolo Polledri, who was trying to build a regional collection of architecture. When I first came to the museum, there was a show on Japanese art, modern/contemporary Japanese art. There was one that followed that, I believe, not too long afterwards—I may be wrong about this. We had, in John Humphrey's time, shown a collection of Japanese photographs—I think from the Museum of Modern Art. So there was in the collection not a huge collection, but significant amounts of Japanese photographs. I just started looking at them and thinking, this is potentially really interesting stuff. Actually, through Szarkowski, who had maintained ties with these people in Japan, and also I think through Lee Friedlander, who also goes to Japan, I got in touch with the right people and we managed to do that first show of [Daido] Moriyama, which I think was '99.

Cándida Smith: It was '99.

04-00:07:41

Phillips: It was '99, just before I left for my sabbatical. Then we continued with [Shomei] Tomatsu.

Cándida Smith: So it became a regular part of your program. Do you travel to Japan to look at work, visit photographers?

04-00:07:59

Phillips: I do, but I haven't in the last three years. It's just a little too time-consuming and expensive. I now go more to Europe. When I finish up my project in Europe, maybe I'll go back to Asia. Recently, maybe three years ago, I went to China. We bought a lot of Chinese contemporary work, but work that was not expensive. Not the famous people, but the younger people who had come in for a conference from all over the country. So that was interesting. We're going to show that stuff, too.

Cándida Smith: You've compared Moriyama to Robert Frank.

04-00:08:45

Phillips: I did?

Cándida Smith: Yeah, you did. In something I ran across.

Phillips: Well, I think Robert Frank was probably very important to Moriyama.

Cándida Smith: I presume you collect from every show that you do, to the degree that that's feasible.

04-00:09:39

Phillips: Well, I wish. Let's see. It's probably true. In the beginning, we could only buy maybe one or two pictures. I wonder, did we buy anything from the—yes, we did—the Wegman show. I think we bought some. I'm not sure, but we did later. I'm not sure. I think so, actually. But in the early years, when I had so little money, it would take a sizable chunk out of my budget. Then it didn't really become a self-conscious thing until I looked through some of the catalogs of the collection—not my catalogs, but before—and realized that in some cases, we had *nothing* from the shows that we had had in the past. There was a show organized by, I think it was Marjorie Mann, on California pictorialism. I was looking at the book and trying to figure out what to represent, how to represent California pictorialism. We had nothing. Nothing. I found that shocking, that the museum would spend this effort, and not only find the work and put it up but print a catalog, and not have pictures to memorialize that in a concrete way in the collection. So it fired me up with a certain enthusiasm. I thought if we were to determined to have an exhibition, if we had made that determination, that such and such a photographer or such and such an idea in photography was important enough or meaningful enough for us to devote energy and time and resources to it, then we better follow that up with some meaningful representation. I think this came to me especially with "Crossing the Frontier," because that was, again, a massive show. Nobody was buying this stuff. I was coming across this stuff, and the only way to borrow it was to try and buy it to keep it available so that you could actually have it in your show. I'm finding that now with this voyeurism thing, that if I'm going to have a reasonably complete exhibition, I have to buy the stuff because otherwise it will just follow the paths of finding one collection or get dispersed somehow. The only way to keep track of it is to actually own it.

Cándida Smith: So that means contacting dealers and giving them a list of what you're looking for?

04-00:13:22

Phillips: I've never done anything so self-consciously, but I say, "I'm doing this show. Do you have anything that falls into that category?" They will [say], maybe a month or two later, "Does this fit into your idea?" Sometimes it does, and I'm really grateful to people to come up with an imaginative response like that. But the only way to grab onto it and keep it from slipping away is to buy it.

Cándida Smith: Or it disappears into private collections?

04-00:14:03

Phillips: Or public collections, which is even worse because then you have to deal with trustees or something, to borrow.

Cándida Smith: In many cases, you're dealing with non-arts institutions, I would imagine. They probably understand the value now, but did they always understand the value of what they had?

04-00:14:27

Phillips: No. I would go to the National Archives for "Crossing the Frontier." There's a big swath of material that is—well, it's known, but it's not obvious. I would go through this stuff—Or the Library of Congress. They were totally generous, but they were probably more generous than they should have been.

Cándida Smith: There were some collectors, some donors that you have had close relationships [with], that I wanted to ask you about. Carla Emil?

04-00:15:18

Phillips: Oh, Carla is my good, dear friend. All these people have become my friends. Carla was once the head of my committee. She's now become the head of the main accessions committee. I got to her because she came to the Helen Levitt show and saw Fraenkel Gallery written on half of the pictures. She walked into the Fraenkel Gallery and started buying photographs. She had no interest or special awareness, even, of photography before, and became an *extremely* important and very interesting collector of photographs. Now she has gone into painting and sculpture and other things, too. A very personal response to this material, a very interesting collection.

Cándida Smith: So you would advise on possible purchases?

04-00:16:20

Phillips: I make suggestions. Sometimes they're followed, sometimes—I don't say, "You should buy this." I say, "Have you looked at this?" I just feel I should always be available, insofar as I can. It's a lot of work, though.

Cándida Smith: But sometimes it can have payoffs.

04-00:16:42

Phillips: Oh, indeed.

Cándida Smith: As with the Sack Collection.

04-00:16:44

Phillips: Indeed, indeed, indeed. And Paul is also a very good friend. Both of these people understand museums. They understand what we do and why we do it, and the value of being part of an institution, rather than just taking away your

collection and looking at it yourself and not paying attention to your community.

Cándida Smith: Robin Wright?

04-00:17:14

Phillips: All these people were the heads of my committee. Paul was the first. Who was the second? Might have been Carla. I don't remember now. Maybe Robin was the third. Robin comes from an art background. Her parents are important collectors in Seattle. She was interested in conceptual art, and photography fit into a part of her collection. It was never the central part of the collection, but she understands museums and the importance of the photography department here and she's always been extremely helpful to me.

Cándida Smith: Do collectors of that caliber, let's use that word, presumably they're working with other curators at other institutions?

04-00:18:16

Phillips: I'm sure they're friendly with them. I know, for instance, Peter Galassi knows Carla, sees her collection. I think their interests, though, have been on San Francisco. We have a pretty good track record with getting exhibitions out there. So the photography collectors tend to be reliably affiliated with our institutions, rather than being courted off to fancier places like New York MoMA or the Met. That, knock on wood, will continue, but it's a big job. That's part of the reason for my being involved, obviously. I want that stuff to remain here.

Cándida Smith: If I compare this to, say, painting and sculpture, where there have been, shall we say, disappointments or actually splits on the board of trustees, it often revolves around competing aesthetic ideas that suddenly reach a point of rupture. Your approach seems to be—

04-00:19:52

Phillips: More inclusive.

Cándida Smith: So nobody feels like their particular interests, necessarily, are denigrated.

04-00:20:00

Phillips: I think, Richard, to be completely fair, I think it also has to do with the fact that photography itself is not a singular art. I don't want to brag, but I think the people who are involved in photography are involved more for the right reasons than painting and sculpture collectors tend to be. Because you really can't have a lot of glory by being a photography collector. It's not that valuable. It's getting to be that valuable, but it still really isn't.

Cándida Smith: Now, there were some artist purchases that you were involved with that seem to have been particularly important—like, let's say, Charles Sheeler. You went out and you got a body of Charles Sheeler work.

04-00:21:04

Phillips: That was actually David.

Cándida Smith: David Ross?

04-00:21:10

Phillips: David Ross found that material. It was very weird psychologically, too, because he had not even come to the museum. I think politically, he was trying to stage himself as a mediator. Because by that time, there was a terrific split between photography and the other lesser expensive, in terms of expense, arts—the architecture and design people and media—with painting and sculpture. There was big problem. There were all these very fancy trustees on the painting and sculpture side that were also being very fractious and demanding. So I think this was a bone. It was very generous of him, too, because he did have the psychological wherewithal to figure all this stuff out and to figure out that it would be great to bring this to the museum. Because in the fifties, we had the opportunity to buy the Stieglitzes, and we had never followed up, really, in a big way, with another major purchase of that quality, of that period. Our Strands are pathetic, in terms of representation. We have maybe two or three Strands that are worth hanging, really. But we have, as you know, a great collection of Stieglitz. Through the Stieglitz material, we got some great f/64 stuff, but we had never been able to represent modernism, outside of California, in photography. He made this important to the trustees, not just the photography department. So I went out and found support within my photographic guys, Bob Fisher and Paul Sack. Bob was very important, but through the support of David, putting it up here for the rest of the painting and sculpture people, we got other important support so we were able to get it. That was a good thing to do. That was hard work.

Cándida Smith: Were you competing with other institutions for the Sheeler photographs?

04-00:24:22

Phillips: Well, it was a question of time. I had been working—It came through Peter MacGill. I'd been working with Peter for ten, fifteen years by then. He would call me up every other day and say, "How are we doing?" I'd say, "Well, this is where we are." He said, "Okay. I'll call you again in a couple of days." This went on for a couple months, maybe three, I don't remember now. But I was always completely up front with him. I said, "If you feel you can't wait, so be it. But so far, I've got, so on and so on and so on on board, and we're just trying to—" He wanted a commitment of I don't remember how much. Then David came up with an idea to present it to the main accessions committee. So that was good.

Cándida Smith: I know there's at least one Sheeler painting, because I've seen it, in the collection. I don't know how many others there are.

04-00:25:43

Phillips: I think we have more than one, but we have one good one. It's later, actually, than these pictures, which is interesting. But David saw it as an important chance for the photography department to take part in the advanced opportunity, in terms of money, being able to get money to support this, as the painting and sculpture was then buying wonderful stuff, as it would with Rauschenberg.

Cándida Smith: Then another major acquisition, Georgia O'Keeffe.

04-00:26:35

Phillips: Georgia O'Keeffe. Well, you mean the Stieglitzes that we were able to purchase. But that wasn't me. That was really John Humphrey. That was early.

Cándida Smith: I have it down here as something that you were involved with.

04-00:26:58

Phillips: The only other big acquisition we made at that time was Tina Modotti. We were able to get this archive that included about thirty of her photographs—they're small photographs—but also all of her letters that she sent from Mexico to her mother-in-law, who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. Even though her husband had died, she maintained a tie—I think they were actually not even married. She retained this tie. She would send photographs in the letters. Some of them are bent. Some of them are boring and just pictures of a house or something. But some of them are really good pictures. That took a lot of time because I had somebody who was going to support it and then who backed out. I had to scramble for \$350,000 or something like that. We were able to get it.

Cándida Smith: I'd like to talk a little bit about the changing directors of the institution and the degree to which that changed the direction of the museum in general, and what impact that may or may not have had on you and your department. So it's clear, after the move to the new building, that Jack Lane has lost the support of the board of directors. Was that evident to the staff, to you?

04-00:29:09

Phillips: Poor Jack was so beleaguered he couldn't pay attention to what was going on. The trustees were so fractious and so mean. I remember when what's-her-name was literally thrown off the board of trustees. It was so awful. There was blood all over the floor. Poor Jack. He could not really concentrate on the program or what we were doing. He would come to our accessions meetings. He had never had any particular great fondness for photography anyway, so he'd fall asleep. Just exhausted from all of this. Then we get David, who bounces in and—

Cándida Smith: Well, in between, Lori Fogarty seems to be—

04-00:30:20

Phillips: Lori was great! But she was never—Lori’s a friend, so—I’m sure I’ve stayed here as long as I have because of Lori, because of her skills and making all of us feel important enough to stick around. To deal with all the terrible politics that take place in every small institution. Lori was great. Actually, Lori was very, very skilled in helping us with the Sheeler purchase. I couldn’t have done that without her. I would massage somebody like Bob Fisher, who was too young to really think of where his collection would eventually go. She would call him and would say, “You know, we can’t do this unless you actually say that at least some of this material will definitely come here. You’re being offered this opportunity to own this, and at this price, because this material will have to come the museum.”

Cándida Smith: So he purchased some of the Sheeler material?

04-00:31:44

Phillips: Yes. Yes.

Cándida Smith: With the idea that in the future—

04-00:31:48

Phillips: Yes.

Cándida Smith: Was that a pledge or a promise?

04-00:31:56

Phillips: It wasn’t a fractional gift, because by that time, we still hadn’t figured out the evil fractional gift. It was a promise, somewhere in the distant future.

Cándida Smith: Fractional gifts, you do them in the photography department, as well?

04-00:32:19

Phillips: Well, yeah, we have a *lot* of fractional gifts. But they’re difficult now because they’re not technically legal anymore. I can’t go into this.

Cándida Smith: In 2006, the tax laws changed. Supposedly, it changed everything, but somehow it seems like not that much has changed.

04-00:32:48

Phillips: Nothing has changed. No, there was a different energy. I would say that poor David, who got quite quickly embattled by everything, at least, when money was flowing, was able to get the trustees to do what they’re supposed to do, to spend money and help the collection, help the museum and all that.

Cándida Smith: How did you feel about the choice of David, initially?

04-00:33:19

Phillips: Oh, I thought it was *disastrous*.

Cándida Smith: So you were not supportive from the beginning?

04-00:33:25

Phillips: I think part of the reason he was interested in helping me with the Sheeler was to win me over. I can get bribed.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps he had greater interest, just natural interest in photography?

04-00:33:43

Phillips: Oh, I think he did. I think he did.

Cándida Smith: I thought he was involved, to some degree, in getting the Arbus show.

04-00:33:58

Phillips: He was the one who suggested it, who leaned on me to start it, to start working with Doon [Arbus]. He was the person who laid out a budget—which was absolutely crazy. We ended up renting space in Manhattan so Doon could put together a maquette.

Cándida Smith: It sounds like it was a different universe than you were used to.

04-00:34:30

Phillips: Absolutely extravagant. But I remember him coming into my office and saying, “You know this is the one show, besides Ansel Adams, that will get tremendous play in the larger art world, that people will take this photographer very, very seriously, as seriously as they would take—” [Richard] Diebenkorn or Jasper Johns, maybe. I can’t remember the example now.

Cándida Smith: I would think but not for the right reasons.

04-00:35:16

Phillips: But that was my job, to make it for the right reasons. Then he left. Then after I had begun talking to Doon and working with Jeffrey Fraenkel and working with Elisabeth Sussman, and the trustees said, “Okay, your show is cancelled.” I said, “Well, wait a minute. How can we un-cancel it?” This was Dick Greene. He said, “Well, raise a million dollars.” So I said, “Okay. Well, I’ll try.” I think I raised about \$700,000. So by that time, they said, “Okay, you can do the show.”

Cándida Smith: That’s unusual for a photography show.

04-00:36:15

Phillips: We knew it was going to be an expensive show. We had to charge a lot because of the circumstances. I mean, Doon was crazy and needed a lot of money and needed a lot of hand holding. The conditions under which the show were exhibited—*aah*.

Cándida Smith: I thought that one seldom sees reviews for an exhibit that are as contentious as those for that show were. It wasn’t just a question of liking or disliking the work, but strong feelings both ways about the moral integrity of the people

involved. Which must have been difficult for you. Or maybe you were expecting that.

04-00:37:20

Phillips: I think those are questions that she deliberately raised herself, Arbus. Well, that Sontag raised, too, in reacting to her work. So, yes, I totally expected all of that. What Sontag was not able to do was to realize how great an artist she was within those kind of—I don't think she was morally questionable, but I think she was certainly interested in pushing boundaries. I thought it would be a good show for us to do if we could pull it off. I just hated *doing* it.

Cándida Smith: So in the ideal world, David Ross would have raised the million dollars.

04-00:38:27

Phillips: I just had to work with Doon, instead. I had to do the whole thing.

Cándida Smith: Have you done any other shows of comparable expense and complexity? I mean not intellectual complexity.

04-00:38:51

Phillips: Well, I would say the Ansel Adams show we did. We got a million dollars for that show. We got a million dollars because we wanted the show to be essentially free to whoever wanted the show, but we would pick the most important museums. That's how we did that. There was a traveling fee, but it wasn't a fee that would cover our costs. In working with John Szarkowski, to have him do a revisionist understanding of Adams and pick early prints and his own favorite prints, without the jolly Ansel Adams being around, we were absolutely right on there. It was good.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps it's difficult, but since David left, since Neal has become the director, how have—

04-00:40:11

Phillips: Thing changed?

Cándida Smith: How has the new direction changed things for you and the department?

04-00:40:17

Phillips: Well, for better or worse, I've been doing things on my own, as I usually have been. Again, Richard, even though there's been this enormous change in the photography market or awareness of photography, nobody's as interested in photography in this museum as I am or my department is. So we're left alone to follow our own thing. I guess my major disappointment right now is that the show we did just this year, the science show that was done not by me, but my colleague Corey Keller, had a great book, it was a beautiful show; it got virtually no national attention. It should have traveled. Part of it is that that was her first show and she doesn't know how to work the politics of the Met or the Modern, and partly because to a very great extent, the museum photography world has changed. The Modern and the Met are not what they

used to be, internationally. They're colleagues, but not that important anymore. It's weird.

Cándida Smith: In the photography world.

04-00:41:55

Phillips: I don't know. We all try.

Cándida Smith: And Neal has articulated a goal of being able to exhibit more of the permanent collection?

04-00:42:14

Phillips: Yeah.

Cándida Smith: Does that excite you, the possibility of being able to have a much larger representation of the collection up?

04-00:42:41

Phillips: I think if we're asking people to give us their collections, or large parts of their collections, we have to be able to show it. As you know, unlike painting and sculpture, this work cannot be up forever; it has to rotate. It has certain conditions. It has to be under certain light and humidity situations. So we do need more space. I hope we get staffing to support that so the photography curators don't die of overwork, which they may very well. But c'est la vie.

Cándida Smith: But this is part of the master plan, then.

04-00:43:36

Phillips: It seems to be.

Cándida Smith: That you're included in it. You might even be an important part of it?

04-00:43:43

Phillips: Probably. It's weird. It's like capitalism, the museum world always expanding, right?

Cándida Smith: But the stock market has just collapsed by 50 percent in less than a year, so one doesn't know—

04-00:44:02

Phillips: Really what's going to happen.

Cándida Smith: Yeah, what's going to happen with *anything*. Whether the kinds of money that was easily—well, not easily, but at least accessible over the last twenty years will be available over the next twenty years. We could be going back to the 1970s.

04-00:44:22

Phillips: Well, we could be going back to the nineteenth century.

Cándida Smith: As you're thinking about what you want to collect over the next five years, does it involve any new departures?

04-00:44:56

Phillips: Well, I always say I'm interested in good photographs. Recently, some of those good photographs have come from Africa. It may be new departures in other parts of the world. I remember having this conversation with John Szarkowski when I came back from China three years ago. He said, "Well, is there anything interesting coming out of China?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, why?" I said, "Because China's changing and people are interested in showing what that change is like." I think that's true of Africa, too, right now. It's interesting that the technology has evolved so that people in Africa can photograph what change is looking like. Some of these people are sophisticated, knowing people. You can live in Johannesburg or Tangier and you can make wonderful pictures that we will want to own and exhibit.

Cándida Smith: So you're going to broaden your international perspective.

04-00:46:22

Phillips: Probably. That seems to be where it's going. I'm interested, actually, looking at India right now. The same old places, too, Europe and the US.

Interview 3: May 18, 2009

[Begin Audio File 5 05-18-2009.mp3]

Cándida Smith: Today, we wanted to discuss a sampling of the photographs that you've acquired for the collection. I thought we might start with one of your earlier interests, which was John Gutmann. You've selected—

05-00:00:56

Phillips: *The Artist Lives Dangerously* [1938].

Cándida Smith: From your personal point of view, what is it that is meaningful to you about that particular photograph? What makes it really click?

05-00:01:16

Phillips: John was a good friend of mine. I didn't know him until I came to San Francisco. I had worked, before coming to San Francisco, on an old Jewish Hungarian photographer who had lived in Paris after he emigrated from Hungary and then had moved to New York. I had been essentially raised by all those German Jews. They were all my parents' friends, and they were all my teachers. So I was very comfortable with John Gutmann. I met him, like the first month I came to San Francisco, because I knew the catalog that John Humphrey had done of a show in the eighties, I think—no, it must have been in the seventies—which interested me, and he seemed like a wonderful photographer and a very interesting man. His background was such that I was very familiar with it, but very intrigued why he came not to New York, but all the way to San Francisco.

I remember walking up from Haight [Street], up Cole Street, to visit him. It was completely crazy. I thought I was back in New York and I could do that thing. We went out to dinner, and we became friends from then until his death. It seemed completely natural that I would want to do a show. He was clearly the most original photographer who hadn't had any real recognition. He had had some recognition, but not real serious recognition on the part of people living outside of San Francisco.

05-00:03:26

So we worked together. He was a very cantankerous but quite brilliant man. It seemed to me that even though he was a painter before coming to San Francisco and had supported himself as a teacher of painting, he supported himself when he came to San Francisco as a photographer for the German magazines. Even though these were supposed to be documents informing Germany of what an odd but marvelous place San Francisco or the western United States was, it seemed to me that he was really a surrealist. These are amazing pictures, but their poignance or power is that it was a definitely European sensibility looking at these events. They seemed imbued with a disquiet. Even though they were normal kids playing in the street, they seemed imbued with an anxiety and foreboding that we would associate with

De Chirico or some other surrealist artist. Of course, he never would admit that, but I think it was clear.

This picture, in particular—I think it’s actually not one I bought, but it’s one I think my predecessor bought, Van Deren Coke, who was himself very interested in surrealism. He was a surrealist photographer, in fact. I like it because John had this fascination with American cars. He came from Germany, and he said how amazing it was that poor people in the United States had cars. They would go around in these old jalopies, and they would just live out of their cars. Or they would truck everything in their cars, but they had cars. In Europe, of course, if you were wealthy, you had a car; if you were a poor person, there was no way you could have a car. So when he arrived in the middle of the Depression, it was an astonishing thing to see people with cars. In fact, the car in this picture is looming weirdly. It has this vibrancy, an almost, not quite menacing aura, but it does have an aura of its own. It’s like another witness, a personality. There is something dangerous about this kid in the street making this graffiti. John considered the title of a picture as important as the picture itself. So the title of this one is very evocative, as most of them are. But I think it was important for him to say that it was called *The Artist Lives Dangerously*. I think he himself had some compassion for this. As you know, the surrealists had very consistent interest in children’s art and the art of the primitive. John was very much a part of that. But I think the fact that it’s a child artist and he’s living dangerously on the street is a particularly John Gutmann insight. I think it comes from somebody who’s come from Europe and has experienced this displacement.

Cándida Smith: Were there other photographs that were related to this particular one? Is it part of a series?

05-00:08:15

Phillips: He did make collections of cars. He made photographs of cars, people living out of their cars, the way cars were personalized, license plates—for instance, one from Wyoming with a cowboy on it. It all seemed very bizarre to him. There are other street photographs that relate to this, too. There’s this amazing woman who’s all clothed in a veil and strange dress. You can see from the way the veil is lit, that it looks like she has a death’s head. He called it *Death Stalks Fillmore*. That was what he was interested in, in the city and the exoticness of his experience here.

Cándida Smith: What about the way in which he framed his photographs or the way he printed them? Is there something special for you in the formal construction of the photograph as an image?

05-00:09:42

Phillips: They are very deliberately framed. This is a vintage print. We were able to buy some wonderful vintage prints. He was, as one might imagine, a master technician. There’re these deep, luminous blacks in many of these pictures.

The shadows are beautifully physical, and as one might expect, very different from the sensuousness and luminosity that you would find in, say, an Edward Weston photograph. Very characteristic of Gutmann, the way this is framed, because it has a narrative. That was what was so different about him here. He was a loner. For him, the idea of a narrative in a picture, totally antithetical to what Weston and Adams were doing, was very important to him. The only person he had any modest contact with was [Dorothea] Lange, actually. He said he wasn't interested in her, because she was an old woman. But she knew his work and was encouraging. Which I think is interesting, because they're both documentary, but they come from very different backgrounds.

Cándida Smith: The street scene is, of course, a classic genre in documentary photography. Helen Levitt, of course, pops to mind, in terms of somewhat contemporary images of children playing in the streets.

05-00:11:55

Phillips: Indeed, indeed. Certainly, he knew—not at that time, but he knew Levitt's work. He was a quasi-contemporary of Helen. But his work does have this tragic overtone, which Helen's work does not have, even though her work was informed by surrealism. It's more like there's some magical primitivism in children that she appreciates. In Gutmann's work, it's very beautiful, but there's always—The lighting is a little bit theatrical, often, and you always get a sense of some disquiet in the work. There's something strange. Clearly, it's a European sensibility, which is why it spoke to me.

Cándida Smith: Does Robert Frank have a similar kind of—

05-00:13:05

Phillips: Oh, I think Robert's work is completely informed by the fact that he is an outsider and looking at a strange culture that sees itself very complacently. He sees it in a very tragic way.

Cándida Smith: That's one of the striking things, is the often vacant expressions on the faces of children. The affectless presentation of children. There's the famous photograph of the black nanny holding the white toddler.

05-00:13:49

Phillips: Yes, who looks like a doll, without any internal life at all.

Cándida Smith: Well, I had suggested that we go in the order in which you came to know the photographer, but since we've brought up Dorothea Lange, perhaps we should go to her, as one of the most famous documentary photographers of that generation.

05-00:14:22

Phillips: It took me a while to get to Lange. I thought that everyone knew Lange, and why should I do a Lange show? Actually, somebody suggested—Because by then, I had done a show of Helen Levitt and John Gutmann and Wright

Morris. Somebody said, “Well, you’re obviously interested in documentary photography. You should probably look at Dorothea Lange.” I did start looking at her again. We do have some pictures of hers. Not a whole lot, because the great collection of the work is at the Oakland Museum [of California], given to them by Paul Taylor. I always thought, well, somebody there knows everything, but I became friendly with Theresa Heyman. She was extremely generous. She insisted on writing an essay in the catalog, but she said, “You can go through our collection and just choose whatever you want.” She was very helpful. Indeed, there was a lot of stuff there that was vintage work. Lange was not interested in vintage and not vintage; she was interested in just getting good pictures. That’s what informed the Oakland Museum, but I thought, “Well, wouldn’t it be interesting to look at stuff that she herself printed?” So we did. Then I started going around to other collections, where there was quantities of material that I knew was there and hadn’t been looked at. So we discovered in—Was it Duke [University] or—No, it wasn’t Duke. [The University of North Carolina] Chapel Hill had a big collection of work that they hadn’t even catalogued as Dorothea Lange, because nobody had matched up the—As libraries do, you get tons of stuff and you catalog it as best you can, but they had this big batch of pictures that hadn’t been matched up with the numbers, the code. There were Lange pictures there that nobody knew were by Lange. I knew her work from the California work, mainly. But you got a sense that when she was in the South, she was very enchanted with the struggles there and the culture of the South.

She went into the South with her husband, Paul Taylor. The pictures of the South in our show were, I think, quite unusual and rich. As we started putting the show together, I had asked John Szarkowski, my friend who had worked at the Modern for so many years and who was so important to me, to write a catalog essay, which he did. Then he found this picture [Dorothea Lange, *J. R. Butler, President of Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, Memphis, Tennessee, 1938*], and he said, “This is a wonderful picture. I’ve never seen this before.” Of course, we *have* seen this picture before. Lange herself, as an older woman, would take her own work and make different croppings of it. So what we know of this picture is the head, very, very closely cropped. It’s a very effective picture. But I think as a classical example of the expressiveness of the way this man holds his body and the leanness of his arms and the expression of complete anxiety, open anxiety on his face. The face is, of course, what interested her, but how the face could be read through the expression of the body, too. That’s what so interested me. I think it’s a *truly* great picture, one of her very, very best. So yes, we bought it and yes, I was happy. I think it’s an important picture.

Cándida Smith: Lange must be a difficult photographer for a curator to work with, because there’s so many presuppositions about her.

05-00:19:39

Phillips: There’s so much information.

Cándida Smith: There's so much predetermined or preordained knowledge, which may or may not be right, that it may in fact, be hard for people to look at her photographs because they think they already know what they're seeing, before they even step into the gallery.

05-00:19:59

Phillips: I remember our show traveled all over the place, and it went to ICP [International Center of Photography] in New York. I have very good friends who work there, and they asked me to give a tour of the show. I gave this tour, and there were a couple of my friends, one of whom I went to grad school with, who's a very fine writer on photography and knows all the theory and knows the history of modern photography. I told the story of why Lange became interested in this subject and the meaning of the subject of, essentially, land use. He was so surprised. He said, "I've never really understood Lange." It's not just about documenting people, it comes from this whole cultural understanding of why these people were moving and a cultural difference from where they had lived before to where they were moving to. The different history of the land and its use was something that most people on the East Coast have never heard of. So in fact, there was a lot to talk about.

Cándida Smith: But they have seen the famous—

05-00:21:43

Phillips: They've seen the pictures.

Cándida Smith: The madonna photograph, as it's sometimes called.

05-00:21:46

Phillips: Of course, yes, there's not much new to talk about there, but to focus attention on why she was interested in this. Then after she left that subject, why she went on to work with the Mormons in—There was a magazine article she did with Ansel Adams called "Three Mormon Towns," for *Life* magazine. Then her work in the Berryessa Valley with Pirkle Jones. All these are very consistent interests. They're understood when you understood what Paul Taylor was about. Paul Taylor was an extremely important person for her and for the history of land use in the West.

Cándida Smith: Or her photographs of the Bracero program.

05-00:22:58

Phillips: Yes. Exactly. That's right. So I was able to inject a little new life into this.

Cándida Smith: This is a vintage print that you acquired. What about the special characteristics of her own approach to printing? Is that even a valid issue to bring up? Are there formal questions that are important for understanding her?

05-00:23:28

Phillips: It's interesting because *she* was *not* interested. She was interesting because she was very squeamish about making her own prints. She persuaded Roy

Stryker, who insisted with everyone else, on having his photographers send the unprocessed film to him directly so they could all be processed in Washington, she persuaded him that it was a better idea for her to send the film to Ansel Adams in Yosemite, where he was living—he had a store there—and to have him produce the prints because he was a much better printer. In fact, not of this picture. This picture, I think was actually probably made by her. But we have in our collection, two versions of the *White Angel Bread Line*. One of them obviously printed by her, which is romantic and very touching and emotional, which is why I think this is by her; and the other one a little crisper, very beautiful, very elegant, slightly different cropping. It's clear it's made by Ansel. It's interesting to see two different personalities with the essentially the same material.

Cándida Smith: Presumably, he was trying to interpret her vision.

05-00:25:28

Phillips:

Oh, indeed. They were *very* competitive, those two. Her son Dan, I remember when I talked to him, said—Because he was there doing the text for the *Life* magazine article called “Three Mormon Towns.” He said that they got out of the car, and Ansel got his little—Was it a 35 mm camera? A small camera, like she used. She got out an eight-by-ten view camera. They were friendly competitors. I think he was always encouraging her to take herself more seriously as an artist. Of course, that's what *he* was. She considered herself a documentarian, making photographs for a use. I think the emotional aspect of this picture is what she considered her special gift.

Cándida Smith: Was she turning her back on the pictorial tradition of, let's say, Imogen Cunningham or—?

05-00:27:03

Phillips:

Well, she herself had been a pictorialist photographer, a portrait photographer, in that tradition. I think when she left her husband and decided to take up a life with her second husband, I think she became more serious. I remember John Szarkowski was trying to figure out if she had more fun before she got married to Paul. I think it's a fair question. I think she probably *did* have more fun.

Cándida Smith: What about the Bryan Studio picture from possibly 1886 [Untitled (*A Pile of Animal Tails*)]?

05-00:28:14

Phillips:

Oh, I love this picture. I included this picture in my very first large show, which was called “A History of Photography From California Collections.” I had gotten to know Gordon Bennett, who's still alive. He doesn't collect anymore. He's not well enough, but he was this *amazing* collector. He had been trained by John Gutmann. He was a photographer. The museum had given him a show. He had found the eloquence of vernacular photography, and he became a proponent of this material. He had put together this

completely amazing collection, which included some great people. For instance, Carleton Watkins. But mainly, they were snapshots or pictures by people that nobody had ever heard of. This picture was one of them. I remember there was a tintype, also of an ear of corn set against a mirror.

Now, why would anyone do this? Obviously, there was an effort here of cutting off all these tails and bringing them to somebody's studio in the middle of the Dakota Territory. This was before North or South Dakota became states. I can't even remember the city it's in. It's maybe Fargo. In any case, it's some absolute provincial place. Obviously, spending quite a lot of money making a picture. What was the reason? What did it mean? Well, if you look at the tails, they're probably coyote tails. There was probably a bounty on them because at this time, the range had been changed from bison to cattle, and probably now, to growing wheat. This probably was part of that change of culture, a radical change. Because obviously, there was probably some bounty on coyotes, because they were out there doing bad things to calves or whatever it was. It's such a bizarre picture. In its own way, it's like folk-surrealism, but because it's so bizarre, it makes you try and figure out why it was made. For the show that we did after that, about the way land was used in the West, it seemed a completely appropriate thing to include because the West, as you know, was farmed in these enormous farms and ranched in these enormous ranches, as well as being mined in other ways. So this was all part of that great tale, the tale that we thought we could rule it. We could command it. With our brains, we could conquer.

Cándida Smith: Is there a surrealist quality to the picture that attracted you?

05-00:32:38

Phillips: Oh, indeed! It's very bizarre. A little creepy, but also wonderful.

Cándida Smith: You've come up with a very rational explanation for it. But there is also a nineteenth-century tradition, particularly in the US—the Ringling Brothers, Barnum, Cody—of just weirdness for the sake of weirdness. A mountain of tails, just because you can do it.

05-00:33:19

Phillips: Well, certainly. But there might be other reasons for it, too.

Cándida Smith: Edouard Roditi, who was a—

05-00:33:29

Phillips: Oh, I knew Edouard.

Cándida Smith: He mentioned to me once when he—He came to the US when he was nineteen, having been a youthful participant in the surrealist circles in Paris. The strange thing was, *everything* in the US is surrealist, without anybody knowing it.

05-00:33:51

Phillips:

I think that's what John Gutmann also felt. Here it was so bizarre—certainly, for a European—and nobody realized it was so bizarre except the Europeans.

Cándida Smith:

What about the Carleton Watkins [*Pohono, Bridal Veil, 900 Feet, Yo Semite, 1861*]? That, of course, is one of your treasures, I suspect.

05-00:34:20

Phillips:

We're very fortunate here to have Jeffrey Fraenkel, a man who really discovered Watkins as a major artistic figure, something that Watkins himself thought he was and went broke on that prospect. I've always admired this work because it's so beautiful and grand, and also very modern. Watkins, it seems to me, is a minimalist artist who happened to live in the nineteenth century and make these amazing pictures with a spare vision, very modernist vision. But he was very much part of the nineteenth century.

Cándida Smith:

So if you were to compare—it's probably an unfair comparison—but if you were to compare this photograph to, say [Albert] Bierstadt or [Frederic] Church, what would be the kinds of differences that would make the photograph particularly more interesting to you?

05-00:35:40

Phillips:

Well, Bierstadt and Church—Bierstadt particularly, because he made pictures in Yosemite—I would say employs the nineteenth-century rhetoric of the divine landscape, the hallowed corner of the United States as a divine entity. I think that Watkins probably had similar feelings, especially when seeing Yosemite. But the work is not as full of that rhetoric. When you make a big photograph like this—and these are contact prints, so he had a big camera; he had a camera that had a plate that size—when you open your lens, you see this picture upside-down. You know, if you're a nineteenth-century photographer, that the sky is always going to be a blank. It will be completely overexposed. That's because of the chemistry. So people like Watkins and people who were making photographs of the West had to invent a way. Of course, there were clouds, but they had to invent a way to make a picture work that was not along the conventional lines of painting. In fact, it's closer to an abstract geometry that we're familiar with through cubism. At least that's what Watkins is.

If you look at the work of his rival, [Edward] Muybridge, Muybridge is more a nineteenth-century romantic artist. He would take pictures of clouds and print them in, because the cloudy sky would be blank by the time you exposed the rest of the mountains and trees and everything. So he would print in these beautiful billowing clouds. He would choose vantage points that were more like people like John Martin, the Victorian painter of revelatory landscape. He knew that material because he was an English artist; he came from England. He sold stationery, he sold cards, he sold prints. So he knew those conventions. Watkins probably knew them, but not so well. He was more a worker. So because he didn't know those conventions, or not so well, or because he was an amazingly brilliant creative force, he managed to form a

style in which he successfully engaged the viewer in the dynamic, original quality of the landscape that he was looking at, its newness, its unconventionality, in a way that's very particular to him and very unlike the more conventional Muybridge. Which is not to say that Muybridge isn't a very, very interesting photographer, because he is. But I guess I could say that I *love* this picture, because it is such a modern picture. You can say it's a minimalist picture, even.

It's a wrong thing to admit as a historian, perhaps, but that's certainly why it speaks to me. I think it's why it speaks to a lot of contemporary people. Can you imagine coming onto this scene? You know that by this time, it was not unexplored. It looks here as though he's just trudged all of his cameras and his equipment into the valley by burro, and he's the only person there. He camps out at night and eats cornpone or something like that. Well, there were already hotels there and there were people who were herding their sheep there. So it was not unexplored, but it makes it seem as though it's an Edenic, untouched, unseen part of very special scenery.

Cándida Smith: You've connected him to the minimalists, but if we were to roll back to before the minimalists—I don't know when we might say that magic moment would be, but if we would go back to the era of "The Family of Man," how do you think this photograph or his photographs read in the period of high modernism?

05-00:42:02

Phillips: Well, let me just say that one of the people who rediscovered Watkins was Ansel Adams. Which is peculiar, because Adams is more Bierstadtian than Watkinsonian. But we know that because of several things. First of all, there's a hotel there, a nineteenth-century hotel. I'm forgetting the name. It's a little bit south of the major tourist area of Yosemite. Inside of that hotel, there were original Watkinses. There still are, but they're copies now. Adams lived in Yosemite, so of course, he would know that. He also included Watkins in a big show in 1939 that he did, a World's Fair show he did here on photography, history of photography. There was a big section on Western photography. He included Watkins, along with people like [Timothy] O'Sullivan, who were essentially the contemporaries, maybe a little bit earlier, than Watkins. So he knew that material. Of course, as you know, Adams was in "The Family of Man." His work was considered spectacular by his friend, Beaumont Newhall, but was included by [Edward] Steichen in "The Family of Man," I think to promote an American specialness, in a somewhat dogmatic exhibition. But yeah, [Watkins] was known. It was important for Adams to know Watkins. I think at some point, he moved beyond Watkins. If you look at early Adams, though, you will find there's more resonance than the later work.

Cándida Smith: When we look at these two albumin prints from the 1880s, what does a contemporary viewer need to know about the conventions of the late

nineteenth century, in terms of what a beautiful print may or may not be, that might be different from what emerged through the twentieth century?

05-00:45:02

Phillips:

Well, it's hard to say. Watkins was a very ambitious man and very serious about his work. He knew those painters. His work was bought by Bierstadt and other painters. Watkins was such a single-minded, devoted photographer. He saw photography less as a business than as a vocation. He was known to be completely impractical. When he had his store here in San Francisco, it was called the gallery, Watkins Gallery, Yosemite Gallery. He made these pictures that were extremely expensive to produce. Big, so they would be like paintings. They were framed to be like paintings. He had *ambitions*, shall we say? He was a very, very beautiful craftsman.

There were many problems. One was economic, there was a downturn in the economy shortly after he opened his store. He was a completely impractical businessperson. He lost material. We know, also that his work was sent to Congress to persuade Congress to make this place a national monument. People like Frederick Law Olmsted knew of his prints. He was a known artistic figure, even though not an artist. But he certainly had ambitions for that. I think those ambitions never really left him, even though he had to make smaller pictures just to survive. They were often made in this other format, which is a smaller, more populist way of selling pictures, presenting pictures and making them. The other picture, the pile of tails, is a more normal studio picture. You would go to the studio, and you would probably sit yourself down or bring your children and have them photographed. Or you would purchase a photograph of a famous visiting speaker or actor or opera star from Europe, things like that. It was a more commercial medium. Depending on the photographer, it usually became a little more standard.

Cándida Smith: Let's move on to the Robert Adams photograph [*On Signal Hill: Overlooking Long Beach, California*, 1983]. Contemporary. Possibly minimalist, though I hate to apply labels.

05-00:49:09

Phillips:

Robert Adams is, I think, a really wonderful and very, very interesting man. It took me a long time to understand this work, because it is so different from conventional landscape photography. Actually, looking at it now, it seems more inflected with a mood than perhaps some of his earlier pictures that he did in Denver. It's kind of, "Just the facts, ma'am." It shows everything. Really without apologies. It shows both the beauty and what's wrong in the landscape.

This series is a series of pictures he did of failed housing developments in Southern California. He went to graduate school in Southern California, an English Ph.D. student. He returns there to print his books. He's a person who says that he is more drawn to the tragic in life than the optimistic aspect of

life. I think he's tried very hard in his work not to be gloomy, but to be bilateral, to be even-handed. Because he's really a transcendentalist, I think. He really finds salvation in nature. I think he feels very personally, the damage that we do to nature, which I think is what makes his pictures work.

Cándida Smith: With this particular picture, what was it that leapt out at you?

05-00:51:49

Phillips:

Well, it's those two trees. There's this one larger tree that's almost bare, and the other one crouched underneath the first one, weeping, with a few more leaves on it. They're on this hillside overlooking this smoggy Los Angeles. I think it's like something out of Ovid, as well as something out of contemporary life. There's something very vital and very emotional about this work. Very, very beautiful, too. The lines of these branches could have been drawn by some Japanese artist, I think. They're carefully seen and eloquently made.

Cándida Smith: The Henry Wessel next to it [*Buena Vista, Colorado, 1973*]? Which is, I see, ten years earlier.

05-00:53:15

Phillips:

Henry Wessel and Robert Adams were shown together, with a group of other photographers, in a show called "New Topographics" that took place at Rochester, the George Eastman House. Now, when was that? It must have been like 1976, something like that. This was survey. It included Bernd and Hilla Becher, which I think is ridiculous. But it also included Stephen Shore, who was the only one in color, and Frank Gohlke, a whole bunch of people who were the opposite to Ansel Adams. There was a whole group of photographers who were trying to come to terms with documenting the landscape as it really looked. Ansel Adams had been this amazing conservationist who was working for all of the various arms of the conservationist movement that were so important then. He had started to reprint his earlier photographs by the fifties, to make them a little more rhapsodic, perhaps. So there was a reaction. His work was also pretty much about land that was untouched by human beings. Or at least white human beings. There's a whole series of pictures that were done in the Southwest. That seemed to be okay. Indians were okay, but white folks were not. Bob Adams, Hank Wessell, Frank Gohlke, and Stephen Shore, all these people were more accepting of what the land really looked like and the incursion of man into the land.

I think Henry Wessel's work tends to be—Well, not *riotously* funny, but certainly bemused. I think this picture of the telephone cabin in the middle of God knows where is so incongruous and funny. At the same time, there's this *beautiful* light. Henry moved from where he was born and raised, on the East Coast, in Pennsylvania, to California because he said he couldn't believe the light. You could photograph here all the time. You could make pictures in

winter, in summer, every time, and it would always be this amazing light. So I think that's also what informs this picture. It's a picture about not only the weirdness of things you find in [the West], but the amazing climate here and visually, how beautiful it is. Even though it may be odd.

Cándida Smith: In today's discussion, you have been emphasizing beauty as a value. Then I think of—I probably am going to get in trouble now, but somebody like Lewis Baltz.

05-00:57:35

Phillips: Oh, Lewis was part of this. He was part of the New Topographics.

Cándida Smith: But I don't think of Lewis Baltz—I don't think of him as beauty, I think of him as anti-beauty.

05-00:57:38

Phillips: I wouldn't say that. I think he's very hard about what he's seeing, but I'm sure that he does find it, also, very beautiful, in an inhumane way. They're very minimalist, those pictures. They're very much like admiring the form, the maybe inhumane form, of these box-like structures down in Southern California. Who would want to live in them? What life do you have in them? But they have an amazing purity. Yes, I think it's all about ambiguity, actually.

[Begin Audio File 6 05-18-2009.mp3]

Cándida Smith: Larry Sultan. For him, the connection that he made with the museum was an important part. He's stated that this museum was quite important for the development of his career.

06-00:00:58

Phillips: His showing of *Evidence*, the *Evidence* pictures, with John Humphrey. Did he tell you about how John—who I never met; he had died before I came—would smoke cigarettes and you were watching the butt get larger and larger, until you were wondering if it was going to fall on your picture? Sometimes it did, apparently. But then, nobody took photographs very seriously anyway, so it was okay.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps you could tell us about why *Practicing Golf Swing* [1989] is meaningful to you, particularly meaningful to you. What's going on in this picture that the viewers should see?

06-00:01:50

Phillips: First of all, it's an amazingly beautiful picture. I hate to use this word once again. The stance. It looks like the Praxiteles sculpture, the *Discus Thrower*. It has that elegance. Like the *Discus Thrower*, the golf swing is in the middle of his gesture. It's seen against this wonderful theatrical, filmy curtain, so the light is just entering in and making the interior special, like a special stage, but

making it a gentle place and something private. This is a private act. He's doing this for himself. It's also a melancholy picture because this is his father, who was a businessman and who had a life in business. He worked for, I think, Schick razorblades. Then he was asked, because he was so good, he was invited out from Brooklyn, so he moved the whole family to Southern California. Then some years later, he was invited to move somewhere else, like Chicago or back to the East Coast, I can't remember, and he declined. He never again retained his foothold in the business world. His wife, Larry's mother, essentially became a businessperson, selling real estate. His father did things, but essentially, played golf. That was his job, that was his identity. So there's something very sad about this, but also very beautiful. It's a picture of a family. A history of a family, looked at by a very fond son, with understanding, but without emotionalism. It's with a separation, too. He understands the whole situation, obviously, and understands it as separate from him. Larry, as you probably know, is an amazing writer, as well as being a wonderful, wonderful photographer. His first book, which is called *Pictures From Home*, is about this whole story. It includes found pictures, vernacular pictures, pictures that he took out of family films, things like that, that he found and extracted and illustrated. So he put all this together in a very Northern California way, with his writing. Then after the book was published, he continued to work with his parents. This actually is a later picture. I don't know if it's done after his mother has died, but she's certainly not well. They were very much a couple. But this was obviously his father's identity here. Very California, too. You can see the way he's dressed, in his shorts, and very tanned body, very athletic. He did not want to lose that, being in paradise.

Cándida Smith: With both the Gutmann and the Sultan, with the human figures, does it matter that these might be staged scenes?

06-00:06:49

Phillips: Well, first of all, I don't think they are. I don't think it does matter, because first of all, the Sultan picture is so intimate, anyway. The other picture by John Gutmann, I don't think he staged it. I don't think he would stage a kid out there. He did stage certain pictures. I must say that when I look at those pictures, knowing that they were staged, they're less interesting to me. But that's maybe unfair.

Cándida Smith: What if you didn't know?

06-00:07:39

Phillips: I don't know. Alas, I do. Yes, he can get theatrical sometimes. But this, I don't think is theatrical. I think it's found theater.

Cándida Smith: That's a nice distinction. The television being on, is that important for the composition?

06-00:08:04

Phillips:

Well, it's part of their daily life. It's part of *our* daily lives. I love the distinction between the inside and the outside, and it's part of the inside. It's part of the reality of their inside. I think the outside is a swimming pool under construction. I think they had moved and that was the new swimming pool.

Cándida Smith: How many pictures do you acquire at a time, of a photographer?

06-00:08:52

Phillips:

We try to acquire at least two if we believe in this person. We've been working with Larry for years. When I got to the museum, I think we had one Sultan picture. We probably have something like thirty now.

Cándida Smith: So every year you buy one or two?

06-00:09:21

Phillips:

For instance this year, we bought four. We hadn't gotten any for a few years. But if he does an interesting body of work, then we try and represent it somehow, hoping that there will be gifts in the future. There have been, actually.

Cándida Smith: The Daido Moriyama [*Stray Dog, Misawa, Aomori, 1971*] was a gift of Van Deren Coke to the museum in 1980. Why this picture? What's going on for you?

06-00:10:20

Phillips:

When I was still living in New York, I saw a show at the Museum of Modern Art called "New Japanese Photography." I think it was in '78. It had been organized by John Szarkowski and a man I had never heard of, a Japanese man named Shoji Yamagishi. When I became friendly with John Szarkowski and discovered that we had this picture, as other Japanese photographs in the collection that came through Van, I asked him about Moriyama. He said, "Oh, yes, he's a great photographer. But the really great one is Shomei Tomatsu. So I started looking at Moriyama, because that really interested me. Especially this picture. We eventually did a show of Moriyama.

Cándida Smith: How many Moriyama were in the collection when you started?

06-00:11:30

Phillips:

Van had a connection, and I don't remember who it was with, but some Japanese person had sent him a number of important photographers' works. I think we have three other Moriyamas. There are other people of that period, the sixties and seventies, who are less interesting but very similar. This picture is called *Stray Dog*. It's done on an air force base in northern Japan. It looks like a casual picture. It's a little bit mean. There's something haunted about that dog. It's a force. It's pretty ambiguous. You don't know if it's going to bite you or who it is, or what it is, or what it represents. Obviously, it was an important forceful element for Moriyama.

Cándida Smith: The light is very peculiar to me.

06-00:12:51

Phillips: It's very stagy, very blatant. It's out there in some brilliant summer day. Uncomfortable. I think the lighting makes that dog a very uncomfortable animal.

Cándida Smith: When I first was looking at it, I didn't recognize it as a dog; it's more like a demon. I have to work with the image to see, yes, it's a dog.

06-00:13:31

Phillips: It's uncomfortably seen. It's seen tail first and then it's leaning around looking at you. It looks a little dangerous. Yeah, it looks demonic, indeed. I found it shocking, very moving, and very disturbing. Then there were all these other pictures that seemed banal, but they were also shocking. There's a picture that I was shown quite early when I arrived because it had been stuck in a drawer and had gotten bent. These are all ferrotyped, which means they have flat, glossy surfaces. So that essentially destroyed the picture. Though they were able to restore it, you see this big, long crease mark still there. But that picture was a picture of Japanese people, mainly men, sunbathing—like sardines, they were so close to each other. Then there's another picture of a tire. Weird, molten looking, or moth eaten. Why would somebody do these pictures? Obviously, it was about modern life, and there was something very troubling about it to him. Maybe also interesting, because it was difficult, but also alluring, in a way. This demonic figure is also attention getting. Your hair goes up a little bit there. The more I got to know this work, the more uncomfortable, but also interesting it was. It's all about the presence of Americans and America in Japan after the war and trying to live as a country and as a culture, in two cultures. An American culture surrounding you. This was done on a base. So the idea of the Americans seen as saviors, but also as demons at the same time. Modernity, coming out of a very difficult period after the war and emerging into something that we would call a consumer culture, was also very exciting, but also unsettling. That's what all this work was about.

Cándida Smith: The Tomatsu [Untitled, from the series *Chewing Gum and Chocolate*, 1969, printed 1980] is from Okinawa, which for many years, was essentially an aircraft carrier in the middle of the ocean.

06-00:16:40

Phillips: Like a South Seas paradise, there were these two cultures that existed side by side. An ancient, pre-Japan culture and this American culture that was very dangerous. This is somebody who's obviously been in the war. War wounds is what you see there on the back, living in his body. It's about being, again, caught in this cultural conflict. Dealing with the heritage of the war and the Americans as a constant presence. In a way, Tomatsu's work was more difficult to understand. It's more demanding. It's probably easier for Japanese to understand it than it is for Americans. But his work is about Japanese

history and the ambiguity of modernity in Japan, both very beautiful and also very frightening.

Cándida Smith: In terms of the Japanese photographers that you've collected, these two are a similar time period and a parallel subject matter.

06-00:18:32

Phillips:

Almost every Japanese photographer was interested, in some way, in capturing what was authentic Japanese experience before the war and what was happening after the war. That was the common subject. It was extremely interesting to me because there was—there still is—but there was in the sixties, a culture of photography of this kind, a real culture that existed in many, many magazines and books. They were publishing like crazy. Because what had happened was after the war, the Japanese had to change their economy from a wartime economy into a peacetime economy. So they invented consumer culture, in part, by changing or modifying the optics industry and the film industry into objects for personal use. So there was a tremendous amateur market, not only for the Japanese but also, as you know, worldwide. It's still very important, Canon cameras and all that. But to market this, these big companies put out—You know how you get the *New York Times Magazine* every Sunday? They would get the equivalent for amateur photography every week. Sometimes every month but very often, every week. That's what sustained all these photographers. There were people who lived off of making pictures for those amateur publications. Moriyama published that work, and Tomatsu published that work. Among other things, there were topical subjects, but they were able to define a real culture, in the way that Edward Weston and Ansel Adams defined a culture here for modern photography in the thirties. It was something I fell into when I came here because it was here. We already had these ties with Japanese photography, and it seemed completely obvious to us being here, overlooking the Pacific, to concentrate on this. So we have.

Cándida Smith: The last picture you selected is by Rineke Dijkstra, done in 1992 [*Hilton Head Island, SC USA, June 24, 1992*], you acquired in 1998.

06-00:21:56

Phillips:

Rineke, how old is she? She's probably pushing fifty now. I remember putting up this picture and a larger version of another picture and a couple of other bathers that she had just made, when the new museum opened. Within that year. We had a show and we put Rineke's work in and a couple of other—Lewis Baltz was one of them and Mitch Epstein was the other. She was included in a show called "New Photography," at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and some other shows. I remember talking to a friend of mine who had a gallery, who was trying to get her to become a part of her gallery. It never happened, but there was a lot of interest in this work.

I remember looking at these pictures and thinking, they're really different. They're really new. Here's a woman looking at kids. She's interested in this transition period in people's lives, where they're becoming something and they're trying things out and they're maybe a little bit awkward. They're still the person that they will become, but they haven't become that yet. She would go on these beaches all over the world. This beach happens to be in South Carolina, but she went to beaches in Poland, beaches in Russia—really, all over the place. This one, I love. There's also the Polish girl, I think is great, who looks like a Botticelli, but a little too angular and a little too ugly. This woman, she's very American. There's all this attention to her body, to her pose, to the way she's done her hair, to her makeup, to her eyes, to her lipstick and all of this. The way she holds herself is very American. It's all about consumerism and—

Cándida Smith: But there is a Botticelli aspect, just to the pose which I presume is not an accident.

06-00:25:08

Phillips: Oh, I think Rineke found it. I think it's also wonderful because she doesn't know who she is yet. You can tell that there's something very tentative about it and very shy. She hasn't grown up yet. She's still a little insecure, a little bit awkward. That's very wonderful and very much appreciated by Rineke. Rineke was a somewhat well-known fashion photographer who did the most boring work and then had a bike accident. As you know, people living in Amsterdam go all over the place on bikes. She had a hard time recovering from this accident; she hurt her back severely. It was when she was recovering from this accident that she found this hopefulness and the energy to do this work with kids. I think the psychology of where she was, trying to regain herself and her body, had something to do with the awkwardness that she finds so very endearing and beautiful in these kids. Grand, too.

[End of Interview]

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