

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

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

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

ALLON SCHOENER

SFMOMA Staff, ca. 1952-1954

Assistant Curator

Producer for *Discovery* and *Art in Your Life*, SFMOMA television programs

Interview conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2007

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Interview #1: December 5, 2007

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Rubens: We're speaking with Allon Schoener today, whose title changed often at the San Francisco Museum of Art, as it was called then. But why don't we just begin with where you were born and how you got to Yale.

01-00:00:28

Schoener: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on January 1, 1926. I went to high school in East Cleveland, Ohio. I graduated from there. How I got to Yale was not exactly by accident. I wanted to go to Harvard. This happened to be wartime, 1943, when I graduated from high school. There was something called the V-12 Program, the Navy College Training Program. I enrolled in that, and they ended up sending me to Yale. So I never went through the admission process of being admitted as an undergraduate, but I was part of this V-12 Training Program at Yale.

Rubens: Sponsored by the Navy?

01-00:01:54

Schoener: Sponsored by the Navy.

Rubens: Paid for by the Navy?

01-00:01:56

Schoener: Paid for by the Navy.

Rubens: What did the Navy want from you in exchange?

01-00:01:59

Schoener: Well, it was an officers' training program. We were trained to become naval officers. But at the same time, we were allowed to take courses with some of the faculty at Yale. There was a basic program that we went through—I think it was the first year—which was essentially, mostly, I would say, probably naval sciences and mathematics, science and engineering, things of that nature. But then we were there for three-and-a-half years and finally graduated. I graduated in 1946. Actually, my graduation was accelerated, and I graduated—even though it should have been in June '46, I graduated, I think, in the fall of 1945. But I got a BA degree at that time. I went into the Navy, and then came out of the Navy, went back to Yale, and I was called a special student. This was in terms of expanded admission programs that they had developed for returning veterans. So at that time, I was allowed to take—I was taking undergraduate courses at that point, to round out my education. The courses I took were mostly humanities courses, primarily art history courses. Then, after having done that, I was admitted to the Courtauld Institute at the University of London. From there, I returned to Yale and got an MA in art history.

Rubens: The war was over when you returned.

01-00:03:40

Schoener: The war was over by the time I ended up going to the Philippines.

Rubens: What did you do there?

01-00:03:46

Schoener: I was on an admiral staff in an accounting—

Rubens: Fine. Irrelevant to art.

01-00:03:50

Schoener: Nothing to do with art.

Rubens: What drew you to art? Did you have any family background in that?

01-00:03:57

Schoener: I had an aunt and uncle who were relatively prominent artists in New York at that time.

Rubens: What were their names?

01-00:04:04

Schoener: Their names were Zorach, Bill and Marguerite Zorach. You ever heard of them? Okay. Well, he was probably the leading sculptor in America at that time. He was my relative. My aunt was a painter. They were in the Armory Show. They were very active in the art world up until they died, actually, in the 1960s. They were considered to be in the forefront of the American avant-garde. They were established New York artists.

Rubens: Would you come to New York to see them?

01-00:04:51

Schoener: When I was going to Yale, I would come almost every weekend and spend the weekend with them. I'd hang out with them and go to museums and art galleries—with my uncle, mostly. I became sort of an adopted child in the family. They were a very significant influence in my life. Until I really came to Yale, I had visions of wanting to go into some kind of an industrial enterprise, because I thought I could make money there.

Rubens: What did your father do?

01-00:05:28

Schoener: My father was in the *schmata* business, he was in men's clothing.

Rubens: Did your family suffer during the Depression?

01-00:05:34

Schoener: Yes. Very radically, very seriously.

Rubens: These artists, were they WPA [Works Progress Administration] artists at all?

01-00:05:40

Schoener: No, I think they did pretty well. They managed to do pretty well during the Depression. He was represented by the leading American art gallery in New York, and he did pretty well. They had a carriage house in Brooklyn that they had renovated. So they were established, and they lived a very bourgeois life.

Rubens: Were there art historians at Yale, before you went to the Courtauld, who particularly animated you?

01-00:06:07

Schoener: Well, I have to tell you, I had this discussion with someone the other day about— Oh, I know what it was. I was reading an autobiography. It was Andre Schiffrin's autobiography. He was the publisher of Pantheon. The firm that he founded, called The New Press, reprinted one of my books, *Harlem on My Mind*, for the fourth time. I was reading his autobiography, and there were several things that we had as parallels. But one of them was going to Yale and being— He was there a few years after I was there. But going into an environment and being Jewish in a WASP environment. It was a very disturbing situation for me. It had an incredible impact on me because I was totally outclassed, *déclassé*. I think that was one of the things that also contributed maybe to my wanting to get into the art world, because it seemed as though it was a much more open world than one that had to do with business and finance, or other kinds of professions, where you were judged by your family background. In the art world, you were judged by your talent. So I picked all that up, I think, from my aunt and uncle. There were other people in the family who were artists, and my uncle thought that we should have an art dealer in the family. He tried to convince me that that would be a proper role for me to perform, in terms of the family. Didn't interest me at all.

Rubens: What was his gallery here in New York?

01-00:07:44

Schoener: It was called the Downtown Gallery. It wasn't of any appeal to me whatsoever. So I decided that I was much more interested in going to work in a museum. So I went to Yale, got an MA in art history at Yale. I went to the Courtauld, as well, as I mentioned before.

Rubens: You studied with Anthony Blunt?

01-00:08:09

Schoener: He was my tutor.

Rubens: Was there a focus of your studies?

01-00:08:12

Schoener: Well, we did mostly Renaissance, Italian Renaissance—even though that was not his specialty. [Nicolas] Poussin and French seventeenth-century painting

was his specialty. But he was my tutor at that particular time. But there were very brilliant people who were there. [Ernst] Gombrich was there at that time. These were famous names, in terms of the world of art history. I was exposed at the Courtauld to really stellar art historians, a class of people I had not met even at Yale. When I came back to Yale and went to graduate school, I thought I was in kindergarten, because these people were so far superior. I learned an enormous amount of methodology by working there, even in a very short period of time. You brought up the Warburg before. The Warburg was affiliated with the Courtauld Institute. It was actually a library, not a teaching institute. So we used the facilities of the Warburg library, and we had the faculty of the Courtauld. But there were people who were assigned to the Warburg who were also on the faculty of the Courtauld. So the two organizations were somewhat joined. As I said, when I came back to graduate school at Yale, I really felt that I was almost in a kindergarten, by contrast, because everything was very simplistic. I think this is the point that André Schiffrin was talking about, his experiences of having studied at Cambridge after having been at Yale, that European universities are so much more sophisticated than American universities. So I think that was my most profound educational experience, was the one year that I— Plus I made three trips to the Continent and traveled all over Europe. Then I went to Czechoslovakia and worked on the youth railroad. I was very active in left-wing politics.

Rubens: At a youth—

01-00:10:13

Schoener: Youth railway.

Rubens: Youth railway?

01-00:10:17

Schoener: Yes. Czechoslovakia had just become a communist country. You know what happens when you're in college, you get involved in left-wing activities. Whatever's going on, somebody finds out where the latest hot spot is. So the latest hot spot was Czechoslovakia. We went there. We'd heard that there was this youth railway. We shovelled a couple shovels full of gravel. That's about all I ever did, and I hung out for a few days.

Rubens: I'm just trying to figure out what railway, why is—

01-00:10:49

Schoener: Railway, railway.

Rubens: Why is a railway for youth?

01-00:10:51
Schoener:

Oh. Well, you see, they didn't have bulldozers, they didn't have any road-grading equipment, so they used people. They recruited students to come and help them build the railway.

Rubens:

I see, I see. So they were workers.

01-00:11:07
Schoener:

They were workers, yeah. Unpaid workers.

Rubens:

Was there anything going on in the art scene particularly that was attractive there?

01-00:11:13
Schoener:

No, it was just the politics that attracted me.

Rubens:

Then you decide, I'm going to get a masters in art history. Come back and, in fact, do. What were your aspirations for employment? We're now talking about '48, '49?

01-00:11:31
Schoener:

'49. Well, I went to a College Art Association meeting in Washington. Was it Washington or Baltimore? I think it was in both cities. I went to this meeting—I think it was the second semester of my graduate year at Yale—and I was very disappointed at what I saw at the College Art Association. I decided this was a group of people that I didn't want to associate with, because I thought they were all intellectual phoneyes. So I decided I was going to change my career, and I was going to go into business. Little did I know what I was getting into. So I came to New York and I was able to rent a room from my aunt and uncle's son and daughter-in-law, who lived in Brooklyn Heights. I started looking for a job. Then somebody told me, "Well, the Yale Club has an employment agency. Why don't you go there?" So I thought, that's great; I'll go to the Yale Club and I'll get a good job. So I went there, and the only thing they had available was being what was called a junior salesman for the Royal Typewriter Company. All that that meant was walking around from door to door, trying to sell people typewriters. I did that for a year, until I was fired. I think I was there for about two days and I realized that I'd made a gross error. But one of the things that I learned in the process of working there was that at that time, there was a system called a Hooven letter. We all use computers now, so you can knock out multiple letters and make simple changes in them. Well, this Hooven letter system worked on a player-piano scroll. You would go to these service agencies and they would type out a standard letter. Then you'd give them a list of the names that you wanted it addressed to, and the addresses, and then they'd knock out all of these letters, but each one would be individually addressed. I put together a list of a hundred museums in the United States, and I wrote to a hundred different museum directors, offering my services. I had very good credentials. Dr. Morley [director 1935-1958] was the one who bit.

So I met Dr. Morley and Helen Potter Russell here in New York. I think this would've been in 1950 or 1949.

Rubens: You started in '51, I believe.

01-00:14:32

Schoener: Then it'd be 1950. It would've been in 1950.

Rubens: Helen Potter Russell?

01-00:14:36

Schoener: That was her name. She was a Crocker. She was William Crocker's, W.W. Crocker's sister.

Rubens: They said, "We'd like to interview you in New York."

01-00:14:51

Schoener: They interviewed me at the St. Regis. I don't know if I was offered a job immediately or not, but eventually I was offered the job.

Rubens: Was TV part of the job description?

01-00:15:03

Schoener: No. There was no job description. In other words, I was being hired as a junior curator.

Rubens: Do you remember anything particular about that interview?

01-00:15:15

Schoener: Well, obviously, I wore a suit.

Rubens: Did you have any expectations of Morley? Had you read up on her? Did you know her? She had studied with someone at Yale.

01-00:15:32

Schoener: Oh, I didn't know that.

Rubens: Yes, she did.

01-00:15:34

Schoener: Oh, I didn't realize that. Well, I had heard about her, obviously, because she had somewhat of a reputation in the museum field, but I didn't know too much about her. I didn't know anyone who knew her, so that I could get any kind of a take on her. I guess I made a good impression on the two of them. Now, Mrs. Henry Potter Russell, her brother was the president of the board. I think she was the head of the women's committee—it's possible at that time—but she was also on the board. But she and Grace McCann Morley were very good friends. They had a lot to do with the growth and development of the museum.

Rubens: So you don't know if you were offered a job then, but soon thereafter.

01-00:16:30

Schoener: Soon thereafter, I was offered.

Rubens: You picked up and moved to San Francisco. Had you been west before?

01-00:16:37

Schoener: I went to the Philippines in the Navy. I went through San Diego. I actually had taken a train across the country to Oakland, so I had been in San Francisco once before.

Rubens: Did you go to the museum? I bet not.

01-00:16:53

Schoener: No, I don't think so.

Rubens: What did your aunt and uncle say, particularly, when you took this job? Did they have any, oh, you're going to the provinces?

01-00:17:02

Schoener: Well actually, my aunt was born in Fresno. Or maybe it was San Rafael, I can't remember which. She was born in California, so she knew California.

Rubens: What was her maiden name?

01-00:17:13

Schoener: Thompson.

Rubens: But did she work under the name—

01-00:17:17

Schoener: She used Marguerite Zorach as her name.

Rubens: Did they wish you luck? Or did they think you'd be—

01-00:17:28

Schoener: Well, I think they were a little perplexed because they had other visions for my role in their family. They were very paternalistic people. So I was no longer an appendage to their little world, little microcosm.

Rubens: Where did you live when you first came? Did you have any friends out there at all?

01-00:17:55

Schoener: I had no friends whatsoever. I didn't know anybody.

Rubens: You're twenty—

01-00:17:59

Schoener:

I was twenty-five years old. I lived on Russian Hill. I found an apartment—I guess an ad in the paper—on Jones Street. Jones and Waldo Alley. Do you know where that is, on the top of Russian Hill? Near Jones and Broadway. I rented a room in an apartment there. Then eventually, I was able to rent an apartment around the corner, on Glover Street. Then another apartment later, on Glover Street. So I spent my whole five years in San Francisco on Russian Hill.

Rubens:

Then how did you get to the museum? Which was in [the] Civic Center at the time.

01-00:18:45

Schoener:

Well, I came with a car. So I drove.

Rubens:

Here you've been at Yale, you've circulated in New York. You go to the Courtauld Institute. You had not seen or probably knew too much about the collection in San Francisco. Were you dismayed or a little hopeful when you first saw it?

01-00:19:17

Schoener:

Well, I think I was a little naïve. I obviously knew what major museums—because I'd been all over Europe, so I had a sense. This was like a rinky-dink museum.

Rubens:

They had no [Jackson] Pollock, the [Henri] Matisse at that—

01-00:19:32

Schoener:

There were about ten paintings in the collection. Maybe two of any caliber. So in a sense, the museum was a big hype.

Rubens:

Hype? Do you think it really had presented itself, or was perceived in New York as having a little more than it was, even though it was a regional—

01-00:19:54

Schoener:

Well, you see, this was part of Dr. Morley's personality, is to make it seem bigger than it was.

Rubens:

So let's start with her. Just almost a physical description or overview of what you—

01-00:20:09

Schoener:

Well, I can see her. She was, I guess, about five feet—I'd say five-feet-five. Somewhat heavysset. She had her hair pulled back in a bun. I think at the time I was there, she was probably in her late forties or maybe early fifties. She was gay. That was a big part of her life.

Rubens:

How was that known? So many people easily say that.

- 01-00:20:41
Schoener: Well, she had this friend. Her name was Raymonde Fran, who was the editor of the *UNESCO Journal*. That's how I happened to get in that *UNESCO Journal*. She would show up in San Francisco periodically.
- Rubens: Oh, she didn't live in—
- 01-00:20:58
Schoener: No. She lived in Paris. Dr. Morley would go to Paris and visit. Everybody knew. Everybody around the museum knew.
- Rubens: What's important to say about that?
- 01-00:21:35
Schoener: Well, you see, she was such a driven person that she only had a life for work. That's all she did was work. So she didn't have any other interests. I never knew about Sylvanus Griswold Morley, her husband.
- Rubens: There was a husband?
- 01-00:21:54
Schoener: Her name was Grace McCann. He was an eminent archeologist, Latin America archeologist. He did the classic book on the Maya. S. G. Morley. I don't know whether he died. I never heard who he was.
- Rubens: He wasn't around.
- 01-00:22:14
Schoener: No, he wasn't around. But she used his name.
- Rubens: How were your duties established? I looked at the bulletin, and your name and your identification changes. First you are curator. How do you know what to do?
- 01-00:22:48
Schoener: Well, you see, I knew what curators did in museums. I understood that. I thought I was hired to come and work as a curator, which meant that I would do research, plan exhibitions; I would also lecture; I would do other things. I would be an adjunct to her professional staff. So when I got there, I waited to find out what I was going to be assigned to do. I guess it was Kay Baker who gave me my first assignment. I was given an office with about twenty or thirty cardboard storage boxes that had photographic files in them. I was instructed to organize those files. I said to myself, "Is this what I went to graduate school for? Is this what I came here for? It doesn't make any sense." I never had a discussion with Dr. Morley about this, in terms of what my assignment was, because it didn't make any sense to have a confrontation about that. I needed the job. I didn't want to leave, and I wanted to try to figure out how to make the best and most that I could out of it. But it was very apparent to me, and I learned that Dr. Morley was essentially a one-man show. She ran everything.

Everyone else was a vassal. I think she hired me because I had prestigious credentials. That's all she wanted. That's what she wanted me for. But she didn't want me to do any work.

Rubens: Kay Baker, what I've been told is she shielded Morley, let Morley then do what she was going to do. Apparently, then, Baker basically ran the museum, is that right?

01-00:25:03

Schoener: She was a very efficient secretarial type of person. She had a husband who was an artist. Not very good. His name was Harry. He wasn't a very good artist. He worked as one of the handlers. The other sort of chief handler was a guy by the name of John Humphrey. They were both artists, frustrated artists.

Rubens: Tell me a little bit about Humphrey. Did he have any reputation?

01-00:25:52

Schoener: Not that I know of.

Rubens: Do you remember meeting with him when you came, too?

01-00:25:54

Schoener: No. He was there when I got there, and he was there when I left. He was there for a long time.

Rubens: Were you to take any direction from him?

01-00:26:03

Schoener: Not really. I worked with him. He was a very nice, cooperative person. But he was another one of these appendages that Dr. Morley was able to attract and manage, like Kay Baker. They were both very efficient, very supportive people. They didn't question her authority in any way whatsoever. Not at all.

Rubens: Before I get to the TV, just to ask about the photographs, it's ironic, because you end up doing a significant portion of your work, photographic history books.

01-00:26:47

Schoener: Well, these were just simply photographs of events and activities at the museum, or whenever there was—

Rubens: Oh, they were not—

01-00:26:55

Schoener: Nothing significant. It was not an archival collection. It was really mostly garbage. No, that's what was really disappointing. It wasn't any kind of real archive.

Rubens: Did you begin with TV pretty soon thereafter? Because my understanding is that there was a program already established.

01-00:27:20

Schoener: No. No, I originated the whole idea. Well, you see, what I did was, I go back one step and I said to myself, "If I'm here, I've got to figure out something to do. Obviously, Dr. Morley is not going to let me organize any exhibitions. She's not going to allow me to compete with her in any territory that she considers to be hers. What is it that I can do that'll be independent of that, that will be of interest to me?" Because Frank Stauffacher was doing these "Art in Cinema" programs at the museum at that time, I developed a friendship with him, and I learned a little bit about filmmaking through him. I said to myself, "Well, here's television. Nobody's doing anything with television. Why not figure out how to do something with television?" So I went to her and I said, "I'd really like to—"

Rubens: Her, Morley?

01-00:28:25

Schoener: Morley. I said that I would really like to do something with television. She said, "Fine, but we don't have any money. Do whatever you can without any money." So I did. I managed to piece it all together. I don't know if I ever got a budget. Maybe fifty dollars or something like that a week, but nothing of any significance for anything.

Rubens: The only piece of information I have is that the Women's Board then helped raise some money.

01-00:28:57

Schoener: That was several years later.

Rubens: Several years later. But this is very important for the record. I said, "Now, how did the idea start?" The archivist thought that Stauffacher may have started it, that you came in with it only partially developed. I said it didn't look that way from the record. This was your idea. You go to Morley, she says fine, and you begin, with not much of a budget. Later on, you do write an article about the history of television and museums. I just wondered, you said that MoMA [NY] had done some and the National Gallery [of Art] had done some. There were a few other things earlier. But had you seen any of that?

01-00:29:41

Schoener: No.

Rubens: Had you had any experience with television?

01-00:29:42

Schoener: No, what I did was long before MoMA [NY] had started anything. Long before that.

[interruption]

Rubens: There was an experimental program at the Metropolitan Museum [of Art]. The Metropolitan Museum granted permission for the use of its pictures on television. Then the Museum of Modern Art [NY] presented a television program that featured a discussion with Graham Cousey. [Before that] it's National Gallery in '47, but you didn't know about that at the time.

01-00:30:42

Schoener: No. But those were only like spot things, they were not continuous things.

Rubens: So you go to Morley, you say, "I want to do it," she says okay, you've got to get the money. Did you then enlist, do you think—

01-00:30:57

Schoener: I got everybody to volunteer to do all this stuff. *Everybody*.

Rubens: What did you know about the medium?

01-00:31:05

Schoener: I knew *nothing* about it. I don't even think I had a television set.

Rubens: You went to KPIX. I think that was your—

01-00:31:19

Schoener: KRON was the first one.

Rubens: KRON was the first one.

01-00:31:24

Schoener: I went to them and got the time. I think we did it on an experimental basis. I think we did one or two shows first. Then they gave us a slot.

Rubens: You were saying that you knew, you had become friends with Stauffacher. Had you known, looked at films, particularly, when you were in New York?

01-00:31:51

Schoener: No, but when I had this crummy typewriter job, what I used to do is I used to go to MoMA every afternoon and see films. So I learned a lot about film history as a result of that. So by the time I came to San Francisco, I was very well informed about film history.

Rubens: Then you must have known the Stauffacher name.

01-00:32:17

Schoener: No, I didn't know about his—

Rubens: You didn't?

01-00:32:18
Schoener:

No.

Rubens:

And just to reiterate, this was not a part of your discussion with Morley when she came here, that you knew about film or could help Stauffacher.

01-00:32:30
Schoener:

None of that. I thought I was being hired to be like a line curator, an art curator.

Rubens:

Pictures.

01-00:32:36
Schoener:

Pictures, drawings, stuff like that.

Rubens:

Maybe sculpture.

01-00:32:40
Schoener:

To organize exhibitions. See, when I was in graduate school at Yale—I think this is one of the things I probably mentioned to her—we had a course called museography. All we did was we went around and visited museum directors in the Northeast. So I said to the guy who was conducting the course, I said, “Why don’t we organize an exhibition?” I said, “Why don’t we have, as a class project, organizing an exhibition?” Such a simple idea. So he said, “Fine. Go ahead. You want to do it?” So I did. What we did was they gave us space in the gallery, and I went to New York and borrowed things from galleries in New York, and we had a small exhibition.

Rubens:

At Yale’s gallery. This is revolutionary? This had not been done?

01-00:33:27
Schoener:

No one had ever done anything like that before. It’s obviously a standard procedure everywhere now. But no one had ever done it. They hadn’t thought of it.

Rubens:

I shouldn’t ask this, but by the way, you’re saying SF Museum of Art was the only real job you were offered, in terms of all the hundred letters you sent out.

01-00:33:47
Schoener:

The only one I got.

Rubens:

But you have this marvelous blank slate, and you create this concept of the television program. Is there anyone else that you enlisted to help you?

01-00:34:01
Schoener:

No, I think Frank was the only other person. I did everything else myself.

Rubens:

The vision was? What I’ve never quite understood, was “Discovery” the overview? Or was “Art in Your Life” the—

01-00:34:16
Schoener:

Well, “Art in Your Life” was the name of, I think, either a book or an exhibition that they did at MoMA, so I plagiarized that name and adapted it, because it was a philosophy that made sense to me. I have to say, when I was going to college, MoMA was an incredible influence in my life because I went there as often as I could. It was a very revolutionary place at that time. So every time I’d go there, there was another discovery. I would say in addition to going to college and graduate school and everything else, MoMA would be my other educational source. Clearly.

Rubens:

As you said, you went to the films regularly. There is the book—at some point, either you mention it or—that Scott MacDonald did on “Art in Cinema,” the letters of Frank Stauffacher. There is an attribution of MoMA’s film program being animated by Frank Stauffacher.

01-00:35:18
Schoener:

No question about it.

Rubens:

But his name wasn’t big enough that you knew the name when you were young here, and going the other way. So Frank, you’re talking this over with. You happily plagiarized the name.

01-00:35:35
Schoener:

Borrowed it.

Rubens:

You started making lists of what might be good. I have that list—let’s see—of what the programs were. The very first one was—surprise—*Modern Sculpture*, April 22, 1951.

01-00:35:58
Schoener:

I came in November! Wow. So it took me about six months or five months to figure out how to do something for myself.

Rubens:

Fantastic. Yeah. *Modern Lighting, A Visit With Varga, How to Look at Modern Art, Benjamin Bufano*. Did you know who he was before?

01-00:36:19
Schoener:

No.

Rubens:

He’s a West Coast person. *Pottery and Ceramics*, with Edith Heath. *Sculpture in Motion: Mobiles*, and here, one of my favorites, *Art for Christmas*. I wish we had it, we could see what it is. I don’t think they have that script. *Where Does Modern Art Belong in Your Life, Design for Seating, Everyone Can Paint, Advertising in Daily News, Experimental Sculpture*. Then a lot about how to build a house, design your garden. This one, I like. *How City Planning Affects Your Life*. Where would an idea like that come from?

01-00:37:03
Schoener:

Well, I hung around with all these architects and planners and decided that that was something that should be brought to the public's attention. At that time, nobody knew about all these things. There were people, there was a planning department. Or maybe the planners were on the architectural staff at UC Berkeley. But nobody knew about these professional things. You brought up the business of the art of seating; I want to go back to that for just a second. Because this also relates to MoMA's interest in television. There was a woman who was public relations director at MoMA at the time that I had started doing these television programs. She heard about what I was doing, and she brought Ray and Charles Eames to see one of our programs, to see what was going on.

Rubens: Are you saying a PR person from New York?

01-00:37:56
Schoener:

Yeah. She was the PR director of MoMA. She brought Ray and Charlie Eames to see— Well, that was a very important thing in my life, because Charlie Eames became a mentor of mine.

Rubens: You had not met him before?

01-00:38:13
Schoener:

No.

Rubens: You're sitting in an Eames chair right now—

01-00:38:16
Schoener:

I know.

Rubens: By the way, does Grace McCann Morley know about this? Once the TV starts going and the—

01-00:38:32
Schoener:

I'm sort of off on my own. She could have been out of town.

Rubens: She's leaving you alone.

01-00:38:37
Schoener:

She pretty much left me alone.

Rubens: So this PR person, she knew the Eames and brings them to you. There's some instant rapport?

01-00:38:49
Schoener:

Yeah.

Rubens: Say a little bit more about that.

01-00:38:51

Schoener: Well, it was an instant rapport. I used to go to LA and stay with them. They were a very important part of my life for four or five years.

Rubens:

Why? Did you find them intellectually exciting? Their work?

01-00:39:10

Schoener: Well, they were both very creative people and very stimulating to be around. I'd have a lot of discussion with them about doing things, how you do them. So it was very—I learned a lot about communications theory from Charlie Eames. He made a film called *A Communications Primer*. The other thing that he did—all this stuff sounds so primitive now—but he started doing these slide and tape shows. There was no way to coordinate a slide projector with a tape recorder at that point. I remember going to the architecture department at UC Berkeley with the two of them. They had three slide projectors. Each one of us operated by hand a slide projector, on cue.

Rubens:

Why did Eames do *A Communications Primer*? I thought of him as an industrial designer, a—

01-00:40:28

Schoener: Furniture designer? Well, he was interested in exhibition design. He was more than just simply a designer. He wasn't an intellectual, but he was a creative person.

Rubens:

And communications theory, what did that mean at the time?

01-00:40:43

Schoener: Well, it was the beginning of cybernetics. There was a lot of discussion about that, information technology, the beginnings of computers. They had these huge computers that were a mile long. People were just beginning to think in those terms.

Rubens:

What was it about the architecture department at Berkeley?

01-00:41:06

Schoener: I knew everybody on the faculty there, but I can't remember why he went there.

Rubens:

More than Stanford, or even UCLA?

01-00:41:17

Schoener: Nothing at Stanford. I don't think there ever was an architecture department at Stanford.

Rubens:

The Los Angeles County Museum was not much in the fifties.

01-00:41:25
Schoener: No. No, even though [Richard] Neutra was there, [Rudolph] Schindler was there, but there wasn't much going on in the museum world. There were architects, outstanding architects practicing there.

Rubens: So Eames, you did one show with him. I read that script.

01-00:42:02
Schoener: Oh, really?

Rubens: It took a lot of work to write these scripts. You had to type them out, you changed them, you had to have the timing when you're going to have a still photo, when the camera's going to go to.

01-00:42:15
Schoener: I did that all myself.

Rubens: You're using film. It's kinescope, isn't that right?

01-00:42:26
Schoener: That's what they did, it was a kinescope.

Rubens: But you hired people to actually run the cameras?

01-00:42:33
Schoener: No, that was all provided by the station.

Rubens: The station provides it, okay. Here's one for instance on *Art in Clothing*. [Robert] Anshen is the—

01-00:42:47
Schoener: Emcee, yeah.

Rubens: —the emcee. Was he an architect?

01-00:42:49
Schoener: He was an architect.

Rubens: Polly Warfield, I don't know who that is.

01-00:42:58
Schoener: I think she was probably a writer for the *Chronicle*.

Rubens: Lyle Griswold is a guest. Then there's various clothes models. Just wonderful, big staff. I don't know, did you have some assistant who went to Saks and Magnin's to get the clothes? It's labor intensive.

01-00:43:21
Schoener: Thekla Wurlitzer was my assistant, so I guess maybe she did some of that.

Rubens: I wondered where she came in. You later write an article with her.

01-00:43:43

Schoener: Her family lived in Burlingame.

Rubens: Young woman?

01-00:43:46

Schoener: She was my age.

Rubens: Let me ask a little more about the programming. *How City Planning Affects Your Life*. Again, this is Program 21. These are usually Sunday afternoons, every other Sunday, one-thirty to two. Robert Anshen is often your host. How did you meet him? Were you particularly drawn to his work? You liked how he conducted himself?

01-00:44:19

Schoener: Well, he was very glib and animated. He was part of a social group of architects and designers that I hung out with.

Rubens: How would you describe that group?

01-00:44:37

Schoener: Well, that was the early fifties, and they were a group of, I would say, aspiring professionals, most of whom came from other parts of the country, settled in San Francisco. They all worked around Montgomery Street. They were just establishing themselves as young pros. That happens over and over again in different generations, but I happened to be part of that generation when it took place.

Rubens: The announcer introduces him as a distinguished Bay Area architect, and his firm is Anshen and Allen. How old was he, roughly, at the time? Much older than you?

01-00:45:21

Schoener: I guess he was about five years older than I, maybe ten years older than I am.

Rubens: Did he specialize in a particular kind of architecture?

01-00:45:28

Schoener: He was the first person to do modern subdivisions. There was a firm called Eichler.

Rubens: Oh, yes, I know this. I know this.

01-00:45:42

Schoener: You know the Eichler homes?

Rubens: I knew that he worked for him.

01-00:45:44

Schoener: He and his partner Allen, they designed all those. Also, they did that monstrosity, the Transamerica Building. They never should have done that.

Rubens:

But you're saying part of a social group, an artistic group. Eames is so important to you, but there's also a community to draw on.

01-00:46:13

Schoener: Well, the Eameses were in LA. These were people in San Francisco. I guess I was trying to find my way, in terms of a group of creative people that had nothing to do with my aunt and uncle. I was in the course of establishing my own identity. So I became involved with filmmakers, photographers, city planners, architects. That was very much the climate of San Francisco at that time. Now, one person who was also very important at that particular time in my life was Imogen Cunningham.

Rubens:

How did you meet her?

01-00:47:19

Schoener: I guess through the museum somehow or other, I can't remember. But she became a very important force in my life.

Rubens:

Why?

01-00:47:27

Schoener: Well, she latched onto me; I guess I latched onto her. She became like an adopted mother for me, a substitute mother. I don't know why, but it just happened. She had one other guy, who was a little older than I am. Did you ever hear of Dave Meyers, the filmmaker?

Rubens:

No.

01-00:47:44

Schoener: David Meyers. Anyhow, he was a cinematographer, a well-known cinematographer. Anyhow, he and I became sort of adjuncts to Imogen's life. When I'd go out on dates, Imogen went along with me.

Rubens:

What do you mean? You took her with you?

01-00:48:01

Schoener: I didn't go *anywhere* without Imogen.

Rubens:

How did you explain it to your date?

01-00:48:53

Schoener: I don't know. It didn't seem to be a problem.

Rubens:

Are you buying an Eames chair? Are you buying or being given a Cunningham? Are you collecting yourself?

01-00:49:08

Schoener:

Well, I have one photograph, a portrait that she took of me. But I think that's the only photograph I've got of her. But what also happened—this happened after I moved to Cincinnati—I did an exhibition of her photographs in Cincinnati. She was hardly recognized outside of San Francisco at that point. Then I think from there, she went on to Maine with me, drove on to Maine with me, with my family, and we went to visit my aunt and uncle in Maine. She took a lot of photographs of them there.

Rubens:

Imogen, she's not so young at the time you know her.

01-00:49:50

Schoener:

She was seventy when I first met her, and I was twenty-five.

Rubens:

The Dixieland jazz piece is the only one that I've actually seen. It's a half-hour long. It's a *wonderful* script, Phil Elwood. Do you remember at all how that particular piece came together? Why Dixieland jazz? How do you find Elwood?

01-00:50:31

Schoener:

Could he have had a program on the radio at that time? I don't know. It was too early. Nothing like KPFA existed at that point. I don't know how I found out about him.

Rubens:

There's a great announcer's voice, too. I was wondering whose the voice was. It's that old-timey, "And now wait, you'll see—"

01-00:50:54

Schoener:

Well, that would've been KPIX had that—

Rubens:

Then Lloyd Leftman is the host.

01-00:51:02

Schoener:

Now, why did we get him? Because we wanted to get rid of Anshen for some reason, and we wanted somebody who seemed to be more establishment. I think he had something to do with the university or something like that. I can't remember. But he was a more conventional type of person. Lloyd was a university type of person. I think that it may have been the KPIX people who wanted a different type of person. When we moved to KPIX, we had some money. The Women's Board raised some money. That was the only money that I can ever recall that was specifically raised for the show.

Rubens:

There's one article where you say, "I get an idea, I meet with— about ten or twelve days in advance, I meet at lunch with Anshen," an engineer named Denver Sutton, Robert Wurtz, an advertising man, who did the museum commercials, George Oliver, on the museum's staff, and some prop man. You kick around ideas.

- 01-00:53:01
Schoener: We used to go to Sam's on Bush Street. We always had a room, one of those rooms in the back.
- Rubens: And nothing's coming to you from Grace McCann? She's not saying, "I don't like it, I got—"
- 01-00:53:15
Schoener: No. No, neither positive or neg—
- Rubens: "Do this, do that." John Humphrey, was he particularly—
- 01-00:53:21
Schoener: No, not really.
- Rubens: But just back to the Dixieland. Discovery of Dixieland jazz, it's just such a nice construction.
- 01-00:53:39
Schoener: It was Phil Elwood's idea to get George Lewis. I think George Lewis was coming to San Francisco for a gig or something else. We could not have afforded to bring him.
- Rubens: Then you go to a map. Not you, but Leftman and Elwood go to a map. Actually, you can just see a little bit of Texas hanging down behind their heads. Then they get up and you see the whole United States. There's a wonderful chart of the spread of Dixieland music and blues. It's a nice sophisticated piece. It's not a corny piece. The music is fantastic.
- 01-00:54:21
Schoener: George Lewis is great.
- Rubens: Then Elwood talks over and talks about how each band member comes in and what— their melody and their beat.
- 01-00:54:33
Schoener: Well, I didn't script him, I can tell you that.
- Rubens: They play "Careless Love" by W. C. Handy. Then "Just A Closer Walk With Thee." I love this. The archivist says, "You just watch part of it, because they're playing music." An historian doesn't do that. An historian looks at the whole thing. Three-quarters into it, there's a commercial break, in a way, and a woman named Barbara Gifford comes on, who's with the museum. It's a beautiful shot. She's sitting on a table, and it looks very film noir. She's talking about the museum's program, that art is not just paintings. Then she talks about the music. Then it goes back to film, and they end with a tune called "Ice Cream." Then that KPIX voice says, "And next week, Sol Hurok his adventures in the dance world."

01-00:55:50

Schoener: I got Sol Hurok. I got Frank Lloyd Wright on one of those programs. Does that show up anywhere? I started going for celebrities at that point.

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Rubens: '51 to '53, "Art in Your Life," this TV program, runs for two years. I think it's about, oh, in the end, maybe forty different programs.

02-00:00:34

Schoener: Every other week for two years. That sounds right.

Rubens: There's not a great listing of "Discovery."

02-00:00:43

Schoener: Well, I think we had enough for a thirteen-week series—I think that's about all—and we ran out of money. The idea was to do it on KPIX and do a more elaborate show.

Rubens: Tell me about going back to New York. It's called the Committee on Television in Education.

02-00:01:11

Schoener: Well, no, it was called the Committee on Art Education. It was organized by a guy by the name of Victor d'Amico, who was the head of education at MoMA at that time.

Rubens: Are you on the phone with him, or writing to him when this begins?

02-00:01:40

Schoener: Well, I think I made him aware of what I was doing. Or again, maybe that came through Betty Chamberlain. It could well have happened through her.

Rubens: Betty Chamberlain was?

02-00:01:48

Schoener: Was the PR director at MoMA. I think that's probably how the connection came about.

Rubens: Sure, they said, "We should be doing the same thing." So do you recall when you first went back to New York, then, for this?

02-00:02:02

Schoener: Well, I would go back at least once or twice a year to visit my family. MoMA probably provided the opportunity for me to go and get my trip paid for.

Rubens: Were there representatives of other museums at these meetings?

02-00:02:30

Schoener: Oh, yeah. But there were mostly people who were doing conventional art education. People teaching kids how to paint and do stuff like that. Lectures. But there wasn't anybody else who was doing anything with television. Now, after I started doing it in San Francisco, MoMA got some money together and they hired a guy by the name of Douglas MacAgy, another guy by the name of Sidney Peterson.

Rubens: For television?

02-00:03:14

Schoener: They gave them a lot of money to produce some television programs for them. They were a disaster.

Rubens: How come?

02-00:03:23

Schoener: They weren't any good, that's all. They weren't any good at all.

Rubens: Were they also Sunday afternoons?

02-00:03:30

Schoener: I have no idea. I don't even know if they ran. I think they could have just produced these things.

Rubens: How did you know they were a disaster?

02-00:03:38

Schoener: I don't even think they ever ran them. I think they were so bad that they didn't use them. But it was typical of the difference between a low-budget museum and MoMA, which not necessarily had all the money in the world, but it had a lot of power and attracted money.

Rubens: But it didn't matter.

02-00:03:58

Schoener: Didn't matter.

Rubens: By the way, speaking of money, you said the Women's Board raised some money. You mentioned that they had great parties. Tell me about their parties.

02-00:04:11

Schoener: Well, the museum came to life when they had parties. They were incredible. They just had really good parties.

Rubens: At the—

02-00:04:20

Schoener: At the museum. The top floor, rotunda.

Rubens: What do you remember about the parties being great?

02-00:04:34

Schoener: Well, there was always good wine and good food. We had somebody from Boglia who was either on the board or had some connection. Maybe the Boglia family was on the Women's Board or something. But the wine flowed freely. Wine and champagne. Or wine and sparkling wine. But there was always good wine and good food.

Rubens: What kind of crowd? Who was at that party? You're twenty-five, you're young. Who are you seeing at those parties? Are you bringing friends?

02-00:05:09

Schoener: Well, there were two kinds of parties. One thing I have to give Dr. Morley credit for was that she managed to make the art community in San Francisco feel at home in that museum. That's really where I met most of the people who became my friends, were through these events at the museum. She was very laid back about that. I don't know how she managed to be able to do it, but she created a climate where anybody who was in the art community in the Bay Area felt welcome there. Then on the other hand, there were also the people who had to put up the money. They were the patrons and they were the Women's Board and the trustees, and they had fancier parties.

Rubens: A lot was going on at the museum. Your lecture series, concert series, films.

02-00:06:06

Schoener: Oh, yeah. Then I did that thing called "Man and Art." Did you ever run into that? I did two years of film programming. Did you run across those?

Rubens: I did not.

02-00:06:16

Schoener: It's called "Man and Art." What I did was that Frank introduced me to this whole area of documentary films about art. I put it together and had lectures interspersed between showing films, short art films.

Rubens: I see. That was separate than the lecture series that was in the bulletin?

02-00:06:40

Schoener: What was that one called? It might have been called "Man and Art." There were two years of it. I brought in people from the UC faculty and other academics to talk.

Rubens: Frank is going to Europe. There's some correspondence with you and Frank. I believe that you go back to Maine, and you go to Sheelers?

02-00:07:13

Schoener: Charles Sheeler.

Rubens: You became good friends with Frank. He's not there the whole time in San Francisco; he's in—

02-00:07:22

Schoener: He went on a project for MoMA, where he was doing something about— Maybe it was the USIA [United States Information Agency]. I can't remember what it was, but he put together a film exhibition on directors. I think that was for the USIA, but I can't remember. That may have been the thing that took him to Europe. We met in New York.

Rubens: Frank and you.

02-00:07:43

Schoener: We made some film in New York, and then we when to Charles Sheeler's home.

Rubens: Why? What was that about?

02-00:07:50

Schoener: Well, I don't know. I guess I always liked his work, and he was a good painter, a good photographer. Very excellent photographs. Mostly industrial landscape, but they're really striking. I guess I just wanted to do something with somebody whose work I liked, who was in New York. We also did a crazy thing going around to art galleries on 57th Street, because I remember once we rented camera equipment and we were tracking around on 57th Street. We got a permit from the police department to film on the sidewalk. I can't remember what that one was all about. I guess someone was going to visit art galleries in New York. I guess that was the idea.

Rubens: So when you come to New York for the MoMA educational meetings, or seeing Frank or family and traveling, are you aspiring to get out of San Francisco at this point?

02-00:08:51

Schoener: I knew San Francisco was not going to be my future.

Rubens: Did you have to defend the museum in any way? Would people say, "What's going on out there?"

02-00:09:19

Schoener: Not really. The museum world was much more provincial than it is today.

Rubens: The whole museum world.

02-00:09:24

Schoener: Whole museum world. There was New York, and then there was the rest of the country.

Rubens: Right. Maybe Chicago?

02-00:09:33

Schoener: Chicago, maybe Washington, maybe Boston, but that was about it.

Rubens:

You had such a broad background. Were you developing a particular interest in modern art? Whether it's Eames design or architecture, Sheeler—a little bit older. As opposed to all the lectures you're giving on Poussin and nineteenth-century Flemish art. You had to maintain a real breadth of expertise. I'm looking for those. Did you find yourself having some aspirations to focus in on any particular kind of art, or film?

02-00:10:16

Schoener: No. No, I guess I just saw myself as a museum curator. I had this stupid aspiration of someday wanting to be the director of the Museum of Modern Art.

Rubens:

In New York.

02-00:10:27

Schoener: In New York.

Rubens:

Why is that so stupid?

02-00:10:34

Schoener: But then I learned the politics of the museum world. I was outside of it. I didn't know how to make it in it. So that was a dream, but I got over that. I'm glad I didn't do it.

Rubens:

Well, going to Cincinnati—

02-00:10:53

Schoener: I thought that was a stepping stone.

Rubens:

It was. Well, let me say a few more things. Here's a letter from Frank Stauffacher. I don't know, is it Rouben Mamoulian? It's about the Screen Directors Guild of America collaborating in a series.

02-00:11:15

Schoener: Well, now, that was Frank's project. But I helped him with it. I was supportive to him because he didn't have anybody else, I think, to assist him with what he was doing. So I helped him negotiate with these directors we worked. But it was his direction. He knew about the film world. I didn't know about it, but I learned about it indirectly through him. But the thing that was so funny about this coffee-maker business in the letter in that book was that I went to L. A. to meet Mamoulian. I don't know how this came up, but I guess I'd just come back from Italy or something else like that. Oh, no. There's a place, it's still, I think, on Sansome Street, where they sell espresso machines. I can't remember the name. Anyhow, at that point, all that you could get were these small aluminum coffee makers. I bought one from him and took it to the

Mamoulians, because they didn't know about espresso machines in Hollywood. They'd never heard of them.

Rubens: Who were they, the Mamoulians?

02-00:12:39

Schoener: He was a big film director. He did musical comedies.

Rubens: Stauffacher's promoting you as knowing about the machine. But you helped him with that series.

02-00:12:53

Schoener: I was supportive. I didn't have anything to do with it conceptually, but I was supportive. We met Fred Zinnemann, George Stevens, all those people, as a result of that. We brought them up there.

Rubens: Then were they part of your series?

02-00:13:10

Schoener: His series, not mine. He did a series called "Directors." That's how we brought all these people up from Hollywood.

Rubens: You mentioned a series that I didn't know about.

02-00:13:20

Schoener: "Man and Art."

Rubens: Let me see a few of my things, just about San Francisco. One question, you said you really had trouble finding money for these TV programs, you remember the Women's Board. You spoke also about perhaps KRON, and you mention specifically KPIX wanting a more polished look.

02-00:14:00

Schoener: I think they gave us a better time slot. They gave us a time slot once every week.

Rubens: Do you have any idea how many people are watching this?

02-00:14:17

Schoener: Well, I think we got a rating once where there were like 100,000 people watching it. Because I mentioned that at some point, that there were more people watching one show than came to the museum all year.

Rubens: That is amazing. Yet I just have to go back Morley's not saying anything to you.

02-00:14:39

Schoener: I think she was just happy that I wasn't getting in her way. I did whatever kind of scutwork she wanted me to do.

Rubens: Are you hanging some exhibits, too?

02-00:14:51

Schoener: No, never got a chance to do that. Oh, those Christmas exhibits. I figured that one out as a niche for myself, too, going around and finding stuff, good design for Christmas stuff.

Rubens: So was that for sale?

02-00:15:08

Schoener: Well, MoMA had done these good design shows. At that point, I was borrowing a lot of stuff from MoMA. I decided that I could adapt that to a local situation, go around and find stuff in local stores. We put it all together, put up shopping lists where people could buy things.

Rubens: The museum did not have a store at the time.

02-00:15:33

Schoener: It had a bookstore, but not a design store. It had a very good bookstore, an excellent bookstore.

Rubens: The librarian, I think, had a hand in that.

02-00:15:48

Schoener: No, there was a guy by the name of Phil Goddard. He was the one who did the bookstore. He was very good. The librarian's name was Analiese Hoyer.

Rubens: Do you remember any other staff people that you particularly want to point to? Any board people?

02-00:16:22

Schoener: I didn't have very much contact with the board. I never got invited to go to board meetings or anything else like that.

Rubens: You didn't go to Elise Haas's house?

02-00:16:29

Schoener: No.

Rubens: What is the reason, do you remember, why it changed from KRON to KPIX?

02-00:16:37

Schoener: Because they gave us a better time slot, and they gave us a time slot once a week. I think they had better facilities than KRON.

Rubens: So what did it mean for your career?

02-00:17:15

Schoener: Well, I guess after we didn't get any more money for continuing the "Discovery" series, I decided that my days were numbered there. That's when

I started looking around for a job. I found out about this job in Cincinnati, so that's what I went for.

Rubens: What was the job in Cincinnati?

02-00:17:42

Schoener: Well, it was to be called director of the Contemporary Arts Center, which was in the basement of the Cincinnati Art Museum. I went out and I was interviewed by these people who lived in big estates outside of Cincinnati, with horses all around, in an area called Indian Hill. I thought there was a lot of money there. I thought it was going to be an easy take, to raise money there. I got there, I got the job, and there was no money in the bank! So I had to basically start from scratch to even raise enough money to pay my own salary.

Rubens: How long were you there?

02-00:18:27

Schoener: Well, actually, I ended up staying there for eight years.

Rubens: I had asked you earlier if you had personally developed an interest in modern—I didn't say the word contemporary—art. Of course, you're doing film and television and design that's contemporary, but what did *contemporary* mean when you—

02-00:18:51

Schoener: Well, I think after spending all that time in Cincinnati, I was not really much interested in becoming a sort of promoter of what I saw as the contemporary art scene at that moment.

Rubens: By the time you finished.

02-00:19:09

Schoener: What I meant by the contemporary art scene was painting and sculpture.

Rubens: When you started. How would you just describe who that was? [Ellsworth] Kelly and—

02-00:19:18

Schoener: No, no, people like that weren't even recognized. This was like the leftovers of the School of Paris, the imitators of the School of Paris, the younger generation Americans. Well, obviously, there were people like [Jackson] Pollock and [Mark] Rothko who were arriving on the scene. They were a newer generation. Well, actually, when I was in Cincinnati I did this big Pop art show, too.

Rubens: I was going to say, did you ever encounter that?

02-00:19:42
Schoener:

Yeah, I did that.

Rubens:

Late fifties, early sixties?

02-00:19:48
Schoener:

When would I have done that? I did that about 1960. Well, what happened was we were forced out of the basement of the museum. I'm getting into this whole museum thing. Because we had the basement of the museum. They were renovating the museum. There was a lot of tension between the Contemporary Arts Center and the museum because it was a competitive situation between the director of the museum and this outside organization that they had offered free space to in the basement. It was a really sort of screwy situation. I forced the Contemporary Arts Center to move out of the art museum and move to a downtown location. So we got space in a downtown skyscraper in an office building that was empty, and I put a Pop art show in there. It worked out very well.

Rubens:

By the time you leave in '55, had you met Bay Area painters?

02-00:21:12
Schoener:

You mean [Richard] Diebenkorn, people like that?

Rubens:

Well, yeah, Diebenkorn. Did you develop any particular interest in or feeling for—?

02-00:21:20
Schoener:

No, not much, not much. I knew David Park, for example. When I had a going away party, he came with a band and played.

Rubens:

At your going away party? That's terrific.

02-00:21:35
Schoener:

I knew him. Because again, this was all part of the same milieu. You just bumped into these people.

Rubens:

The San Francisco Art Institute—or maybe it was still called the California School of Fine Arts—

02-00:21:49
Schoener:

It was called the San Francisco Art Institute at that point. I had a lot of contact with people there.

Rubens:

Who was teaching there?

02-00:22:03
Schoener:

I did have contact with them, but I was not very much interested in painting or sculpture, as such.

Rubens: Even though then you know you've got to get out of San Francisco, and this job opens, and so you are quite able to present yourself as someone who knows painting and sculpture.

02-00:22:24

Schoener: That was an important thing. It's how you got a job.

Rubens: Did you ever get San Francisco to buy one of your aunt or uncle's pieces?

02-00:22:32

Schoener: No. Now, as I said, the museum was a rinky-dink museum at that point. It had a Diego Rivera, it had one painting by Matisse that Elise Haas had given.

Rubens: It did have a photograph collection.

02-00:23:06

Schoener: I don't remember any photographic collection.

Rubens: Well, photographs weren't your interest, either.

02-00:23:11

Schoener: No. But I don't even remember a collection like that.

[material deleted]

02-00:27:42

Schoener: I would like to say one thing, also. This is for myself, it's not so much in relationship to what you were asking me. But I was thinking about this, that in terms of the importance of the television programs, as far as my work is concerned, everything that I have done since has been influenced by that. In other words, the way I conceive of books and the way I conceive of exhibitions. I would not have known how to do the "Harlem on My Mind" exhibition or the "Lower East Side" show at the Jewish Museum, using sound and film and incorporating that with still photographs, if I had not done all those TV scripts. So I think in terms of a TV script every time I do something.

Rubens: San Francisco was your lab, it was your school. When you went to Cincinnati, did you try to do anything there?

02-00:28:40

Schoener: There wasn't really an opportunity to do anything quite like that there. The only thing I did there that was somewhat similar was I did an exhibition called "Cincinnati Plus and Minus," where I did a kind of visual evaluation of the environment, visual environment.

Rubens: Did you have photographers?

02-00:29:01

Schoener: Actually, I think I did all the photography myself.

Rubens: I was going to ask you.

02-00:29:05

Schoener: I'm not a good photographer. Not good.

Rubens: Oh, okay. If you became interested in photography—

02-00:29:09

Schoener: Yeah. But I'm not good.

Rubens: What did you shoot with?

02-00:29:11

Schoener: Pardon?

Rubens: What did you use? What camera did you use?

02-00:29:14

Schoener: Just an ordinary 35mm Kodak. I can take decent photographs, but I'm not really a skilled photographer.

Rubens: Everyone knows the "Harlem on My Mind" show. That was a big show. How did that come about?

02-00:30:02

Schoener: Well, I did this show at the Jewish Museum on the Lower East Side.

Rubens: It came before. I'm sorry, I don't have the dates right here.

02-00:30:07

Schoener: Yeah. Came after that, yeah.

Rubens: Oh, okay. Because that's also "Portal to America."

02-00:30:17

Schoener: Then I did another show on the Erie Canal. I put an exhibition on a canal boat from Albany to Buffalo. We used it as a catalyst to have festivals in all the communities along the way. I initiated, I originated a lot of things that have become very common for other people to do. We went through Upstate New York; there were no local community festivals. Didn't exist. But we started doing them at the South Street Seaport Museum. We started a lot of that stuff. But that was the time. All you had to do was mention something, and people came out and participated in it. So it was a very different time. This is the late sixties.

Rubens: There was some money. The National Endowment for the Arts.

02-00:31:10

Schoener: Well, I was at the New York State Council on the Arts at that point, so I gave away money, had access to a lot of money.

Rubens: Let me just drop back, because I want to ask you about the climate before you go to San Francisco. You're in New York, really having a post-graduate education. You're selling typewriters, but you're learning a lot. Were there artists that you particularly came to admire, and wondered why San Francisco wasn't showing them? Just kind of a comparison of San Francisco and New York. There is no comparison, in a certain way, but do you know what I mean?

02-00:31:57

Schoener: Well, see, I still had this problem with my aunt and uncle of their being of a kind of discarded generation of American artists. What my uncle used to do when people would come to his studio in Brooklyn Heights—Jackson Pollock was just arriving at the art scene at this point. He'd say, "Let me show you how Jackson Pollock paints a picture. You get a birdcage, and you take the bottom out of the birdcage, and let the bird shit all over the canvas, and then that's the painting." Well, I didn't buy that. Because somehow or other, what Jackson Pollock was doing, and some other people like that, was very meaningful to me. So I couldn't participate in a continuation of, I guess, the aesthetic that my aunt and uncle had invested their lives in. How that transferred for me when I got to San Francisco, I don't know. Maybe only when I had an opportunity to interpret something. But most of what I had to interpret was geared toward these exhibitions that Dr. Morley brought in.

[material deleted]

Rubens: One of the arcs that the museum goes through is how much to focus on Bay Area, California, and the Pacific Rim. Or how much to emulate MoMA. It's a dilemma that the museum goes through. It tries to do both, and then really forsakes the Pacific Rim.

02-00:35:29

Schoener: Well, I think the museum, as I said, always had a very good relationship with the local art community. It was seen as a friend of the local art community, through things like the Rental Gallery, through these events, these parties, whatever you want to say.

Rubens: The lecture series.

02-00:35:50

Schoener: The lecture series. But it was also seen as the window on the outside world, by bringing in things like— Even though Raoul Dufy was not a great artist, it was bringing in something from a foreign land. The [Fernand] Léger show was a good show, the Matisse show was a good show. I think there may have been a Juan Gris show. There were a couple major shows that she brought in that were really significant. But in terms of local artists, there was this group, they called themselves Dynaton. It was Lee Mullican, Gordon Onslow-Ford and Wolfgang von Paalen. You probably heard about that. I was friendly with all of them.

Rubens: You were friends with them. Not necessarily people that you were going to promote.

02-00:36:55

Schoener: No.

Rubens: You said you had originally aspired to go to Harvard. Were you a good student in high school? What made you think you could get to Harvard? I want to say that next to— They seemed to have a little more openness to having Jews at Harvard, and a big deal when the faculty, first Jew was hired, et cetera.

02-00:37:37

Schoener: I think that's one of the reasons that I thought of it. Well, I have to tell you, this is my own personal evaluation, but I was an indifferent student in high school. I got good grades, but I was an indifferent student because I was never challenged by the public education system. So what I did was I got in the National Honor Society. You're allowed to cut study halls. I would cut every study hall and I would go hang out and play around. I prided myself on never taking a book home. When I got to Yale, I discovered that these guys who went to private schools like Exeter, Andover, these guys were like two light years ahead of me, because they had study habits that I didn't even know about. They'd been exposed to information that I'd never even heard of. So it took me a while to catch up. It took me a long time to catch up. I know by the time I was in graduate school I had exceeded whatever limitations I had before.

Rubens: I wanted one more reiteration of the state of art education, or the kind of discourse, if you will. I don't think you used that word. You said it was so far superior in Europe. When you came back to Yale, it seemed like a kindergarten. I just want to hear, did it have to do with analysis about how one talked about art and what was going on in art or— Just say something about that.

02-00:39:21

Schoener: Well, I'll give you an example. If Gombrich gave a lecture, it was so rich in detail and information and intersection of ideas, it was stimulating. If the guy who should have been like my sort of mentor in modern art at Yale, George Hamilton, gave a lecture, it was pedantic and shallow.

Rubens: In a way, you're making, I think, the same kind of comparison between the kinds of programs you produced on TV about "Art in Your Life" and what MoMA did when they tried to do it. It sounds like it was more formulaic.

02-00:40:10

Schoener: I think so.

Rubens: In the Bay Area, there was a guy named Alfred Frankenstein, who was the critic for—

02-00:40:21

Schoener: The *Chronicle*.

Rubens: Did you—

02-00:40:25

Schoener: Do I know him? Yeah, sure.

Rubens: Did you like his—

02-00:40:29

Schoener: Well, he was both the art critic and the music critic.

Rubens: Music, yeah. As was Gleason.

02-00:40:34

Schoener: I knew Ralph Gleason, too, but he was a jazz critic. Not the music critic. I don't know, I thought Frankenstein was like a journalist, not a critic.

Rubens: Were there critics that you read? Were you interested in what the *New York Times* would say about exhibits? Or were there other art critics that you followed? Can you think of writers that might have been substantial for you?

02-00:41:11

Schoener: Well, see, that was also the [Joseph] McCarthy period.

Rubens: That's exactly right.

02-00:41:17

Schoener: I had been very politically active at Yale, I'd been politically active in Europe. I have to tell you that I was scared shitless, for fear that my political past would destroy my life.

Rubens: So when you came to San Francisco, did you lay low?

02-00:41:47

Schoener: I did, totally. Totally. Didn't get involved in any type— So I would say that what I found myself doing was being a kind of delayed adolescence and having a good time in San Francisco, and not worrying about anything else.

Rubens: That leads me to just two other things there. Did you have a television by the time the McCarthy Army hearings were on TV? Do you remember seeing those?

02-00:42:20

Schoener: I do remember seeing those. Now, wait. What year would that have—

Rubens: I thought it was '53, '54, maybe I'm wrong. I don't have it right here.

02-00:42:28

Schoener: Well, a friend of mine made that film called *Point of Order*. Did you ever see—

Rubens: Oh, really?

02-00:42:32

Schoener: Yeah, [Emile] de Antonio. Did you know— I know I watched those hearings. I know I watched them. I don't think I had a television set, but I remember watching those things.

Rubens: *Point of Order* came out, I think, in '59 or '60.

02-00:43:06

Schoener: I remember that was sort of hanging over my head. I spent a lot of time at the UC Berkeley library, I remember that. I knew people in the art history department. I developed a connection with the library and the faculty there. But I think I was timid, in terms of anything that had to do with politics. I wanted to stay away from it.

Rubens: Well, as were much of the left in the Bay Area. They were underground. Harry Bridges was having his third deportation hearing. There was the issue at the university about signing a loyalty oath. So it was not a good time.

02-00:43:56

Schoener: Not a good time.

Rubens: People were laying low. Did you get involved at all— I don't remember when the challenge was over the Anton Refregier murals at the post office.

02-00:44:09

Schoener: No, that would've been after my time.

Rubens: Okay. And the California Labor School?

02-00:44:19

Schoener: That, I never knew about. I really tried to stay away from politics.

Rubens: It didn't suffuse the museum. That kind of politics stayed out of the museum world. Morley was not a—

02-00:44:46

Schoener: Not at all.

Rubens: Well, would you say "Harlem on My Mind" was one of your popular endeavors?

02-00:45:09
Schoener:

Well, I think most significant, maybe.

Rubens:

It just has had legs, right?

02-00:45:18
Schoener:

The New Press republished the book for the fourth time, and it just had a forum two weeks ago at the Schomburg Center in Harlem. I had done this exhibition, “The Lower East Side,” at the Jewish Museum. This was the late sixties in New York. The museum world was in turbulence. I would say MoMA was totally asleep. The Jewish Museum was sort of a hotspot.

I ended up there almost, again, by chance. What happened was that I was offered—I wanted to get out of Cincinnati. I was bored with Cincinnati. I don’t know how this came about, I was offered a job working for the Marlborough Gallery in New York. I thought that I was going to become the gallery director. I thought that’s what I was going to do, was put on shows again. Going back to Dr. Morley again, same old story. So I got hired, they paid my way to come to New York, they gave me a contract for six months. I came, and they wanted me to be a floor salesman. I worked there for six months, and I never sold a thing. Not one thing.

What happened was that my wife and I went to dinner one night with Emile de Antonio and one of his girlfriends, at Elaine’s. We bumped into this woman that I knew from Cincinnati who’d worked at Hebrew Union College. She had been working at the Jewish Museum. She said that she had just been fired as the assistant director or assistant to the director of the Jewish Museum. She said, “There’s a new director by the name of Sam Hunter, and they’re looking for an assistant director.” Well, I had actually tried to get the job as director of the Jewish Museum, and had not succeeded. I went to see Meyer Schapiro about it, and got nowhere, because I couldn’t break into the New York scene as being an outsider. So Sam Hunter offered me this job. He said that there’s an idea that’s been kicking around the museum for years. He said, “Nobody wants to do it. It’s to do a show on the Lower East Side.” So we lived right around the corner from the museum; we lived on 90th, between Park and Lexington. I came home and I said to my wife, “I got a job.” I said, “I was offered this exhibition.” I said, “The day the exhibition opens at the museum, I guarantee that there will be a line from the front of the museum to Madison Avenue.” The line was there every week—every day, I should say, for six weeks or something like that. But I knew that I was going to hit a nerve, and I knew exactly what I was going to do with it. It goes back to the TV shows. I knew exactly what I would do with it. So at that point, I was like a hot young curator New York, of the moment. The moment didn’t last too long; it lasted for a few years. But anyhow. So then I went to work for the New York State Council on the Arts.

Rubens:

So then by ’68, ’67-68, you go to—

02-00:49:37

Schoener:

To the New York State Council on the Arts. I had just done this thing on the Erie Canal, which was very successful. Tom Hoving was Parks Commissioner at that point, and I was writing for *New York* magazine. I had done a piece—Huntington Hartford wanted to build a café at the southeast corner of Central Park, right opposite the Plaza Hotel. There's a small pond down below the street level. He wanted to build a café overhanging the street corner that would've obliterated the pond. He was this A&P heir who built the Huntington Hartford Museum, that ugly building, that Stone design. I wrote a piece for *New York* magazine, in which I gave all the reasons for rejecting it. Hoving used it as a position paper. We had never met until that point. Then I was at the museum, the Metropolitan Museum, on some New York State Council on the Arts business, and— Oh, you probably know who Harry Parker was. Well, anyhow, Harry worked at the Met at that point. He was a deputy of Hoving's, and he was essentially running the museum until Hoving arrived. Because [James J.] Rorimer died and they needed to have somebody in charge. So Harry said to me, "You did this great show at the Jewish Museum. Do you have any ideas for us?" I said, "Sure. I want to do this exhibition about Harlem."

Rubens:

This is your idea.

02-00:51:31

Schoener:

So he said, "Well, wait. I'll call Tom and see what he says." He called him on the phone; he was at the Parks Department. I described the idea to him, and he said, "I'll buy it." That was it.

Rubens:

What year are we talking? '68?

02-00:51:48

Schoener:

This would be '67. Late '67.

Rubens:

When was IS 201, the big strike?

02-00:51:59

Schoener:

Oh, that was in '69. '68, '69.

Rubens:

Because people talk about that being the fracturing of the Jewish-Black— And "Harlem on My Mind" came out when?

02-00:52:12

Schoener:

In the middle of all that. It was pretty intense, yeah.

Rubens:

So you did that as an independent contractor?

02-00:52:34

Schoener:

No, actually, I was working for the New York State Council on the Arts, and I was lent by the New York State Council on the Arts to create this exhibition for the Met. But I held my full-time job at the Council on the Arts at the same

time. So I never got paid a dime to do the exhibition. But I was able to sign a contract with Random House to do the book, so I own the book. So that was a good thing, I think.

Rubens: You remained at the Council till '80, I think?

02-00:53:03

Schoener: No, I remained at the Council till '72.

Rubens: Did you have any contact with the museum in San Francisco? Did you follow it?

02-00:53:20

Schoener: Not really. don't know if I ever went back to the museum for much, anyhow. I don't know.

Rubens: Anything else you want to just say about subsequently, since you left the Council? Here you are, just intellectually alive and full of ideas. You're beginning a project on the history of Chinese in—

02-00:54:10

Schoener: I've been working on that for two years now.

Rubens: Okay. Chinese in New York.

02-00:54:13

Schoener: Chinese in America.

Rubens: In America.

02-00:54:16

Schoener: Well, I've done books about the Jews in America, about African Americans, Italian Americans. Then I did a book called *New York: An Illustrated History of the People*. So it's all the different ethnic groups in New York. I have another project I'm working on called *Cosmopolis*. It's going to be a comparison of ancient Alexandria, ancient Rome, seventeenth-century Naples, and modern New York. All these things come together. So I'm still working on that. I had the idea sold to a museum in Rome, and then a new director came in and she killed the idea, so I had to go back and start from scratch. But I'm still working on it. I'll get it, I'll get it done. So that's my latest. After the Chinese Americans, that's my next project.

Rubens: Is there anything else that you would like to say, both reflecting back on your days in San Francisco or subsequently?

02-00:55:36

Schoener: Well, I look back on my days in San Francisco as sort of part of my adolescence. I think I had a delayed adolescence. I think I spent a lot of time partying.

Rubens: Did you meet your wife there?

02-00:55:51

Schoener: No, I met her in Cincinnati.

Rubens: By the way, when you went to the museum every day, what did you wear? Was it jacket and tie?

02-00:56:06

Schoener: Definitely. I think I probably may have worn a sports coat and a tie, flannel slacks. But I always wore a tie.

Rubens: And just maybe reflections on museums, generally. The cost of shows by the eighties became so great. So much corporate sponsorship into the nineties. Now they're trying to be more interactive with various populations. There's the fragmentation, identity museums. I don't know, do you have a favorite museum? Let me ask you that.

02-00:56:54

Schoener: Well, I think the Met is still probably my favorite museum, because it's a great encyclopedic museum. That still is my favorite museum. Well, I went up there this morning to see—I was told by a friend that they had copies of the *Harlem on My Mind* book there for sale in the bookstores. I went up to see it myself. Well, I was a pariah in the eyes of many of the people at the Metropolitan Museum for a long period of time. The book was withdrawn from sale at the Met. The *New York Times* published an editorial, in which they praised the Met for withdrawing the book from sale.

Rubens: Why?

02-00:57:38

Schoener: Because it became so controversial. I did a very stupid thing. In other words, I took an essay that had been written by a young woman who had just graduated from high school in Harlem. She had used quotation from Moynihan and Glazer's book, *Beyond the Melting Pot*. One of the things that she said in her essay was, she talked about the relationship between blacks and Jews, and she said something that was very critical of Jews—which actually had been a quotation in the Moynihan and Glazer book. But I took the quotes off. This became a very inflammatory issue. Now, my contention is, one way or another, somebody would have created an issue about the exhibition, because it was a revolutionary act.

Rubens: Was the criticism at the time that you weren't black?

02-00:58:38

Schoener: No, that had very little to do with it. That was a minor thing. No, but what happened was, the first day I went to Harlem to do research for the exhibition, I went to meet with the curator of the Schomburg Center, which is a branch of the New York Public Library. It's a research center on black history. We had

lunch with a guy who was a local Harlem historian. He said to me—this is before I even got started—he said, “If you’re another downtown Jew who’s come here to rip us off, go away.” Then we had a staff that was half black and half white. Every time we’d have a staff meeting, this one guy, Don Harper, would say, “Just like the Cotton Club. Jewish boss and black talent.” So when I read something that had to do with black attitudes towards Jews, it seemed perfectly natural to me to be able to include that. But I didn’t know what its ramifications would be. It turned out to be almost a fuse that just simply, in the middle of the teachers strike, in the middle of all kinds of other civil rights— I was thinking about it the other day. We had an opening at the Met, and we had Rap Brown at the opening. We bridged all kinds of gaps.

Now, what’s happening at the Met next month is that they have something called a multicultural committee or something else like that, and they’re giving an award to a woman who is a black curator, who was in the department of contemporary art at the Met for years, then became director of the Studio Museum. They’re inviting 600 people to come, who pay \$400 or \$600 apiece to go to this thing. They want to celebrate the fact that the museum is open internationally to people of all color and all ethnicities. They want to celebrate that. Well, here I am, the guy who really laid the fuse to start all of this forty years ago—thirty-eight years ago, whatever it was. So I got a certain amount of satisfaction out of that. So I went up to see if the books were there this morning, because a friend of mine— I saw a woman who worked in the bookstore and I asked her where the book was, because I didn’t want to spend a lot of time looking for it. So she took me to it and she said, “Do you want to buy some?” I said, “No, I’m the author. I don’t need to buy any of them.” I said, “I’d be willing to sign some of these, if you’re interested.” She said, “Well, it’s not worth it to us, because we’d have to wrap them and do all sorts of other things.” I can understand that. But I’m working on this—I don’t think it’s going to happen—but they have these benefit openings, everybody goes away with a bag full of tchotchkes. So I was thinking, wouldn’t it be really great if my book were in that bag? I’m trying to work with the publisher and see if we can pull it off, but I don’t think we can. I don’t think it’ll be cheap— I don’t think we can lower the price enough to make it worth their while. But that would make me very happy.

Rubens: How history comes around.

02-00:61:59

Schoener: Yeah. I don’t know if I even would get invited to this damn thing. I don’t even know if I would want to go to it. But at least I get the satisfaction of knowing that I have made a contribution to that museum.

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[material deleted]

Rubens: There's a letter from Morley to Monroe Wheeler. It has to do with something that you may have borrowed from MoMA. I don't know if it was either a car show that exhibited in Civic Center. Do you know what I'm talking about?

03-00:05:17

Schoener: What I did was— I told you I borrowed a lot of ideas of things that they did. I did a car show in the Civic Center. It's behind the City Hall, that big old— I think they've probably changed. There's a parking garage underneath it now. But I had an exhibition of automobiles, did it out of doors there. So it might've had something to do with MoMA. I guess I borrowed the idea, appropriated an idea.

Rubens: Apparently, Morley's saying, "We're sorry that we didn't give you enough credit. He's a young curator and he didn't mean anything." Something like that.

03-00:05:58

Schoener: Oh, okay, that's possible. I didn't—

Rubens: But she never rapped your knuckles?

03-00:06:02

Schoener: No, she never apprised me of that.

Rubens: You remember the exhibit?

03-00:06:07

Schoener: Yeah.

Rubens: That's fantastic.

03-00:06:09

Schoener: I think we might've also done a TV show around that, I can't remember.

Rubens: I don't see that title showing.

03-00:06:16

Schoener: Maybe not.

[End of Interview]

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

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

Dr. Rubens created and directs ROHO's Advanced Oral History Summer Institute.