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Regional Oral History Office
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University of California
Berkeley, California

Gyöngy Laký

FIBER ART: VISUAL THINKING AND THE INTELLIGENT HAND

With an Introduction by
Kenneth R. Trapp

Interviews Conducted by
Harriet Nathan
in 1998-1999

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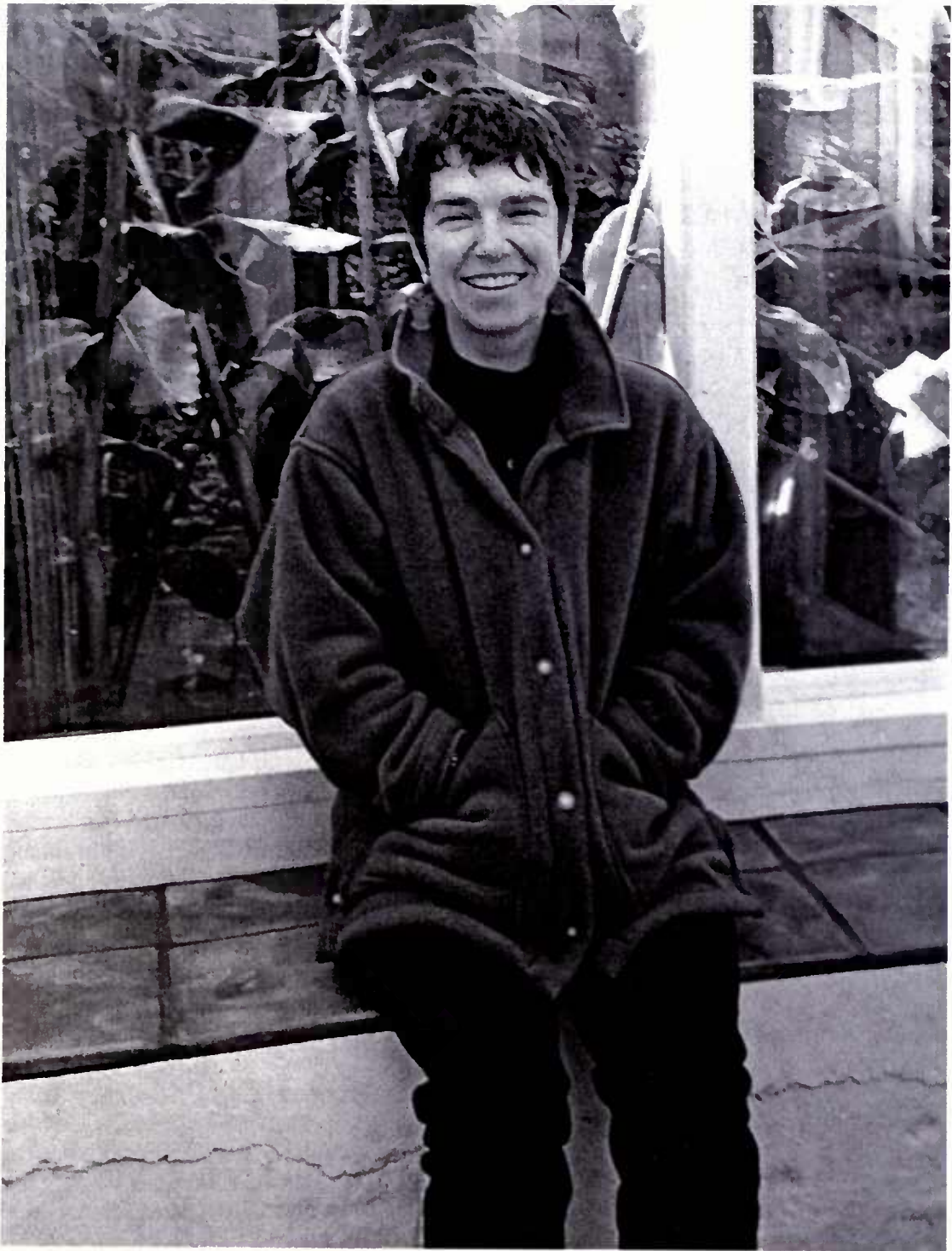
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Gyöngy Laky in her San Francisco studio, 1999.

Photo by Brett Christiansen

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PREFACE

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Since the beginning of the oral history program, artists in many fields have taken their place among the memoirists. When the art of handweaving went through an upheaval during the 1950s, fiber artists gained new recognition, and developed novel ways of using fiber as a means of individual expression. The creativity of fiber artists has won them a significant place in the complex of artistic activity, particularly in the San Francisco Bay Area, and has established the importance of their development and history. Under the leadership of the late director of The Bancroft Library, James D. Hart, the Fiber Arts Oral History Series was begun in 1983.

The emergence of the Bay Area as a center for fiber arts was stimulated by a number of influences including those of faculty members at the University of California at Berkeley and at Davis. Departments of Decorative Arts and of Design at Berkeley were led for many years by Professor Charles Edmund (Ed) Rossbach, now Emeritus, who is the first memoirist in the oral history series on Fiber Arts.

The second memoirist is Katherine Westphal (Rossbach), Professor of Design, who gave strong and innovative leadership in the Department of Applied Behavioral Sciences at the Davis campus from 1966 until her retirement as Professor Emeritus in 1979.

The third memoirist in the series is fiber artist Lillian Elliott, who shared one interview session with her collaborator, Pat Hickman. Lillian Elliott worked with students in a number of Bay Area centers, with extended periods in the Design Department at the University of California at Berkeley, and the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) in Oakland.

The fourth memoirist is Kay Sekimachi, who has taught at Oakland's College of Arts and Crafts and other schools across the country, including adult education schools and numerous intensive one-day workshops. She prefers to work with a restrained palette, beige and black, but boldly mastered a range of fiber art materials and techniques. Nevertheless, she sees herself as a weaver and is recognized as "The Weaver's Weaver."

Bob Stocksdales is the fifth memoirist in the fiber arts series. Self-taught, he refers to himself as a wood-turner. He uses a lathe as his primary tool to reveal the beauty hidden in domestic and exotic woods and turn them into the subtly elegant bowls that carry his name.

Gyöngy Laky, the sixth memoirist, is both a widely recognized and productive fiber (or textile) artist and an educator at the university level who maintains a commitment to community outreach. In each role she has achieved notable success and an ability to continue the searching and experimenting that keep creativity alive.

As an artist she may build a basket or large structure demanding engineering skills, using recycled tree trunks and branches, sticks, nails, dowels, and wires. As a professor in the Department of Art

at the University of California, Davis, she evokes her students' creativity, urging them to travel, to see and learn, to experiment. She asks them to be generous with their discoveries, as she is, in the style of her own mentor Ed Rossbach, Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley.

She recalls that as a child, she and her artist mother would often paint side-by-side, an experience that led to her own calling as an artist. Gyöngy Laky eagerly became an American, along with her family as Hungarian immigrants fleeing wartime Europe. At the same time, she could honor her heritage and recognize her feeling of “otherness” that has broadened her sympathies and sharpened her powers of observation and expression.

Members of the Fiber Arts Advisory Committee have provided valuable advice in the development of the series. The committee includes Hazel V. Bray*, Curator of Crafts, Oakland Museum; Gyöngy Laky, Professor of Design and more recently chair of the Art Department, University of California at Davis; Cecile McCann, former publisher and editor-in-chief, *Artweek*; Frank A. Norick, Principal Museum Anthropologist, Hearst Museum of Anthropology, UC Berkeley; Ed Rossbach, Emeritus Professor of Architecture (Design), UC Berkeley; Carol Sinton, fiber artist, San Francisco; Katherine Westphal, Emeritus Professor of Design, UC Davis; and James D. Hart*, Emeritus Professor of English, and Director of The Bancroft Library.

The oral history process at the University of California, Berkeley, is based on tape-recorded interviews with persons who have contributed to the development of the west. The purpose of oral history memoirs is to capture and preserve for future research the perceptions, recollections, and observations of these individuals. Research and preparation of a topic outline precede the interview sessions. The outline is prepared in conjunction with close associates and other persons in the memoirist's field, as well as with the memoirist, who in turn may use the suggestions as aids to memory, choose among them, or add new topics.

The tape-recorded interviews are transcribed, lightly edited by the interviewer, and reviewed and approved by the memoirist. An index and other materials are added. Final processing includes final typing, photographic reproduction, binding, and deposit in The Bancroft Library and other selected libraries and collections. The volumes do not constitute publications, but are primary research materials made available under specified conditions for the use of researchers.

The Fiber Arts series is supported by grants from the Mina Schwabacher Fund and a donation from the Friends of The Bancroft Library. The philanthropies of the late Mina Schwabacher have included support for hospital programs that serve children, as well as scholarship bequests to Whitman College in her birthplace of Walla Walla, Washington. The Mina Schwabacher Fund was a gift to the University of California at Berkeley in honor of her brother Frank, who was a loyal alumnus and supporter of the University. The Regional Oral History Office acknowledges with appreciation the generous and essential support for the project.

*. Deceased during the term of the project.

The Regional Oral History Office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, and the administrative direction of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Richard Cándida Smith, Director
Regional Oral History Office

Harriet Nathan, Project Head
Fiber Arts Series
Regional Oral History Office

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The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION by Kenneth R. Trapp

Gyöngy Laky is an internationally recognized artist who lives in San Francisco, teaches art and design at the University of California, Davis, and works tirelessly to nurture the visual arts, in particular studio crafts. Born in 1944 in war-torn Budapest, Laky and her parents fled Hungary in 1948. Eventually they settled in Northern California.

Laky came of age in the volatile 1960's, years that shaped and defined California, indeed America, in profound and sweeping ways. Baby boomers, hippies and counterculture youth shouted make love, not war, we shall overcome, free speech, drop out, drop acid, and back to nature, as their anthems. Rebellion was in the air, on the airwaves, in the streets, and in the classroom. The cultural, social and political foment roiling from coast to coast influenced Laky in immutable ways; most clearly these events pushed her to express herself in non-traditional ways in a traditionally oriented art.

Laky had the good fortune to receive her college education at the prestigious University of California, Berkeley. There, in 1970 and 1971, she earned her BA and MA in design. In the late 1960's and early 1970's Berkeley was alive with intellectual and political ferment. The iconoclasts Peter Voulkos, Marvin Lipofsky and Ed Rossbach taught ceramics, glass and fiber at the university.

At Berkeley Laky became one of Ed Rossbach's students. A charismatic mentor as well as a master of fiber, Rossbach almost single-handedly redefined fiber and the basket as art forms. With his use of synthetic materials and unorthodox processes, stapling or pinning or gluing a basket together, Rossbach abandoned "craft" to enter the world of "art" where primacy of content and meaning replaced technique and method as foremost consideration. Rossbach was not obsessed with permanency; indeed, the idea that his creations could last forever seemed ludicrous. Inherent vice, as conservators refer to the self-destructive nature of materials, is an integral part of Rossbach's work. Rossbach's influence on his young proteges was incalculable. Laky learned well from his tutelage.

In 1971 Laky headed for India to study there as part of the Professional Studies in India Program of the University of California. In the summers of 1972, 1973 and 1975 she taught at the Banff School of Fine Arts in Alberta, Canada. In 1973 in a strikingly independent move, at the age of twenty-nine, Laky founded Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, in Berkeley, where she remained as director until 1977. Laky's significant contribution to the history of fiber to the Bay Area and in America has yet to be studied in a serious manner and is unfortunately beyond the scope of this introduction.

Fiberworks operated in Berkeley until 1987, although Laky remained director only until 1977. The Center offered classes in various textile disciplines to amateurs and seasoned professionals. An important aspect of the Center's activities was the exhibition program that introduced fiber art to a sophisticated viewing public at a time when most Bay Area museums, perhaps with the notable exception of the Oakland Museum, paid little attention to the medium or ignored it altogether. Fiberworks was a teaching school and a gallery that showcased fiber as art.

Laky is commonly referred to as a "fiber artist" in museum exhibitions and collections, publications, and conferences and symposia. While such a categorization is not technically

inaccurate, I believe that classification too narrowly defines Laky as an artist. For the uninitiated “fiber” carries powerful associations most commonly attached to “textiles” and further to “weaving.” In the popular mind to be a “fiber artist” is to be doubly limited: first, by materials and, second, by processes.

To be sure, Laky uses fiber, or to be more specific, fibrous materials, as her medium of choice. But she challenges conventional and restrictive conceptions of what constitutes fiber just as certainly she confronts the narrow limits we use to define art. When I behold and contemplate Laky's art I am reminded just how inaccurate and inadequate the term “fiber art” can be. I like to think of “fiber” both as a noun and a verb: to coin an infinitive, “to fiber” brings to mind that which is created from fiber, or the processes commonly used with fibers to create something. For example, clay is a common craft medium that can be manipulated in ways we think of as more natural to fiber; plaiting, assembly, interlacing. And Laky, herself, reminds us that “Without spinning we would have no Golden Gate Bridge.”¹ The steel suspension cables of the Golden Gate Bridge are a nonfiber materials used in a fibermaking way.

The properties of craft materials are governed by immutable laws of physics; clay, glass, fiber, wood, and metal are materials that follow principles that are logical and predictable, although this may not always seem to be so. The tensile strength of fibers dictates the extent to which materials can accommodate applied stresses. Likewise, the potter's wheel, the wood turner's lathe and glassblower's blowpipe and breath are governed by centrifugal force and determine the symmetry and geometry of the form created. Underlying the seeming chaos of much craft production are laws of physics.

By now the reader might be wondering, what has all this to do with Gyöngy Laky? My response is, everything. In thirty years Laky has created an impressive body of art that helps to redefine “fiber art.” She has demonstrated consistent evolution within a narrow artistic range that has resulted in a mature oeuvre of amazing beauty, at a time in the visual arts when beauty is reemerging as a legitimate aesthetic concern.

Laky has created out-of-doors conceptual and environmental pieces, weavings, wall hangings, large freestanding sculptures and basket-oriented forms. Characteristically, her work strikes me as occupying an easy space between opposites; linear and solid; ethereal airiness and massiveness; negative and positive; fragility and substance. Intellectually and creatively, Laky's art manifests an architectonic sensibility. She is as much an engineer as she is an artist in the conventional sense.

Laky calls her materials “industrial harvest” and her art “traditional textile architecture.” Her industrial harvest comprises telephone wire, plastics and other synthetic materials that are the result and refuse of an industrialized society. She is more identified, however, with art created from natural harvests; apricot, almond, plum, apple, peach, cherry, olive, citrus, walnut, acacia, sycamore and eucalyptus prunings. At the same time these discards are free, they speak to Laky's deep concern for the environmental degradation around us; further, the refuse she uses is evidence of the wanton wastefulness of a society awash in rampant affluence. Laky's creative genius sees the potential for art in much that we throw away.

1. Mary Butcher, *Contemporary International Basketmaking*, London: Merrell Holberton Publishers Limited, 1999, p. 56.

The wall pieces Lucky created in the 1980's from twigs, branches and found materials are constructed drawings that define a given space. At once fragile and ghostlike these drawings also suggest age, somewhat like ancient writings and patterns left by an unknown culture. Much like pentimenti, these linear wall pieces seem to be emerging from the wall, at once on the wall and within the wall.

Lucky has created a series of freestanding sculptures that question certain American values. In 1989 she created the larger-than-life-size (90x144x48 inches) sculpture *That Word*. Spelled out in three monumental sculptures in three-dimensions is ART - that word. Created from orchard and street prunings and electrical wiring, all enmeshing a welded substructure, the sculpture invokes what we can never explain adequately - art - in a defiant and amusing manner. On a most basic level, Lucky is saying that art is what we make it - literally and figuratively. Art is a cultural construct the same way *That Word* is constructed. And in the end the piece is art because the maker, the artist, says it is art and she has every right to make the claim, despite the fact others may not buy it.

In the 1990's Lucky began to make basket-like containers of unusual simplicity and beauty. Using dowels and nails to piece limbs together in carefully constructed puzzle-like baskets, she creates pierced forms that challenge our ideas of substance. There is an elegance to the pieces that defies words to describe them. More significantly, one word is almost always used to describe many of the forms and that word is "spiritual." The use of nails in *Spike*, a basket-like form that entered the collection of the National Museum of American Art in 1998, invariably leads viewers to read the piece as a metaphor for Christ or as a symbol of a crown of thorns that is a universal emblem of suffering and redemption. Much like glass, the piece is not complete until lit. Under a full light the piece casts shadows that intertwine to create complex patterns. Where does the container begin and where does it end?

Interestingly, Lucky has noted that working with dowels and nails is very similar to pinning fabric in dressmaking. I think this point is significant for it embodies the creative spirit of Gyöngy Lucky. She is an artist who is always making connections with the world beyond her art. Yet, in full circle her connections bring her back to her art.

Lucky has an insatiable appetite to know the world. This fact comes forth clearly in talking to her, listening to her teach and in reading what she has to say. She is one of the most articulate and poetic artists I have ever had the pleasure to know.

Kenneth R. Trapp
Curator-in-Charge
Renwick Gallery of the National
Museum of American Art
The Smithsonian Institution

July 2000
Washington, D.C.



INTERVIEW HISTORY by Harriet Nathan

Gyöngy Laky is a fiber (or textile) artist who has won world renown as a source of ideas, interests and innovation in fiber art. She is a devoted and inspirational educator, a professor at the University of California, Davis, who recognizes that she gleans ideas from her students, colleagues, friends, critics, and admirers, and also from her travel. As a participating member of the larger community, she believes that artistic creativity is a significant part of life and a necessity that everyone should have opportunities to experience and enjoy.

She is also the sixth memoirist in the series on Fiber Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, conducted by the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. The series began in 1983 with interviews for the memoir of (Charles Edmund) Ed Rossbach, UC Berkeley, followed by Katherine Westphal (1984), UC Davis, the late Lillian Elliott (1989), Kay Sekimachi (1993), Bob Stocksdale (1996), and now Gyöngy Laky (2001), UC Davis.

These celebrated artists are only a few of the many members of the fiber art community in the Bay Area who have gained widespread recognition for both numbers and quality, providing a sort of critical mass of creativity. The Laky memoir occupies a unique position as the first oral history memoirist in the series in the second generation of Bay Area artists. She studied with, and acknowledges the influence, curiosity, generosity and skill of her teacher Ed Rossbach, as well as the important contributions of many other artists and teachers of his generation.

An artist who values working alone in her studio, she is equally at ease practicing her art in public, where spectators can watch her solve problems along with co-workers, sometimes in site-specific installations. In addition to welcoming new materials and techniques, she is a respector of art history, third-world fiber, and creativity, and a champion of the artist's freedom to experiment with the unknown.

Her view of art as a vital element in the life of the world has led her to active citizenship at all of American government levels. Some examples include protection of the ecology, advocacy of diversity and affirmative action for faculty hiring and admission of students, and working to secure the health and well-being of practicing artists and art students. She has gathered and provided information on the artist's use of toxic materials and the need for using alternatives, and in a different focus has worked with BALA (Bay Area Lawyers for the Arts) to educate artists in dealing with business and legal issues.

Her zest for the value of widened experience moves her to advocate travel for her students and other artists, seeing travel as a way to enlarge understanding and stimulate creativity. At home, her enthusiasm has led to support, and provision of, hands-on experience for toddlers and grandparents alike at the Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts. There, inquirers of every age discovered the rewards of personally creating hand-made paper.

As both an artist and a teacher, she understood concerns over an installation that led to many hours of discussion with rangers at the Headlands Center in Marin County. The rangers were uneasy about possible harm to the Headlands during construction of the art project, but she was able to reassure them. So they found agreement as the discussion ranged from art to the responsibility of caring for the environment. She brought a light-hearted side to serious commitment, as a tradition

of lunchtime feasts at Fiberworks were duplicated in the Headlands, and professionals and volunteers celebrated together the joys of creating art.

Gyöngy's energy and enthusiasm enabled her to juggle at least three simultaneous demands on her time and attention: increased faculty and administrative responsibilities at UC Davis, her burgeoning art ideas and output that brought new opportunities, and finally, her agreement to provide an oral history memoir that required eleven interview appointments from July 16, 1998 to August 16, 1999. She seldom changed a scheduled date. For each nearly two-hour session, she was on time, well prepared, candid, forthcoming, eloquent, interested, and realistic where skepticism was appropriate in the narrative. In addition, she was ready with choices of photos and captions, and even lent a hand at some necessary retyping and preparation of disks.

Her memoir is a logical outgrowth of a friendship that had grown into an ongoing twenty-year conversation about fiber art. She was the catalyst for transforming the interviewer's interest into a conviction that grew into a series of memoirs on Fiber Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, by the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library. Willa Baum, founder and division head of the Regional Oral History Office and James D. Hart, Director of The Bancroft Library, recognized the significance of a fiber art series, and it was launched with the memoir of UC Berkeley Professor Ed Rossbach, completed in 1987.

In the late nineties, a collection of fiber art and related activities had flourished in the Bay Area, providing a rich background for the Laky memoir and a feast for the researcher. These included art exhibitions at Fiberworks and other local galleries as well as informal discussions with a number of fiber artists and colleagues. They responded generously with information and ideas that found a place in the list of suggested topics prepared by the interviewer. Librarians at the Oakland Museum of California and at Fiberworks also guided searches in their collections. Grateful thanks are due to all of these talented artists and scholars.

Along with her increasing recognition came invitations to curate exhibitions and write catalogs and to show her own work. As an example, she created the massive three-letter word (ART), titled "That Word" for the Lausanne Biennale. She also enjoyed opportunities to produce situational work or installations, some designed to weather and be reclaimed by natural forces. Newspaper and illustrated magazine articles based on Gyöngy's work were informative, and Fiberworks produced a number of course descriptions and detailed exhibition announcements. Timely presentations of her art and publications submitted for career review at UC Davis were a rich source of information.

In this connection, her curriculum vita sketched the range of her artistic creativity and effectiveness as a communicator. The reported categories included entries under Fellowships, Awards, Public Commissions, Public Collections, Corporate Collections, Exhibitions, Events and Art Auctions, Professional Activities, Lectures, Jurying, Creative Work Published and Publications Mentioned, Media (interviews, talk shows, video, radio, television), Articles Published, and Catalogs Published. Her art appears in exhibitions and museum collections in the United States and Canada and in settings in Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Philippines, and Taiwan.

With the background research in hand, Gyöngy was ready to review the proposed list of topics, and to add several topics of her own. The setting for the taped interviews was the dining room table at the interviewer's home in North Berkeley, a place chosen as the most convenient meeting

spot along the drive from her San Francisco home to the campus at Davis. Her decision saved the interviewer hours of driving across the Bay Bridge, a boon much appreciated.

As Gyöngy entered the room, her sparkle, energy, and appearance had changed little from the time we first met more than twenty years earlier. She was still slender and quick; her smooth, rather pale face required no makeup, her clear hazel eyes needed no accent other than her own magnificent dark eyebrows. Earrings were her only jewelry, some dangling, some short, handmade by other artists using wire, rubber, or other unusual materials. She wore no nail polish, no jewelry on her strong and well-shaped hands.

When the interview sessions were completed, the interviewer did some limited light editing, submitted a few queries for points that might need clarification, and added heads and subheads. These went to the narrator with the transcript for her review and approval. She added valuable inserts and explanations. A number of pages show statements in square brackets [] that indicate the narrator's major additions of various lengths. Most of the shorter and less significant corrections are inserted in the final pages without such marks. She also moved some parts of the transcript to bring together first and second thoughts into a more logical structure. These changes were accomplished promptly, and Gyöngy returned the package on time.

Kenneth Trapp, Curator-in-Charge, Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, accepted the invitation to write his perceptive Introduction to the memoir. As a former Bay Area resident and staff member of the Oakland Museum of California, he was able to draw on his own observations for the context of the times when Gyöngy was developing her social conscience and responding to the pull of her calling. In addition, he could draw on his own experience and knowledge of the lively fiber art scene and specifically of Gyöngy's work. It is a pleasure to thank him for the range and quality of his Introduction.

Grateful thanks are also due to editors at the Regional Oral History Office, Ann Lage and Germaine LaBerge, and office manager Shannon Page, who were particularly helpful in bringing this memoir together.

Harriet Nathan, Project Head
Fiber Art Oral History Series

May 2001
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

GYÖNGY LAKY
 1757 Grant Avenue
 San Francisco, CA 94133
 (415) 398-6745/Fx: 0223
 Email: gslaky@ucdavis.edu

BIRTH:

1944 Budapest, Hungary

EDUCATION:

1971 M A University of California, Berkeley, CA

1970 B A University of California, Berkeley, CA

1971 - 1972 University of California Professional Studies in India Program

CURRENT POSITION:

1978 - Pres Professor, University of California, Davis, CA, (1995-1997 Chair, Department of Art)

FELLOWSHIPS/AWARDS:

1988 Annual Award, Institute for Aesthetic Development, Victor Ivanoff Memorial Trust, San Francisco, CA

1987 Award for Artistic Excellence, Women in the Arts, The Women's Foundation, San Francisco, CA

1983 - 1984 Special one-year stipend recipient, The Uncommon Fund

1976 - 1977 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship

1970 - 1971 Genevieve McEnerney Graduate Fellowship

1969 - 1970 Barnard Hobson Undergraduate Scholarship

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS:

1990 Sacramento Art Commission, Art in Public places Program, Sacramento City Council Chambers, Sacramento, CA, "Language Formation" (6' x 20' x 1'6")

1976 Federal Government Art-in-Architecture Program, Social Security Administration Building, Richmond, CA, "Inner Glyphs Out" (10'x25'x2')

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS:

2002 The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, HI. "Desert Edge" (9"High x 19"Diameter)

Contemporary Art Society of London purchase for the permanent art collections of Britain. "Henry" (19" High x 14"Diameter)

LongHouse Reserve, East Hampton, NY. "Animal Architecture" (Approx. 8" Diameter)

2001 The Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI, "Fish Storm" (Approx 30" Diameter.)

The Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI. "Silver Lining" (16"High x 14"Diameter.)

1999 The Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI. "Chine " (45"x12")

- 1998 Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. "Spike" (13" High, 21" Diameter)
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, "Evening" (19" High x 22" Diameter)
The Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI, "Fast Road Home" (50"x135"x6")
- 1995 The Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock AR, "Surveyor's Pot" (20" Diameter)
- 1991 American Craft Museum, New York, NY, "Red Birds" (approx. 20" Diameter)
- 1986 Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, Monterey, CA, "Flat Figure Moving" (70"x50"x1")
- 1985 Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA, "Mehta" (18"x20"x12")
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, "Stick Episode" (70"x60"x6")
- 1984 Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary, "Men's Party" (8"x8"x8")
- 1980 Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary, "Milkman" (approx. 60"x30"x4") and "Skins of Trees" (approx. 36"x60")
- 1978 Government of India, commissioned by International Education, University of California, Berkeley, for Moraji Desai, Prime Minister, "Connections" (14"x6"x2")

CORPORATE COLLECTIONS:

- 1994 Paige Electric Co, New Jersey
- 1988 Blackside Inc., Boston, MA
- 1987 Scott Foresman and Co., Sunnyvale, CA; Beacon Management Corp., Boston, MA; T.P.F. & C. Corp., San Francisco, CA
- 1985 Cargill Corp., Minneapolis, MN; Syntex Corporation, Palo Alto, CA; Ramada Inn, Beverly Hills, CA
- 1983 Saks Fifth Avenue, San Francisco, CA

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS:

- 2001 Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York, NY, "Gyöngy Laky"
MX Gallery, Barcelona, Spain, "Gyöngy Laky: Recent Work"
- 1999 Officinet Gallery, Danske Kunsthåndværkere (Danish arts and crafts association), Copenhagen, DK, "Gyöngy Laky"
- 1999 Memorial Union Gallery, UCD, Davis, CA, "Gyöngy Laky: Sculpture from Organic Sources"
- 1996 Royal Institute of British Architects Gallery, Manchester, England, "Works by Gyöngy Laky"
- 1985 Site 311 Gallery, Pacific Grove, CA, "Gyöngy Laky: Improvisational Sculpture/Constructed Drawings"
Maple Hill Gallery, Portland, ME, "Baskets, Gyöngy Laky"
- 1984 Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, Monterey, CA, "Gyöngy Laky: Dimensional Works"
- 1983 Live Art Gallery, San Francisco, CA, "Gyöngy Laky/Fiddle Sticks"

- 1982 Meyer, Breier, Weiss, San Francisco, CA, "Fiber/Gyöngy Laky"
 Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA, "Gyöngy Laky Recent Work"
 Pence Gallery, Davis, CA, "Gyöngy Laky Recent Work"

TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS:

- 1996 Brown Grotta Gallery, Wilton CT, "Gyöngy Laky and Rebecca Medel"
 1993 BrownGrotta Gallery, Wilton, CT, "Gyöngy Laky and S & L Niehues"
 1986 Wita Gardiner Gallery, San Diego, CA, "Magic: Eventual Transformation: Luis Bermudez, Gyöngy Laky and Brian Ransom"
 1984 Headlands Art Center, Marin, CA, "The Landmarks Exhibition - William Wiley and Gyöngy Laky," site specific works
 1981 Sarospatak Museum, Sarospatak, Hungary, "Gyöngy Laky and Vermita Nemec"
 1980 California Crafts Museum, Palo Alto, CA, "Progressions I: Gyöngy Laky and David Kuraoka." (inaugural exhibition)

GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

- 2002 Sotheby's, New York, NY, "The Unexpected Too" (in association with the British Crafts Council, England)
 Mobilia Gallery, Cambridge, MA, "Fiber Arts Today"
 LewAllen Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, "Clay, Glass, Baskets"
 Thirteen Moons Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, "Contemporary Baskets"
 Seme Festival International de la Tapisserie et d l'Art de la Fibre, Beauvais, France
 Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, Washington DC, "The Renwick Invitational: Four Discoveries in Craft"
 LongHouse Reserve, East Hampton, NY, "Small Works in Fiber" International touring exhibition: The Ninth Annual International Exposition of Sculpture Objects & Functional Art (SOFA),"Chicago, IL. Miyake Design Studio Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
 Chicago, IL, "The Ninth Annual International Exposition of Sculpture Objects & Functional Art (SOFA)," (BrownGrotta Gallery)
 2002 New York, NY, "The Fifth Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects, Functional Art (SOFA)," (Margolis Gallery)
 Gallery Materia, Scottsdale, AZ, "Art of Contemporary Basketry"
 Snyderman-Works Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, "Survey Fiber 2002"
 Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR, "Baskets Now: USA"
 Federal Art in Embassies Program, Bangkok, Thailand
 2001 BrownGrotta Gallery, Wilton, CT, "Wired Works"

- Art Gallery, Bury St Edmunds, England, "Crossover" (Traveling)
- New York, NY, "The Fourth Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects, Functional Art (SOFA)," (Brown/Grotta Gallery)
- 2000 Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles, CA, "Made in California 1900-2000"
- Florida Craftsmen Gallery, St Petersburg, FL, "Inventions & Constructions: New Baskets"
- New York, NY, "The Third Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects Functional Art (SOFA)," (Brown/Grotta Gallery)
- Snyderman/Works Galleries, Philadelphia, PA, "Surface-Strength-Structure: Pertaining to Line"
- LewAllen Contemporary Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, "Sticks, Stones, Wood and Steel"
- MX Space, Barcelona, Spain, "Fet A Fora/Foreign Built," the Second International (invitational) Exhibition of Contemporary Textile Art in Small Format
- Palo Alto Art Center, Palo Alto, CA, "Nature Re-Bound"
- Prigglitz, Austria, "Kunst in der Landschaft V"
- Sotheby's, London, England, "In Focus"
- 1999 Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, "Material Witness: Masters of California Crafts"
- American Craft Museum, New York, NY, "Baskets from the Museum's Permanent Collection"
- The Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI, "Recent Gifts to the Permanent Collection"
- New York, NY, "The Second Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects, Functional Art (SOFA)," (Brown/Grotta Gallery)
- Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts and National Handweavers Guild of America Gatlinburg, TN, "American Basketmaking: Tradition & Innovation"
- V. Breier Gallery, San Francisco, CA, "Vessel Forms/Fiber Techniques"
- LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM, "Enduring Form"
- 1999 Selections from the Permanent Collection, Smithsonian Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.
- Pitti Imagine, Florence, Italy, "By Hand,"
- Crafts Council and The Whitworth Art Gallery, England, "Contemporary International Basketmaking" (Traveling)
- Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC, "Non-Function: Objects for Contemplation"
- 1998 Konsthantverks, Kulturföreningen KLAR, a cross-cultural organization, Ransäter, Sweden, "Ting '98"
- Braunstein/Quay Gallery, San Francisco CA, "Defining Fiber" (curated by Myra Block)
- Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, Monterey CA, "In the Round: Permanent Collection Sculpture"

Barbican Centre (Inventing America: a year of American Culture), London, England, "Threads Contemporary American Basketry"

Ex Area Ticosa in Viale Innocenzo XI, Coma, Italy, "98 Miniartextil Como: Ottava Rassegna Internazionale D'Arte Tessile"

MX Space, Barcelona, Spain, "First Mini International Contemporary Art Exhibition"

Montclair College, Upper Montclair, NJ, "Textiles of Scale: Selections from the BrownGrotta Collection"

The Fifth Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects, Functional Art (SOFA), (BrownGrotta Gallery), Chicago, IL

Joanne Rapp Gallery, Scottsdale AZ, "Basketry IV"

1997 Craft Alliance, St Louis, MO, "New Baskets: Expanding the Concept"

4th Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects & Functional Art, Chicago IL (BrownGrotta Gallery)

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco CA, "Sculpture Walk"

BrownGrotta Gallery, Wilton CT, "The 10th Wave Part II: New Textiles and Fiber Wall Art"

BrownGrotta Gallery, Wilton CT, "The 10th Wave Part I: New Baskets and Free-standing Fiber Sculpture"

University of California, Davis, CA. "Gyöngy Laky at Ag Tech '97"

Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI. "In the Beginning Was the Word"
University of California, Berkeley CA. "Blake House Collection" sixty visual arts faculty

1996 San Jose State University Gallery One, San Jose, CA. "Raise the Curtain"

1996 3rd Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects & Functional Art, Chicago IL (BrownGrotta Gallery)
Society for Contemporary Crafts, Pittsburgh PA, "25th Anniversary Exhibition: 25 at 25"

1995 Jewish Museum, San Francisco CA, "Light Interpretations"

Banaker Gallery, San Francisco CA, "Friends of Fiber"

Texas Women's University, Denton, TX, "Facets of Fiber"

Sun Valley Center for the Arts and Humanities, Sun Valley, ID, "Art in Nature"

Craft Alliance, St Louis, MO, "Bridges and Exploring Along the Outer Edges"

1994 Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI, "The Object Redux: Re-used, Re-newed and Re-invented"
Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine WI and Katie Gingrass Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, "Ceramics and Fiber: A New Generation"

Banaker Gallery, San Francisco CA, Focus: "American Basketry: Masterworks"

Mobilia Gallery, Cambridge, MA, "Basket Invitational"

San Francisco International Airport Exhibitions, San Francisco CA, "The Continuing Tradition of Basketry"

1993 Mendocino Art Center, Mendocino, CA, "American Fiber Arts '93"

International New Art Forms Exposition 1993, Navy Pier, Chicago, IL (Katie Gingrass Gallery)

- Loveland Museum and Gallery, Loveland CO, State of the Art: "Contemporary Fiber."
- The Society for Contemporary Crafts, Pittsburgh, PA, "Artists and Language"
- Contract Design Center, San Francisco, CA, "California Design '93"
- 1992 Banaker Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA, "Focus: American Baskets"
- Katie Gingrass Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, "Quilts and Baskets"
- International New Art Forms Exposition 1992, Navy Pier, Chicago, IL (Katie Gingrass Gallery)
- Studio Totaro (Chiostrino De Sant' Eufemia) Como, Italy. "'92 Miniartexil"
- 1991 Galerie Philharmonie, Liege, Belgium, "Eventails" (International Invitational - Traveling: Spain, France, Netherlands, Hungary, Yugoslavia)
- International New Art Forms Exposition 1991, Navy Pier, Chicago, IL (Katie Gingrass Gallery)
- 1990 One Bush Street, San Francisco, CA, "New Dimensional Forms." (curated by V. Breier Gallery)
- Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL/Universidad de Los Andes, Colombia, "Fibers: United States/ Colombia"
- Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, CO, "Crossovers: Contemporary Fiber Art"
- 1990 Palo Alto Cultural Center, Palo Alto, CA, "From Tapestry to Vessel"
- California Crafts Museum, San Francisco, CA, "Baskets and Beyond"
- 1989 Nederlands Textielmuseum, Tilburg, Netherlands, "Selections from the 14^e Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie"
- Musee Cantonal des Beaux Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland, "14^e Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie"
- Katie Gingrass Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, "Contemporary Baskets '89"
- Katie Gingrass Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, "American Baskets"
- 1988 International New Art Forms Expo 1989, Navy Pier, Chicago, IL. (Barbara Okun Gallery)
- Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME, "Baskets Past and Present"
- Banaker Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA, "Focus: American Baskets"
- San Jose Art League, San Jose, CA, "The Garment as Metaphor"
- International New Art Forms Exp 1988, Navy Pier, Chicago, IL. (Barbara Okun Gallery)
- Wita Gardiner Gallery, San Diego, CA, "Basketry to Sculpture"
- Katie Gingrass Gallery, Santa Fe, NM
- 1987 University of Louisville and Water Tower Art Association, Louisville, KY, "Contemporary Directions in Fiber" (Traveling)
- Collector's Gallery, Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA, "Textiles Constructed, Textiles Twined"

- University of California, Nine campuses, "Diversity and Presence: Women Faculty Artists of the University of California"
- San Francisco Craft and Folk Arts Museum, San Francisco, CA, "Women's Foundation Awards Exhibition"
- 1986 The Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA, "Best Picks: Brady, Hauptman, Laky and Lerner."
- Site 311 Gallery, Pacific Grove, CA, "Material Presence"
- The Corridor Gallery, Sacred Heart College, Menlo Park, CA, "The Woven Image"
- Site 311 Gallery, Pacific Grove, CA, "Survey of Contemporary California Artists"
- Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA, "Bay Area Collects"
- 1985 Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA, "Recent 20th Century Acquisitions"
- State School of Fine Arts, Lodz, Poland, "Selections from the Permanent Collection of the Savaria Museum"
- Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Louvre, Paris, France, "Fibres-Art 85"
- 1985 Lawton Gallery, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, "Basketry Today"
- Pacific Basin Gallery, Berkeley, CA, "Within and Beyond the Basket"
- University of Texas at El Paso, TX, "Fiberworks, an Invitational Exhibition"
- 1984 Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary, "Fifth International Biennial of Miniature Textiles"
- Visual Arts Center of Alaska, Anchorage, AK, "The Modern Basket: At the Edge"
- 1983 Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA, "10th Anniversary Exhibition"
- Rara Avis Gallery, Sacramento, CA, "Masks and Containers"
- San Francisco Art Commission Gallery, San Francisco, CA, "Open Studio"
- San Francisco Crafts and Folk Art Museum, "Trends and Traditions" (inaugural)
- 1982 Webster State College, St. Louis, MO, "Three California Artists"
- 1981 John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI, "Basketworks"
- Memorial Union Art Gallery, University of California, Davis, CA, "Flower Arrangement"
- DeSaisset Museum, University of Santa Clara, Santa Clara, CA, "Fiber '81"
- Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Lausanne, Switzerland, "Nouvelle Vannerie"
- 1980 Bartok 32 Gallery, Budapest, Hungary, "Selections from the 3rd International Biennial of Miniature Textiles"
- "Fine Arts for Federal Buildings 1972-79," organized by the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC, 1980, and at the Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, TN, 1981, "Across the Nation"
- Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, FL, "Artist/Artisan" (traveling)
- Metropolitan Museum of Manila, Manila, Philippines, "Fiber as Art"
- Savaria Museum, Szombathely, Hungary, "Third International Biennial of Miniature Textiles"
- 1979 Sonoma State University Gallery, Rohnert Park, CA, "Installations in the Space"

Visual Arts Center of Alaska, Anchorage, AK, "Fiber Invitational"

1978

Southeastern Massachusetts University, North Dartmouth, MA, "Invitational Clay/Fiber/Metal Exhibition"
Henry Gallery, Univ. of WA, Seattle, WA and the Museum of Art, WA State Univ. Pullman, WA, "Diverse
Directions: Fiber Arts"

Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, Monterey, CA, "The California Craftsman - 1978" (invitational
section)

Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum, Spokane, WA, "Fiber: New Directions" (traveling)

Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA, "Point of Contact"

1977

Palo Alto Cultural Center, Palo Alto, CA, "Cross Currents: Fiber to Sculpture"

1976

Craft Center, Worcester, MA, "The North American Basket 1790 - 1976"

Transamerica Pyramid, San Francisco, CA, "Fiberworks 1976"

Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, Monterey, CA, "The California Craftsman"

1975

Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, CA, "Fiberspace: L. Cook, G. Laky, B. Shawcroft, C. Smith"

1974

California Arts Commission Gallery, Sacramento, CA, "Northern California Handweavers"

Knoll International, San Francisco, CA, "Fibrations"

Peter Whyte Gallery, Banff, Alberta, Canada, "Faculty Exhibition" (Banff School of Fine Arts)

School of the Arts and Crafts Society, Portland, OR, "Baskets"

1973

Mills College, Oakland, CA, "Women Weavers"

College of Marin, Kentfield, CA, "Photo/Weaving Exhibition"

1971

Civic Arts Center Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA, "Basketry"

Fine Arts Museum of San Diego, San Diego, CA, "Media Survey '73"

E.B. Crocker Gallery, Sacramento, CA, "California Crafts VII"

Chico State University, Chico, CA, "1st Contemporary International"

Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City, UT, "Object Makers"

Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, CA, "California Design XI"

EVENTS, ART ACTIONS, SITE-SPECIFIC WORKS:

2000

"Gyöngy Laky" on-site demonstration/performance of construction process for Raised Urn at Newcastle
Produce, Placer County Mandarin Festival, CA. Supported by the Arts Council of Placer County and the Placer
County Agricultural Commission.

"Open Ended Crater," on-site construction of a vessel (approx. 30"x 36"x30") in conjunction with the
Conference, "Inventions & Constructions: Concepts and Materials," Florida Craftsmen, St Petersburg, FL.

1998

"Tree House," a site-specific work for the exhibition, Complex Harbor, Art Complex Museum, Wustum, MA.

1993

"Surroundings," Art Gallery, California State University, Chico, CA. A site-specific installation.

- 1991 "Sounding Form," A site specific work commissioned for the international event, New Forms in Willow, organized by Projects Environment at Ness Gardens (University of Liverpool), England.
- 1989 "Forms for Language," A site-specific work commissioned for the international conference, Landscape and Sculpture, Projects Environment and Manchester Polytechnic, Manchester, England.
- 1989 "Snow Stones," a small site-specific work executed with workshop participants at Landscapes of Learning, CCLA Conference, Yosemite National Park.
- 1987 "Improvisational Structures: Line, Movement, Change and Space," site-specific work at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- 1985 "Falling Up," Musee des Arts Decoratifs, site-specific work in the exhibition hall in conjunction with the exhibition, Fibres-Art 85, Paris, France.
- "Suspended Three-dimensional Line Drawings," site-specific work at Asilomar, Pacific Grove, CA in conjunction with the Surface Design Association Conference.
- 1984 "The Blue Piece," "The Red Piece," and "The Yellow Piece," site-specific work for Landmarks Exhibition, Headlands Art Center, Marin, CA.
- 1983 "Artists in Action," artist in residence/open studio for the San Francisco Fair and Exposition.
- "Episodes in Textile Thinking," Fiberworks Gallery, Berkeley, CA.
- 1981 "Hot River," site-specific work with gravel mound, Lucas Valley Road, Marin, CA (executed with Lynn Mauser Bain).
- 1979 "A Participation Design Experience with Fiber Artist, Gyongy Laky," Santa Rosa Jr. College Art Gallery, Santa Rosa, CA.

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES:

- 2002 Panelist: Sight & Insight Gallery, Mill Valley CA.
- Member of team of three artists to develop a comprehensive Art Master Plan for the new Federal Food and Drug Administration facility, Silver Spring, MD.
- 2001 Artist in residence, Oxbow School, Napa CA.
- 2000 Charter Board Member, National Basketry Organization.
- 1998 Panelist: "Ritual and Meaning," Symposium. Palo Alto Cultural Center, Palo Alto CA.
- 1998- Advisory Board Member, International Society of Arts, Mathematics and Architecture (ISAMA), University of New York, Albany NY.
- 1996 "Art and the Environment" Keynote presentation, Conference: European Textile Network and Projects Environment of Manchester.
- 1996 Discussion Group Leader: New Critical Contexts for Textile Art Practice/International and Regional Initiatives, European Textile Network and Projects Environment of Manchester.
- Panel discussion, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA
- 1993- Trustee Emeritus, American Crafts Council
- 1993 Introductory Remarks, Tradition + Transition Symposium, Textile Arts Center, Chicago, IL

- 1991 Panelist, "Education: Academic/Alternative" Tradition+Transition Symposium, Textile Arts Center, Chicago, IL
Panelist, "Issues in Education," National Surface Design Association Conference, Seattle, WA.
- 1990-1995 Member, Board of Directors College of Environmental Design Alumni Association, University of California, Berkeley, CA.
- 1990 - 1992 Chair, Board of Overseers, American Craft Council Information Center.
- 1988 - 1992 Trustee, American Crafts Council.
- 1987 Panel Moderator, "Is Art Education Educating Artists?" Bay Area Consortium for the Visual Arts, San Francisco, CA.
- 1986-1992 Member, Board of Directors, Capp Street Project, San Francisco, CA.
- 1986 - 89 Chairperson, Board of Directors, Capp Street Project, San Francisco, CA.
- 1986-present Member, National Board of Advisors, Headlands Art Center, Marin, CA.
- 1986 Participant/Specialist, Seminar/Workshop on Hmong needlework in conjunction with the exhibition, "Hmong Art: Tradition and Change," Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA.
- 1986 Panel Moderator, "Art, Culture, Future," National Conference, American Craft Council, Oakland, CA.

Panelist, Colorado Council for the Arts and Humanities Fellowship Awards.
- 1985 Speaker, Surface Design Association Conference, Asilomar, Pacific Grove, CA.
- 1985 Curator for "The Architecture of Textiles," University of California, Davis, CA.
- 1984 - 1985 Member, Board of Directors, Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco, CA.
- 1983- 1990 Member, Advisory Committee, Fiber Arts Oral History Series, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA.
- 1982 S/12 Twelfth International Sculpture Conference, Oakland, CA (workshop leader).
- 1981 - 1983 Member, Board of Directors, Laotian Handicraft Center, Berkeley, CA.
- 1981 Panelist, Art Expo - Cal 1981, "California Art in the Reagan Era."

Guest Curator for "Contemporary Relics," Santa Rosa Junior College Art Gallery, Santa Rosa, CA.

Keynote Speaker, Crafts Symposium, Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, HI.

Guest Curator for "Matter, Memory, Meaning," Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, HI (two-year traveling exhibition).
- 1979 Speaker at hearing of the Congressional Subcommittee on Post-secondary Education for Reauthorization of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, the Museum Services Act and the Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act.

Member Program Committee, Society for the Museum of Textile Arts, San Francisco, CA.
Participating artist in collaborative artists workshop, Velem, Hungary.

Panelist on the Business of Art, Presented by Bay Area Arts Services, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA.
- 1978 Panelist, Symposium on Contemporary Textile Art, Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA.

- 1973 - 1977 Executive Director, Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, Ca.
- 1975 Speaker, "Fiberforum," Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- 1973 Founded Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA.
- LECTURES:
- 2002 "Trees to Art," California Master Gardener Conference (UC Cooperative Extension), Asilomar, CA.
- "Gyöngy Laky" Lecture, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, Washington DC, "The Renwick Invitational: four discoveries in Craft"
- 2001 "Art and Nature," Keynote presentation "Crossover" exhibition at the Art Gallery, Bury St Edmunds, England.
- "Gyöngy Laky," University of Georgia, Athens GA
- 2000 "From Crafted Object to Installation," Inventions & Constructions/concepts & Materials, national conference, Florida Craftsmen Arts Center, St Petersburg, FL.
- "Gyöngy Laky: Art and Nature," Lecture, Oxbow School, Napa, CA.
- 1999 "Outside In: The Architecture of Textiles," Lecture, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA.
- "Gyöngy Laky," lecture for one-person exhibition, Officinet Gallery, Danske Kunsthåndværkere (Danish arts and crafts association), Copenhagen, DK
- "Gyöngy Laky: Architectonic Aspect of Textiles," keynote lecture for Northern Fibre III, International Textile Workshop, Tuskaer, DK.
- "Sanctuary for the Right Brain: Making a Place for Creativity," keynote speaker, Arts Habitat Conference, Carmel, CA.
- 1998 "Art and Agriculture," Chicago Art Institute, Seminar for undergraduate/graduate Fiber students Chicago, IL.
- "Gyöngy Laky," The Fifth Annual International Exposition of Sculpture, Objects, Functional Art (SOFA), (BrownGrotta Gallery), Chicago, IL.
- "Textiles: An Art Form for the 90s: Who Makes What and How it Meets the World," Textile Society of America, Biennial Symposium panel/speaker, New York, NY.
- "Geometry of Form and Sculptural Constructions," Art and Mathematics Conference, University of California, Berkeley, CA.
- "The Architectural Aspect of Textiles Inside/Outside: Roots, Grass, Leaves and Branches," Ting '98, Konsthantverks, Kulturföreningen, KLAR, a cross-cultural organization, Munkfors, Sweden.
- "Art, Nature and Agriculture," San Diego State University, San Diego, CA
- "Art and Fruit Tree Prunings," San Diego Rare Fruit Growers Association San Diego, CA
- "Gyöngy Laky," Meaning and Ritual, A symposium on Contemporary Fiber Art, Palo Alto Cultural Center, Palo Alto CA.
- 1996 "Art and the Environment," keynote presentation, European Textile Network Conference, Manchester, England

- 1996 "Fibre Art as a Response to Landscape, Environmental and Ecological Issues," Projects Environment Symposium in association with the European Textile Network Conference, Manchester, England
- "Art and the Environment," slide presentation, San Jose State University, San Jose, CA
- 1995 "Art and Nature," slide presentation, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI
- "Art and the Environment," slide presentation, Paa Ya Paa Arts Center, Nairobi, Kenya.
- "Discards Reconfigured," slide presentation, Community Arts Project, Cape Town, South Africa.
- 1994 "Inside/Outside: Roots, Grass, Leaves and Branches," slide presentation, Penland, School of Crafts, Penland, NC.
- "International Perspectives on Contemporary Basketmaking/Fibre Arts," keynote presentation, New Directions in Contemporary Basketmaking/Fibre Art Conference, Manchester Metropolitan University, England.
- "New Work in U.S. Basketry," pre-conference slide presentation for students and faculty, Manchester Metropolitan University, England.
- 1993 "Bags, Bowls, Boxes and Buildings," Conference on Basketry organized by Projects Environment, Manchester, England..
- "Surroundings," California State University, Chico, CA
- 1992 "Gyöngy Laky: Recent Work," Fiber Arts students, College of Marin, Kentfield, CA.
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California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, CA.

1982 Fiberworks, Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA.

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1980 Presentation to textile artists, historians, critics, architects and museum personnel, Budapest, Hungary.

1979 London Textile Workshop, London, England.

Ecole des Beaux Arts, Geneva, Switzerland.

Centre International de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne, Musee Cantonal des Beaux Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland.

Santa Rosa Jr. College, Santa Rosa, CA.

1978 National Standards Council of American Embroiderers, San Francisco, CA.

California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland CA.

Euphrat Gallery, DeAnza College, Cupertino, CA.

Art League of the East Bay, Orinda, CA.

1977 Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, HI.

National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India (seminar with textile students).

1975 Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, LA.

1974 San Joaquin Delta College, Stockton, CA.

Sonoma Art Club, Santa Rosa, CA.

1973 Banff School of Fine Arts, Banff, Alberta, Canada.

Kingsley Art Club, Sacramento, CA.

Conference of Northern California Handweavers, Berkeley, CA.

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Haute Couture, Stockton, CA.

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1986 Colorado Council for the Arts and Humanities Fellowship Awards.

- 1984 Festival at the Lake, Crafts Section, Oakland, CA.
- 1982 Olive Hyde Gallery, Fremont, CA, "14th Annual Textile Arts Exhibition."
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INTERVIEW WITH GYÖNGY LAKY

I EARLY YEARS, FAMILY, WORLD WAR II, ESCAPE, AND ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

[Interview 1: July 16, 1998] ##¹

- Nathan: As we talk, we can find out how you became the person that you are, and to reflect on what you think fuels creativity. Certainly all artists have it, to one degree or another, and others do as well. But the actual fact of creativity is available in many different ways to artists?
- Laky: And these two statements would be descriptive of what this particular oral history series is about, is that right?
- Nathan: Yes. It would really evolve as you talk about different parts of your life and work. You don't have to have a statement: "We are now going to talk about creativity," because it will emerge.
- Laky: There is a way that I can think about my earlier experiences in terms of what I am today as a creative person, artist-teacher; and then there is another way I can think about it, which is just family history or psychological history or—you know, that's one kind of distinction.
- Nathan: Yes. I would agree. It will come to you as you talk. Some of it will have to be personal, and some of it will have to be professional.
- Laky: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.
- Nathan: So it's not to set you a guideline, it's just to have that tucked away in the back of your mind somewhere.
- Laky: Okay.

1. ## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Nathan: You have given many interviews that cover a lot of interesting material, so you can feel free now either to go beyond and expand those statements or explore differently, as you wish.

Laky: Okay. Do you want to start with a question?

Refugees, Vineyard, and a Moving War Front

Nathan: I can do that. We're going to start probably chronologically. I understand you were born in 1944, and were in Budapest until, was it '49 when you left?

Laky: Yes. Well, actually, let's see. Just to get the dates straight: it was in 1948 that we left. We arrived in the U.S. in '49, and that's where the '49 comes from.

Nathan: I see.

Laky: That was due to the fact that it was not easy to become a refugee and arrive in America, and so it took almost a year, or a bit longer. We escaped in the fall of '48 and we arrived in the U.S. in the fall of '49.

Nathan: Now, in those years—let's see, World War II and postwar?

Laky: Well, 1944, there was still bombing going on, because I remember stories about my family being at the vineyard which was a ways out of Budapest.

Nathan: Is that your father's vineyard?

Laky: Yes, my family's. Later, actually, my parents—mostly my mother was involved with this, because my father moved around. He was pretty active. But my mother actually hid a lot of neighbors there in our wine cellar, and was often the person who faced off with the German soldiers or the Russian soldiers, whoever was to come in through the front door and demand whatever they were demanding.

I don't believe she was ever raped or abused in any way, because she was, I think, a very clever woman and very humorous, and I think she always figured out a way around things. But I think one of my father's sister's daughters was actually raped by a soldier, and I remember some references to that difficult time.

So it was a horrible time, I think, for the family. One story from my mother, her cleverness: In came some rowdy, drunk soldiers, and I don't know who they were, but the front was moving back and forth right near there. Evidently, it was still better to be in the countryside than in the city, and so that's why they were in the vineyard. They hadn't lost the house in Budapest. It was still there. My mother actually packed up the three of us kids in Budapest, and we walked out of Budapest. I remember that now.

But some of the stories before the escape, of being in the vineyard, were really that the front was nearby, and it depended which group was there what day. So, these very

rowdy, drunk soldiers came in, and they wanted food, and I don't know what they wanted. Well, there was no food, but my mother had a basket of walnuts. She evidently, just as they were getting really bad and sort of abusive, dumped the basket of walnuts on the table. And of course, one of the problems with the soldiers was they didn't have food, they weren't dressed well enough; you know all those stories from the First and Second World War, about how hard it was to be a soldier.

So they just were delighted with these walnuts, and they started cracking them and eating them, and they were having a great time, and then they left.

So meanwhile, there are people hiding in the cellar downstairs. [laughs] She was a pretty amazing woman.

Nathan: A special kind of valor, too. Now, where were you in the line of children? Were you the youngest?

Laky: I was the youngest.

Nathan: Two boys were—

Laky: My oldest brother is about five years older than I am, and the middle sibling, my other brother, who is no longer living, he was about two years older than me.

Nathan: So she had small children to defend—

Laky: —in the middle of the war, yes. Yes, it was a terrible time, though I have some very fond memories of being a child in Hungary, because then we were there for another four years, and the war of course ended. But times were very, very difficult after the war ended as well. The Soviets coming in and clamping down is what basically pushed my parents out.

But a lovely vineyard. I remember, and I'm sure this is my memory, although I have very, very few memories from my first three to four years. But one memory I have is little piglets, [laughter] and why do I remember them? They were so adorable, and I remember hanging around. I think there must have been maybe a caretaker on our property or a neighboring farmer or somebody had piglets, and that was a big deal to me.

Mud and Wattle Buildings, Woven Fences

Laky: But later, when I went back to Hungary and got involved in some art activities in the countryside, I realized that there were probably other influences, because I found these twig buildings. They're actually Bronze Age-style structures, but they were still using them in the countryside in Hungary. This was in the early eighties.

Nathan: And these were built of twig?

Laky: They are mud and wattle. They are woven twigs with then a sort of mud mixture pressed into the walls, and thatched roof. In the early 1980s they were still kind of using them to—I don't know, store hay in. Actually, a Hungarian art critic called them corn-drying houses. And then I found woven fences that were basically twined, and things like that. Even the way the haystacks were placed and stacked, I thought must have had some sort of influence on me as a young child. And the vineyards and the vines, twisting the vines on whatever kind of wires or strings or trellises and so forth.

I know that I was very interested in all of that. I hardly have a memory from the city, hardly one. I'd have to really stretch my mind and try to remember something. I kind of remember our room that the kids slept in, kind of remember that, but that was about it. I don't remember the streets, don't remember anything. But I do remember things from the country. So that seems to indicate to me that I must have been more alert and more interested and looking at stuff, and playing with stuff and so forth. I have no idea what I played with and what I made and what I built. I do have recollections of a little later in my life, but not from those very early years in Hungary.

Nathan: See if I'm remembering this correctly: perhaps this was later, but that you had a little box on a string?

Laky: That is later, that's a little later. Now, should I describe the whole fleeing from Budapest? Is that interesting?

Nathan: Yes. That's a part of it. You did mention that your father was moving around quite a bit. Why was he doing that?

Laky: That may be an interesting bit of background. He thought of himself as an educator. That was how he described himself. Before my parents married, he came to the U.S. and studied at Springfield College. He was sent on a YMCA scholarship because he was sort of an up-and-coming youth leader, and when he went back, I think he went back to be, and in fact was, the general secretary of the YMCA in Hungary for a while.

YMCA, Non-Communist Resistance, and the American Legation

Laky: I know he was involved in the resistance, but he wasn't in the Communist resistance. There was actually a difference. Hungary had one of the earliest Communist governments in Europe; in fact, maybe it was the earliest. Later it became this Soviet Communist government, but before, it was just the sort of philosophical interest in communism. There were many Jewish people involved. Both the non-Communist Hungarians and the Communist Hungarians did not like the Nazis, of course. Obviously. [laughter]

Now, I can't remember the chronology, although shortly before my father died, I decided I would spend a great deal of time doing his oral history, and I went down there with my little tape recorder and my tapes, and I have about six or eight tapes of him talking about Hungary in the early days and all of that. It would be interesting to listen to them.

Nathan: Did you ever have them transcribed?

Laky: I never have.

Nathan: Would you be willing?

Laky: Oh, I'd be really interested. I'd be very interested.

Nathan: Maybe we or you can do that. That would be wonderful.

Laky: It is a very interesting piece of history. I also have dozens of letters that went between my parents and our closest friends in Hungary, who also came to the U.S.

Nathan: Were these from the United States back to Hungary?

Laky: Well, some of them are from Europe, I think after we escaped, and then the rest of them are early days in the United States of two refugee families. But they need to be translated; they're in Hungarian. [laughter] Minor problem. One of these days, we'll find a young Hungarian-American interested in this. But it would be a wonderful story, really.

Nathan: Absolutely.

Laky: I may have the chronology mixed up. My father worked for the American Legation, but before that, while the war was raging, there came a point when, as you know, Jewish people could not run or own businesses, and that happened in Hungary as well. He had friends or he had been working for an oil company called Stowa Oil—I don't know how one spells that—with offices in Hungary and in Austria. He ended up stepping in to be the general manager of that oil company in Hungary, because his Jewish friends could no longer do that. That's the only thing I remember in the stories. Maybe on the tapes there's a little more description of why that happened and who those people were and so forth, but then after that, I think the factory and company were taken away altogether. So it was in the hands of the Germans.

Then my father somehow ended up working for the American Legation there, and they are the people who said to him, after he was imprisoned by the Soviets for a couple of months, that he really needed to leave the country. They let him out of prison; we don't know why they put him in; we don't know why they let him out. He was actually kidnaped walking out of the American Legation. He was next to his best friend who somehow was a little further away and said, "Goodbye, Les, I'll see you tomorrow," and sort of stepped back. Meanwhile, the two men who had gotten out of a car in front just were right there, one on each side of my father, and he went into the back seat and was put in prison.

And my mother was in prison for a few days, but they let her out. Her description of that is pretty horrendous, and she wrote it up. I have it in English. It was about her imprisonment. She titled it, "In the Hands of Communism."

Nathan: These are incredible. Now, your father's name was Laszlo?

Laky: Laszlo. Although Americanized, he called himself Les. But his given name was Laszlo, and that was his legal name.

Nathan: And what was your mother's name?

Laky: Zyta. If you put all the "y's" of our names together you would have all the "y's" in an entire Scrabble game. [laughter]

Nathan: These are such powerful experiences.

Laky: So just to sort of finish my dad's part, his friends at the American Legation, as I mentioned, said, "Look, Les—Laszlo—Laci" (which was sort of a short version of Laszlo)—"you're out of prison now, but before long, they'll figure out some other reason to imprison you again." A trouble-maker is a trouble-maker. If you're against one foreign power, you're not going to like another foreign power coming in in its place. So, they, the Soviet Communists, who were taking over, the Russian influence, were actually basically getting rid of all the opposition.

My father was a fairly outspoken person, trouble-maker (and I probably got some of my trouble-making personality from my father [laughter]) I think his friends were right, that it would be a matter of time, and he would be back in prison, and then maybe not get out. This was a very transitional time. I think that's why they didn't keep him in prison.

When he was in prison, he was the cellmate of a man whom he described as the architect of the '56 revolution, Dudas. That's what makes my father's story, and probably more of what's on the tapes, pretty interesting.

His friends at the Legation put him in the trunk of a car, a diplomatic car, and drove him across the border. That's how he got out. He took with him two sets of formal coats with tails and that's all, because he was sure he was headed right for the White House to warn them about the difficulties in Hungary, and that Hungary was preparing to face off with the Russians, the Soviets. So that was how he got out.

Nathan: And did he ever get his message delivered?

Laky: No. No, because he ended up with refugee status in Austria for a year, totally demoralized and feeling as if America, that he loved so, wasn't interested in him or in the state of Hungary. It was really a kind of tragic thing that happened. I think for anyone going through a war and being forced to leave a country, it would be difficult, and I have often wondered about how my father responded. He was very discouraged.

He describes the year in Austria as his worst, which the kids loved, we just loved it. It was so beautiful, so great. We were in a tiny little village. As the film "Sound of Music" opens and pans across, and Julie Andrews is singing on the hillside, behind her is St. Gilgen, which is on Lake Wolfgang, and that's where we, my mother, father, two brothers, and I, were for a year. It was absolutely charming and beautiful. But my father was unhappy, depressed, did not see what his future would be.

Parents' Marriage, Move to U.S., Ill-Timed Hungarian Visit

Laky: There is another little side line, and now the story may sort of get shifted around a bit. After college, he went back to Hungary, probably a year or two later met my mother, they married. He decided to come to America, so they moved to America. My oldest brother was born. But it was a difficult life, and I think they were a little homesick or lonely for Hungary, or whatever it was. They decided to go back for a visit at a very ill moment, an inopportune time, and the war broke out and they were stuck. That's what happened.

I think for my father, there was a sense that he could come back to America. He had been educated here, he had done a very good job at school, people loved him. He had mentors and supporters at the university. I think it was just terribly upsetting to him that he would be suddenly a refugee with nothing. No home, no place to go, and nothing in his hand, and a family with a wife and three children.

Survival in Wartime Budapest, Postwar Escape to Vienna

Nathan: And how did your mother respond to these difficulties?

Laky: My mother was left in Budapest with three children: I was four; Mat, six; Les, nine. I don't know how people survive these things, Harriet, I really don't. And as I understand it, I was a little sickly then, you wouldn't know this now, but I was a little weakling, always in trouble. I almost died two or three times in my life. So apparently, that was what I was like.

She received a postcard from my father after his escape in the trunk of the diplomatic car. Because this is now postwar, occasionally, things like the mail were, in fact, functioning. Getting food and so forth was very difficult, and she described those experiences to me often. The inflation rate was so terrible, she would take jewelry or whatever she had at home that she could sell, to the market. Once she came back with dahlia bulbs, because there was no food. Because the next day, the money that she had gotten from whatever she took to sell would be worthless, so she bought whatever was there that she could afford. And she had to walk back and forth to the market rather far from our home, and so forth. So it was a very difficult life.

One day, she somehow managed to get two rabbits, hares, they were pretty big. She hung them around her neck with a string. And evidently, she almost collapsed by the time she got home, they were so heavy, and it was so hard to get back from the market. But those were the kinds of stories that she told about trying to keep us alive.

So, back to the story. She received a postcard in German that said, "Bestegrusse"—sort of "best wishes from Austria," but in German. And no signature on the card. Well, she decided that that was a sign from my father that she should leave. The other reason I think that motivated her to believe that was that the situation in Hungary had become terrible. They argued about it endlessly the rest of their lives, [laughs] "No, it wasn't a

sign to leave.” “Yes, it was.” “It was the most dangerous time to leave.” “No, it wasn’t, it was the last minute I could get out,” et cetera. On and on it went.

I have a feeling she was right, because she was there, and she knew how difficult the situation was, and she felt that she just absolutely must try to leave, or else she’d never get out. So she very carefully arranged all her affairs one night, put labels into things about who they should go to, you know, the precious little things a household has. Then the next day, she didn’t even tell the maid, apparently, the maid still lived with us, having no place else. My mother just walked away with us three kids.

Nathan: Now, was she in Budapest?

Laky: She was in Budapest.

Nathan: In the house?

Laky: In the house. And all the going to market was in Budapest. Because this was postwar, we came back from the vineyard, and we were living in Budapest, and that’s from where my father left. He left from Budapest as well.

So she dressed us, but normally, and she didn’t take any suitcases, didn’t pack anything. She didn’t want to look suspicious. She took her jewelry, she took her fountain pen (which I still have), probably just a little more in her purse than usual. The repatriation program agreed to by the allies was in full swing, repatriation and return of refugees, to keep people in the country, was in full tilt. So Hungarians were not being let out of the country, even though circumstances were just horrendous.

I guess a question I have is, should I describe in detail the escape? Because it’s actually a pretty amazing story.

Nathan: Well, it’s part of your story.

Laky: Quite exciting and—[laughs]

Nathan: Absolutely.

Laky: She used public transportation to start, heading across Budapest. Officials or police would get on and check everybody’s papers every now and then. So apparently, she was on some sort of tram, and heading across town to see a contact who might be able to get us papers. She had all of us with her. This was September, so it was still quite warm and beautiful, and we were in our summer clothes. People near us on this tram realized what she was doing and sort of moved themselves in front of us, and started playing with the kids, and creating a sort of diversion. The police got off. I don’t know if they were military; they were probably military police. This is, again, in the midst of this Soviet Communism entrenchment.

Nathan: Just one question: did you little kids know what your mother was up to?

Laky: I don't think so. I don't think so, and I think she would have been right not to tell us. And also, I was a blabbermouth; I would have just walked up to anybody and started chattering and making friends. That's also stayed with me my entire life.

She realized we had to get off the tram. (Now, the stories I am telling you are not my memory, but they're my mother's stories to us.) So she got off this tram, and she realized she had to walk, because it was too dangerous to be on any public transportation without papers.

She then met up with the person who was going to help get her papers. She gave a lot of her jewelry and so forth to this person. They made arrangements to meet somewhere, but he never showed up. To this day, no one knows whether he absconded with the goods or whether he was caught. My version, I rather think that he was caught. My mother didn't ever sound too bitter about it, so I think that's what she thought too, that in the midst of getting the papers, this person was apprehended.

After waiting for a while, she decided she had to just move on. We started walking the same road that Tom and I drove from Vienna to Budapest in 1980 or '81, when we went back.

Nathan: And you were heading—

Laky: We were heading to Vienna, because in Vienna was the main office of the oil company, and my mother imagined, or they had discussed, that that would be the connecting place. She knew the people in the oil company, and they knew her, and I think she imagined that they would take my father in and that that's where she'd find him.

Well, it started to rain, so we walked for six days and a lot of nights in the rain. She would find little places to sleep here and there. The country people, the farmers were wonderful. Apparently, they really did help a lot. But she said our skin hurt from the rain. We were in summer clothing, but the rainy season started early, I guess. She didn't want to have all the preparations for rain if she was leaving Budapest on a hot sunny day, because it would have been obvious she was escaping and she would have been caught.

So here we were in our summer clothing, I'm crying and sick, or whatever it is, because she said she carried me most of the way. And just close to the border, a farming family took her in for the night, fed us. At that point, and you know, the area had been united under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so there were families that were partially in Hungary and partially in Austria and had been that way for centuries.

The woman of the farming couple (they had a daughter who lived on the other side of the border) went back and forth over the border with her cart and her horse, an older woman. Her idea was that she would just put us all in her cart and act as if nothing was going on, because her daughter came back and forth with her kids (her grandchildren) often. This was her plan.

Early the next morning, she put us all in the cart, she went up to the border. Well, the border guards knew her well, because their house was just down the street. There they were, drinking coffee, trying to get their eyes open, and she went up to the border, and

she saw another old woman in another cart across the border. “Julishka!” she said. “Hi!” And just went [clicks tongue], and the horse went ahead, and the guards were drinking their coffee and telling their stories, and she just went across the border. That’s how we escaped.

The story goes that we are the last large group to have crossed the border. Now, I don’t call a woman and three little children a large group, but we were the last large group to get across the border at that time. Individuals got across here and there by dressing as cows or whatever they did to get across. But that’s how we got across, and this dear, sweet woman—God, I wish I knew who she was, I could go back and thank her or her family. The couple are probably dead; they were pretty old at the time. The daughter was in her late thirties or early forties, about my mother’s age. Actually, my mother I guess was in her thirties.

Nathan: How brave.

Laky: It was very brave. I can’t imagine how scared she must have been.

She did then continue, and we arrived in Vienna. Vienna was divided into four sectors. Let’s see if I can get this straight. The Allies: the Americans, the French, the Russians, and the British. And of course, if you landed in the Russian section, you were going to be taken back immediately. The Russians were very intent upon building their buffer states, and keeping people in those countries. And in fact, all the Allies had some sort of agreement that they would take the refugees back to their original countries as well. Nobody wants refugees wandering all over the world, and I understand that. But it is a harsh reality sometimes.

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Nathan: Which sector did you end up in?

Laky: Let’s see. I think it was maybe the American sector. We got to Vienna at night, or just as night was falling, and my mother somehow managed to have some jewelry still to trade. In fact, she still had a couple of rings when we got to the U.S., so she had somehow been very judicious about her jewelry selling.

I often wonder, I’m not interested in gold or silver or diamonds or anything, but what if we had a terrible time again? I’d have no jewelry to go out and barter. [laughs] Anyway, fortunately, she had a bit left, so she found a little restaurant and she got us some soup and some bread, and we were very happy. Then some soldiers walked in. Now, she didn’t recognize who they were, and I, of course, being warm and happy for the first time, and my tummy full of soup and bread, went running up to them chattering away in German because we were in Austria, and we all spoke both Hungarian and German, from what I understand. So there I was chattering away in German. My mother thought, “This is it. I’ve had it, this is over, now I’m being sent back.” But evidently, they just played with me a little and talked to me, and then I went back to my family and nothing happened. But again, her heart must have been jumping around.

Search for Shelter. Finding Father

Laky: That night is one of the more hair-raising parts of the story, because she still was worried about what sector of Vienna she was in. Lots of bombed buildings. She was trying to find us a place to sleep, so she went to a—what is it, a rectory? The residence of a church of some sort?

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: She knocked on the door, and this I remember: I actually have visual memories from Vienna. Not from anywhere else on the trip, but Vienna. I think maybe I felt we were okay or something and my eyes opened, and I have some visual memories. I remember this door opening and bright light spilling out, the light from inside, because the streets were dark. They probably hadn't been able to repair things like street lights. She asked if she could just sleep with us under the stairs right inside the door, and this person who answered, my mother always described it as "fearful" (probably the caretaker of the residence), said "No."

So then we were back out on the street. She next found a bombed building, and there was some sort of a protected area in it. I think the problem was it might start raining. At that moment, it wasn't raining, but it had been and might start again. She needed a place to keep us dry.

She found the bombed building and something to lie down under, but then some dogs started barking. We all got scared and started crying, then she started crying. There we all were—the dogs and us howling away in the dark in this bombed-out building.

She decided to go out and try again to find a place to sleep. I remember sitting with her on a park bench, and there was a street light there, because I remember the tree, I remember the bench, I remember the light. Evidently, somehow she stumbled upon, or somebody came by and told her, that there was an American mission nearby. (This is what makes me think we were in the American sector.)

We went there to spend the night. I remember bunk beds three rows high with newspapers on them, and we got a blanket. The next morning, we were given hot chocolate, and my mother was just so pleased. But we didn't want to drink it: it was made with water, and we liked our hot chocolate with milk. Ah, kids, eh? [laughter] I don't know if we ever drank the hot chocolate. Hot chocolate made with water: I'm sure it was great but we wouldn't touch it.

Later that day, she was able to orient herself in the city, and she found the oil company. It was in a very bad state. Some of the offices were still okay, but the people she knew, their homes had been bombed, their relatives were sick or had been killed. There was really no one to take us in, but they did know where my father was. They served us Austrian pastries, which my mother would not allow us to eat, because we had hardly eaten anything for the last few days, and she feared we would become ill with just sweets.

She did find my father. He had gotten in touch with some refugee services people. I think he had worked with repatriation of refugees in Hungary through the American Legation. So I think he had some contacts in Austria. Now the tables were turned and he was a refugee. This little family, this tiny little family, somehow survived intact. Pretty amazing.

Nathan: Did you children speak English at this time?

Laky: No. Maybe my oldest brother a little bit, but I doubt it. I think he was one year old when they went back to Hungary. So we spoke German and Hungarian, and in Austria, we kept on speaking Hungarian.

St. Gilgen, Walter Kilpatrick, Sponsors and Mentors: The Stocker Family

Laky: Another very nice piece of the story, where the box and the string come in, is that when we were located in St. Gilgen, in this tiny little town in Austria, a woman who had a guest house took us in, a really wonderful woman who had apparently hidden people during the war in her guest house. I remember this house being huge. We were on the ground floor somewhere, or the basement, and she had a daughter about my age, maybe a year older than I was at the time, and we played together.

And as I say, we loved this little place by the lake. There was a boys' home of some sort there, and my father got involved in being a counselor at this boys' camp. So there were lots of people around to carry us on their shoulders and play with us, and we went on picnics on the island in the lake, or maybe it was the other side of the lake. I just remember going in a boat and smelling the butter on the bread, and we were going to have a picnic. This was when the weather permitted in the spring. I probably only have memories from the spring; I don't remember snow in winter, although we were there for almost a year. Nine months, about.

Nathan: And were you still headed for the United States?

Laky: We weren't headed for the United States. I mean, we were probably on a list at that time. We wanted to go to the U.S. My father met a wonderful man who worked in refugee services, Walter Kilpatrick. Later he became a very, very dear friend of the Dalai Lama's, because Walter continued his work in refugee activities and worked with Tibetans. Just a wonderful, sweet man, who is still alive and with whom I am still in contact. He loved my father, and he adopted us wholeheartedly. He decided he would somehow figure out a way to help us.

Meanwhile, we, the kids, loved St. Gilgen. We would go on little walks up into the hills, and we would pick berries and eat them right off the bushes, and strawberries—fraises du bois—and build little forts, and my mother was painting. It was an idyllic life for the children. Now, my father, on the other hand, was very unhappy and very discouraged and crestfallen. He apparently spent as much time in the pub down the street as he could. I don't know how he paid for that, but maybe people gave him drinks. People were very sweet and took care of us, essentially. We had nothing.

I think Walter had exhausted all possibilities, so he talked to his sister, a dear sweet woman, Beth Stocker, and her husband, Paul Stocker. [added during editing: Walter Kilpatrick died May 12, 2000. I had thought that he had paid all our expenses in Austria and for transit eventually to the U.S. On his death, in a conversation with his sister, Beth Stocker, it became apparent that he had not, that we had had an anonymous sponsor in Washington, D.C. Walter knew the sponsor but had been told it was strictly confidential and he never revealed who it was.]

Nathan: Oh, I see.

Laky: —and said, “Dear sister Beth, would you please take in this adorable family of five, who speak barely any English”—well, my father was fluent in English and very good at it. My mother hardly spoke. “So four out of five do not speak English, and three out of five are very small. Please, wouldn’t your family of five love to have them for a year?” Can you imagine? So they became our sponsoring family, and that is why we were allowed to come to America. We came on a refugee boat to Ellis Island. Later, now that Ellis Island has been all redone and the monument put there, I sent in all our names, and they are engraved in the marble that meanders around with all the refugees’ names on it.

My father still was very upset, and he was very upset that we were detained on Ellis Island, because we were there, I think, a couple of weeks or something like that. Still, would they let him in? He was in the Resistance, and who was he? They were questioning whether he was a good person. I think this then plummeted him even further down. He could not believe that he, Laszlo Laky, who had been educated in America, would not now be welcomed with his sad tales. I remember him talking about that here and there later. When he’d had several glasses of wine, out would come a little bit of that disappointment and that sadness and that frustration that came out of not being welcomed back to America with open arms.

Nathan: How did your mother handle this?

Laky: I think she was the kind of person, I know she was the kind of person who basically took every situation and made the very best of it. So now we were here, and we would face that, and we would do it as well as we could. She also was very busy with the three kids and keeping us happy. She tended to be a very positive personality. I think that was the balance that was so important for the family. My father became very dejected and unhappy sometimes, and very moody and very difficult. My mother somehow managed to keep her strength up and optimism going. She just did what was needed, and she also had a tremendous sense of humor. She was extraordinarily creative, extraordinarily. I’ll tell you more about her.

We went to our new family in Lorain, Ohio, a little steel town on Lake Erie, and lived with our sponsoring family for a year. Absolutely wonderful, wonderful people. The Stocker family, these are the people that make America what it is. They’re just superb, loving, giving individuals. Paul Stocker is now dead; he died a number of years ago. But Beth is ninety or ninety-one as of this year, and she and her three daughters have a very active foundation and support girls’ and women’s issues, and educational projects among other things, and are just really quite an exceptional bunch of people. All three children are married and have children now. Of Beth’s grandchildren we have met three girls (of Beth’s youngest daughter, who was my close friend), and they are absolutely

fabulous. Strong, bright, outgoing, athletic, intelligent young women. Makes you feel good about the world.

Nathan: And that was why you wrote the letter to, was it the *Smithsonian*?

Laky: The *Smithsonian Magazine*. They had published an article about the Stocker Foundation, Stocker Family Foundation, and I just had to respond and say, “Your article did not mention one more thing that really tells who these people are.” Can you imagine taking in a family of five for a year?

Nathan: It’s really amazing.

Laky: I can’t imagine it. Often we have friends’ kids, or other young people we know, staying with us for a few months here and there. But it’s hard. It’s fun and so forth, but it feels like you’ve got your hands full. A family of five, when you also have a family of five, kids about the same ages? Suddenly it’s a family of ten.

Nathan: [laughter] Just the cooking?

Laky: Yes, all the logistics.

II MOVING ALONG IN AMERICA

Nathan: It's amazing. So your parents apparently felt they couldn't stay there forever?

Laky: I think the plan from the beginning was that at the end of the year we would move on, and I know from my parents, they probably would have done it earlier had we the means to do so. Walter and the Stockers were really such fine people. They wanted to make sure we were on our feet. In a sense, it was almost like a mentor family. They were very, very dear to us. I think back to things they did about education, about learning English and all that, I think by the end of the year, they were sure we'd be okay. Then we went on our way.

My father got a job selling stoves in the Southwest. I think he had a section that was Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas, around there. We lived in Oklahoma City after Lorain, Ohio.

Mother's Family, Her Style, Legacy, Experiences

Nathan: One question: you mentioned that your mother was painting. How did she get materials, equipment, and whatever you need for these paintings?

Laky: I don't know. But I do know that somebody gave her a box of pastels, which she had in Austria. I know this because years later, when Tom and I—well—

Maybe I'll insert something here, which is something that I think has to do with who I am today. It must come directly out of this early experience of my mother as being a sort of here-and-now person. If you're in the circumstances you're in, you just do the best you can. That's where you are, and you live that way. She came from an aristocratic family in Poland, so the change for her, if you stop to think about it, must have been tremendous.

Nathan: What was her maiden name?

Laky: Udrycka [spells]. For a man, it would be Udrycki. Lizst composed in my, what would it have been?, great-great-grandmother's parlor. One of her relatives almost became the head of Poland. That's the kind of background she had. So suddenly, she's a refugee, making do with hardly anything. That was apropos of something we were talking about. Oh, yes.

This thing about being with the moment: I think something happened to me along the way about not looking back, leaving things behind that were no longer part of my life. I got this probably from my mother's emphasis on the present tense, but also from the fact that my father was so discouraged by events in his life that he never went back to Hungary. Neither one of them did. Their friends later went back for visits all the time. My parents never returned.

He, in a sense, turned his back on that part of his life. He even proclaimed that he did not want a job with any kind of mental, intellectual activity. He wanted to be a bricklayer, he said. He got the job selling stoves, however, and he was just brilliant at it. He moved up, and he switched companies, and he did really well. Later he sold insurance, and he did really well with that also. He didn't carry out that hand laborer plan, but it was as if he didn't want to think or organize or head up anything. He wanted to leave that part of his life behind, and he wanted to leave Hungary and Europe behind.

In my life also, I have had this thing of moving forward and not looking back. This oral history actually is fascinating to me, because more recently, and possibly because I know you, I've been thinking a little more about the past and connecting to it a little bit more. Even through my work, the visits to Hungary (of which there have been two), noticing the landscape, noticing how people build things, I'm wondering about my connection to that place and to that early history of my life and to my birth culture. I don't have a very good memory. I think that some of my lack of memory has to do with this: you don't look back. You look ahead, and you forget about anything that you've left behind, because it doesn't exist any more. In a sense, you can't have it. You can't go back there. You've left your country; you're now somewhere else.

I think it's not always healthy and not always good, but I've noticed it in myself, that even moving to San Francisco, it's almost like disconnecting from Berkeley. Why wouldn't I think Berkeley is my place, my home? I was here, I studied here, it supported me, I loved it, I started Fiberworks here. Why wouldn't I have major roots in Berkeley? But it is as if I've transferred all my roots over to San Francisco. Probably this is not true as such an absolute statement. I probably have loads of roots here in Berkeley if I were to dig around—so to speak, metaphorically—but it is this attitude I recognize in myself. I think it's interesting. For example, I don't collect my own work. I only have one piece that I've held on to and don't want to sell for some reason. I'm not even sure why.

Nathan: Do you have photographs of everything you've done?

Laky: Pretty much, but I have all sorts of things done early on that I don't have photographs of. And I've also, not very often but two or three times, found it very easy to destroy work. Throw it in the Dumpster, off it goes, and it's gone. I am no longer attached to that work.

There are other ways I recognize this trait in myself. Maybe it will come up here and there in our interviews. If I think about it, I trace it back to being a refugee and having developed this sense, in these ways from each parent, of looking ahead and not back. Anything lost should be forgotten. You don't have to worry about what's not here any more.

Nathan: It's a survival—

Laky: It is a survival—

Nathan: —response, which certainly makes sense in the context?

Laky: I also wonder if maybe the fact that I try new things in my work and often leave something behind forever might not be related to my refugee past.

Nathan: But you're able to identify what it is.

Laky: I've been thinking about it a little bit lately, and I'm curious about some of these traits and where they come from. Who I am, really. To say that there's nothing from my past that would influence my present is silly, and that's what I've realized lately. I think maybe that's why it's easier to think about it now, to sort of explore and wonder. Because of course, I am the sum of my parts. Every single day is a part. [laughter] And together, the sum total is who I am, so of course, my early experiences must have had an influence.

I think also, that my love of using leftovers and recycled material, and making it important and appreciating it, definitely comes from having had very little during the war. My mother's brilliance and creativity in making something of nothing.

As a young art student, my mother went from Poland to Budapest, where my great-aunt was a painter. Ersi Vaskovicz. Ersibet—Elizabeth—[spells].

Nathan: And she was a painter?

Laky: She was a painter in Budapest. [added during editing: In May 2000, I went to Austria to build a big word sculpture for a large outdoor exhibition, "Kunst in der Landschaft." At the same location an art gallery was showing the work of three young Hungarian women who had studied at the Royal Academy of Art in Budapest. When I mentioned Ersi Vaskovicz they said that she is well-known and that they are familiar with her paintings.] My mother went as a young woman to live with her. I think she was eighteen or nineteen. She went to the Royal Academy of Art in Budapest. (My mother—we'll do a little—we may have to reorganize this oral history entirely at the end, [laughing]—but I'm having fun remembering this.) My mother told me stories about living with her aunt, and her aunt must have been quite a character. She would wake up my mother in the middle of the night because she was painting Salomé, and my mother would put on her scarves. My mother was a brilliant dancer. She could improvise. And actually, at many gatherings and parties and soirées, my mother would be asked to dance. Everybody would move back, and my mother would dance. She would just go out on the floor and improvise. She had also made her costume for the evening. She made these very elaborate gowns, and then she would dance in them.

So Ersi would wake her up, she had gotten an inspiration, and needed my mother to put on her costume and her scarves and dance, and dance and dance, and Ersi would paint. It must have been just wonderful. Ersi, a red-haired woman, apparently was quite a character. That was my mother's art education.

Now, I don't know why I segued off into that.

Nathan: This is fine. Things connect, and we'll take care of that in the index. We don't have to reorganize.

Laky: Oh, the creative spirit, I was talking about that, and using your creativity in hard times to make do. Now, my mother made her clothes, and she had a wonderful imagination. She was always ready to make things around her function wonderfully. So she made things out of nothing. We had only Cream of Wheat many nights for dinner, but I remember having wonderful meals all my life. My mother, when we were very poor, would put a dollop of chocolate, or a dollop of jam, or a dollop of whatever in the middle of the Cream of Wheat, and we loved it. Cream of Wheat, of course, is very nutritious, so it was okay. We never felt deprived. I never felt deprived.

Later Fears and Childhood Memories

Laky: Although later, when I was attending UC Berkeley, there were times when I didn't have my finances totally figured out, and childhood memories brought fear. When I was in school, grants, loans, a tiny bit of money from home, because my parents didn't have money then, and also, I think my father was somehow philosophically opposed to supporting me. I think he supported my brothers a teeny bit more here and there, but he went up and down. He was often difficult.

I got part-time jobs patchworked with financial aid from UC. I remember one summer, I didn't get it quite worked out, and I was really penniless. I got very depressed. I was living with wonderful, dear friends, two painters, Judith Foosaner and John King, who were in graduate school at the time. I think I was not yet in graduate school. I got very depressed, and after my morning job could barely crawl home and into bed and start crying. My dear friends fed me and were so sweet to me and took care of me. I realized later that what had plummeted me so was the fear of not being able to feed and take care of myself. A few years later, it just dawned on me, it was obvious, that somehow, when I was a child, I did understand that we were often hungry and at the brink, and that that was maybe one of my worst fears. So here I was, just barely making ends meet, and I was tremendously depressed by it and scared by it. I think depression sometimes is fear, so I think that's what happened to me at that particular period.

Nathan: Very genuine, certainly.

Let's see, I'm going to take you back to where you left Ohio, and—

Laky: And we went to Oklahoma. [laughter] This is actually a great bit of story to pick up, because I think it also has a lot to do with who I am. Is this like analysis, Harriet?

[laughter] I've done bits and pieces of this every now and then, getting an inspiration about, "Oh, I know why I do that. I do that because when I was little, I—". But I very rarely spend time musing about the past, like what I described earlier. I'm always looking forward. I've been in therapy a bit but not much, so I've really not thought about who I am very much in terms of influence from my childhood.

Nathan: This is not a therapeutic venture.

Laky: Oh, it will be for me.

Nathan: It's true that many people say, "I didn't know I remembered this," or "I didn't know it connected." This is a usual sort of discovery process.

Laky: Well, I've never thought much of my memory, and never felt it was very good, and now we're relying totally on it. On my weak spot. So.

Oklahoma, Father's Skill, Selling and Speaking

Nathan: Why Oklahoma?

Laky: My father got a job selling stoves. Now, I don't know if this is something that they came up with for their salespeople to do, but I remember one very funny story about my father saying to someone he wanted to sell some stoves to that he would sit on the stove in the store and light it. The stoves that this vendor had, my father thought were not very good; I think they were electric.

My father's stoves were gas, and he wanted to show that they were much better and faster at heating up. So my father was going to sit on the electric stove and turn it on, and challenged the vendor to sit on the gas stove and do the same. [laughter] I don't know if they ever did this or if he just talked about it in his sales pitch.

My father was a great *bavardeur*. One of his great skills was speaking. He could tell stories and describe things. He later once explained that this skill emerged out of the double talk he did in prison in order to avoid giving out information about his friends.

##

Nathan: That's very illuminating. [tape interruption] A quick question: a *bavardeur* is someone who spins tales?

Laky: Spins tales. It's a French term. *Bavarder* would be to tell a story.

As I said, he described that he developed this sort of very elaborate way of speaking, which made him fun to talk with, when he was imprisoned by the Soviets. He was a good speaker, and people always enjoyed talking with him. But that it came out of this time in prison, and the interrogations, and not wanting to implicate his friends, is

startling. That's what they wanted: they wanted names, of course, for him to name names. And here he was in prison with Dudas.

So the way he did it was by double-talk and these narrative acrobatics. He just confused his interrogators all the time, but he did it by this really extroverted, elaborated way of talking. Isn't that interesting?

Nathan: Very.

Laky: And then it became kind of a skill, a salesman skill—

Nathan: A pitch?

Laky: Yes, the pitch. Talking people into things—what you can do with language, moving people along with you in directions you want to go. The children, my two brothers and I, were often very frustrated with him later in life when we'd be arguing about something, and suddenly he's changed the whole conversation. [laughter] And there you are, it's like you're about to fall over, because the support was just moved to the left. And he's now going on about something else, and this brilliant argument you've just put together is no longer applicable.

Nathan: Oh, wonderful.

Attraction of Discards: Understanding Knots

Laky: We segued off into something. The part that we were talking about in terms of my work is the relationship to making use of everything, every little scrap. Because of the kind of person my mother was, it was always with enormous respect. You know, Cream of Wheat was not poor people's food. It was a wonderful meal. She didn't do that in a phony way or a dramatic way, or a theatrical way, but she basically made stuff out of whatever and made it seem great.

For instance, she was always very elegant. She would get scraps of leather from people who were making leather clothing and gloves and things like that, and she would make gorgeous flowers to wear on her coat, and she gave them to people as gifts. They were beautiful. So out of this scrap stuff, she made these really elegant flowers. She even sold them, but she never was too interested in that kind of commercial activity. She preferred to give them away. But for a while, I think some stores wanted them and sold them. But most of her, let's say, commercial activity, was through her painting. She sold her artwork.

She made these wonderful jackets that she then hand-stitched together. They were out of old blankets, thick. Sometimes they were reversible. They were so elegant and so interesting looking. She would make stuff out of whatever was around, and even the house was decorated, the furniture and so forth, with inexpensive or found items, especially in the early years. Oh, and when we had a birthday, she made things for the children, crowns and costumes out of paper. So I think my interest in leftovers and

discards, and that I don't think of them as garbage, but as really useful things, comes from my mother.

For example, when I was younger I also tried sewing some of my own clothes, which I did for a little while and enjoyed, but it never really became a kind of driving interest, even though my field became textiles. I did not like going to the store and buying cloth. Those projects never worked out. But if I got a dress from someone, or the Goodwill, and if I took it apart, and if I reassembled it, those worked out. I think it's very strange.

Nathan: Very.

Laky: I did not like the fresh, new piece of cloth. Even in the early part of my career in design at Berkeley, I loved weaving, and I would go get these nice, fresh, beautiful cones and spools of yarn to dress my loom and weave. But what I really loved was when I took all the scraps off the looms left by other people and made things with them. [laughs] I mean, I liked the new stuff; I enjoyed a beautiful skein of yarn; but I was much more involved and much more intrigued by the leftovers.

I also loved untangling big snarled, tangled bunches of yarn that people were just about to dump in the trash out of frustration. I'd spend hours untangling. I thought it was the most interesting, pleasant sort of cat's-cradle-like work. What I also realized was that there was a system to a knot. It was fascinating. It's a snarled mess, but it's actually, it's got a system.

I don't know a thing about chaos theory really, except the popular-press statements here and there, but I feel that this might actually fit in somewhere. This scribbled, tangled stuff intrigued me. With students especially, we were often on the verge of throwing out something that was good material, expensive and beautiful, but had been slightly mismanaged in the classroom.

I loved saving these disasters and going through the puzzle of untangling. You loosen and open up the mass, and once you loosen it up, the loops detach from the knots they had formed. The tendency is to find an end and keep pulling, but this tightens up the tangle. Just the opposite should be done.

Nathan: Well, it's those intelligent fingers.

Laky: I must have learned a lot from this activity. I did love handling the ropes and the strings. I did do some knotting, a lot of knotting later and rope-making that I'm sure must have come out of the untangling experiences. But I think my overall love of material, and then the specialization of particularly loving discards, came from both my mother and my early life.

I love getting old furniture and fixing it up. Fixing the hinge or whatever, the mechanical part. My mother did also. I remember distinctly watching her repair toasters and lamps and things like that. I remember her with her tools, her screwdriver and whatever it was she needed, doing these things. Now, this is in the fifties, Harriet.

Nathan: I was thinking how advanced all of this really is.

Laky: Yes.

Nathan: Long before it was popular.

Laky: She never talked about being a liberated woman. But she was. She took the initiative, which I think was also a thing that came with being an artist. When she saw something that needed attention, or she thought she could figure out, it never once occurred to her that it wasn't a thing for a woman to do, nor by the way, did she think any task was beneath her. I also loved that about her.

Respecting material, and also herself as well as her activities, she was the aristocrat, if she was scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees (aristocrat in the best sense of the word), she did it with no sense that it was a lowly activity, whatever it was. In that way, she could manage any kind of difficult situation. It did not demean her to carry things, to make things, to scrub floors, or whatever she had to do maintain the family and the house.

My father maintained nothing. He was not a person who worked with his hands at all. Although later in his life, he took a metal class, and he made a couple of objects, one sort of artichoke-like thing out of metal that he pounded and cut and shaped. He loved it, but that was the only time I ever saw him do anything with his hands, and he never repaired anything. My mother repaired, repaired, painted, fixed, sanded, whatever she had to do. But I specifically remember the toasters she repaired.

Nathan: Solving the problem?

Laky: Yes.

Nathan: Now I'm going to try to move a little bit farther than Oklahoma. How long were you there?

Laky: Oh, Oklahoma. Oh, oh, oh, Oklahoma. [laughter]

Nathan: If that's not of interest, let's go to Carmel.

Laky: There's something—well, we could actually do Oklahoma and Texas together.

Oh, before we do that, though, you asked about my mother painting in Austria and early in her life. She did a portrait of the youngest girl in the Austrian woman's home, and when Tom and I later went to visit, it was on the wall right behind the woman who opened the door. I recognized this little portrait on the wall there, done in pastels, and I said I was the daughter of the woman who painted it. Of course, everybody started crying—Tom, me, the woman. The woman who answered the door was my friend who was a little older than me, whom I had played with as a child.

Oklahoma and the First Gallery, Texas, and Revisiting St. Gilgen

Laky: And so maybe we should go back and fill in at this point. When Tom and I went to Europe, we went to Europe fairly often, and I never wanted to go back anywhere. I didn't want to go back to Hungary, I didn't want to go back to Austria, I never mentioned going to see the place where I had lived in Austria.

But Tom once on one of our trips said, "Well, you know, we're in this car, and it's really only two hours to Salzburg and a bit more to St. Gilgen. Why don't we drive there?"

So we drove there, and we found a place to stay, and I said, "Oh, this is nice," and I enjoyed it. Tom said, "Don't you want to go find the house you stayed in?" I said, "Well, sure." [laughter] But you know, I wouldn't have initiated that, and it was so wonderful that he wanted to and was curious and thought I'd want to.

We started looking around this small village, and I realized I could orient myself by the lake on one side, the mountains on the other, because I remembered that about the direction of the town from where we lived. Walking to town, the hills were on the right, the lake was on the left. So walking out to the house, the lake was on the right, the hills were on the left. But Tom asked, "Why are you looking down?" Because I was constantly looking at the ground. We were walking along a road which I deduced was the road that the house was on, but I kept looking down. I looked at the road. We realized it was because I was very small when we lived there, and I went up and down that road with my little box. I had a box on a string, and in the box was my doll tucked in with her little blankies, and I pulled this thing up and down the road. By looking down, I saw some of the things that I saw as a little child.

There was one place where the road went over a creek, which I definitely remembered so I knew we were on the right track. I was like a bloodhound. I had my nose to the ground. [laughter] And finally we found the house. New houses had been built around on the other side of the road and so forth, but I somehow just sniffed my way to this house by looking at the edge of the road, and then the shrubs. I wasn't looking at the hills and the bigger markings to find the place. We laughed and laughed about that, but that was the box on a string story.

So Oklahoma and Texas. Moving there was very exciting to the three of us children, because America was cowboys and Indians in our minds.

Nathan: Of course.

Laky: Of course. And my mother had painted Roy Rogers in pastels for my brothers. She began to paint horses and the Western scene in Oklahoma and in Texas. She painted the buffalo. In fact, there's one funny story about her being in the field with her easel and the buffalo. Suddenly they start moving toward her, so she grabs her paints and her easel and rushes out, and crawls through the fence again.

She painted rodeos. We went to rodeos, and, of course, we thought this was heaven, particularly in Texas. Big, and oil wells, this was really America now. We lived about three years in Oklahoma and then a year in Texas.

Nathan: Were you old enough for school then?

Laky: Yes, let's see. I think I went to kindergarten in Lorain. I was maybe on the young side, five, five or six. Kindergarten, Ohio, first grade—no, I think it was kindergarten. Then I think it was first, maybe second grade, in Oklahoma. Third grade was in Texas.

My parents opened a gallery in Oklahoma City in 1950 or '51. I don't think there was another gallery in all of Oklahoma City. My mother had a wonderful ability to ferret out the good artists in an area. She somehow looked around in museums, historical societies, or whatever, I'm not even sure there was much of a museum then. There were a few good Oklahoman artists whom she had found, and she and my father opened this gallery. They showed her work and these few Oklahomans. Of course, it only lasted a year and then went bust, because there was no art market in Oklahoma at the time. But isn't it interesting that they did this?

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Yes. It was so entrepreneurial and so hopeful. Then later in Carmel, they opened another gallery, so they weren't discouraged by the fact it didn't work in Oklahoma.

Nathan: All right, we can just stop right there.

III UNDERSTANDING THE INTELLIGENT HAND

[Interview 2: August 10, 1998] ##

Art and Mathematics Conference, and Three-Dimensional Visual Information

Laky: This past week, I gave a talk to a mathematics conference. I told you about this.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: It was the Art and Mathematics Conference at UC Berkeley. One of the things that I found absolutely fascinating that did then touch back into this issue about my mechanical parts—or not my mechanical parts—but my ability to fix things and figure out how things work. There were both artists interested in math and mathematicians interested in art. Not all of it, but a good part of it related to teaching, which I really appreciated. You know, the question is, how do you teach math, and how are we going to reach the kids? In fact, one of the organizers of the conference, Nat Friedman from Albany, and another guy, another participant in the conference, sort of instantaneously organized an art-math for children organization, in the lobby, between two of the afternoon presentations. I thought, “How wonderful.”

One of the things that I still have to think some more about is the ability to visualize things in three dimensions, and the ability to move from information to the object, and back and forth. It was really fascinating. For example, I’ve heard a dozen quilt talks, but there was a wonderful woman who gave a talk about quilts. In her slide presentation, she would put up an image of a beautiful geometric arrangement. You know, those geometric quilts, that are just fascinating immediately: Now, how does this thing happen? It’s so complex, from a visual, geometric point of view.

Then she gave the formula: $X \text{ over } Y \text{ minus } Z \text{ equals}$ —I don’t know what the formulas are, I couldn’t possibly remember one. But I do remember that they were not too difficult.

Then she said, “Now, the way you graph this is:” and there would be little dots on the graph paper, and lines, corresponding to the mathematical formula describing fractals. That was how you got this extraordinary patchworking happening in the arrangement of the geometric quilt. Well, it was really extraordinary.

Then there were all the three-dimensional folks, the tetrahedrons and the polyhedrons. I intuitively know these forms, and I understand them. They’re related to the geodesic dome, but they’re also related to the geometric repetitions of basketry. That’s, I guess, why the conference organizers were interested in my work. I’ve done a couple of pieces that I call some form of “the endless knot.” I have various versions of it. What is a knot, and what is the geometry of a knot? Several mathematicians at the conference were knot theorists, so it was really fascinating.

Through the conference I did understand a little bit more about myself, and the fact that working visually, I could look at some of these mathematical forms and begin to comprehend them, and the logic of their structure, even though I didn’t know the math. I used to be very good at geometry. I just loved it, and I was very, very good at mechanical drawing also. I could draw the side view, the top view, the end view, and then the oblique view with no problems at all. I still can remember quite a bit of it, so I imagine that I must use some of this early interest in math and mechanical drawing visually in my work today.

I think that this visual skill is why I can look at a piece of machinery, and as I take it apart, give myself information visually. When I fixed our refrigerator, it was all a visual process. Looking at the tubes and where they connected, and what was frayed, or whether the water seeped out. It was all visual information, three-dimensional visual information. It’s easy. [laughter] But I think that some people happen to think this way and some people don’t.

I remember a discussion an artist friend and I had about those aptitude tests in high school and college: the section where there are geometric drawings, with questions such as, “What does this look like backwards?”, or, “Does this shape fit in one of the following shapes?” Tom and I and my artist friend were discussing these, and Tom said, “Oh, I hated that part of the exam,” and both of us said simultaneously, “Oh, we loved that part of the exam.” [laughter]

The other part I mentioned earlier is that my mother had these skills. Even though she was a two-dimensional person overall, being a painter, she didn’t really do anything three-dimensional in her art, but she fixed the toaster and rewired the lamps. If a hinge fell off something, she figured out how to replace it. She was very skilled in that three-dimensional problem-solving way. I always call that puzzle-solving. To me, it’s just lots of fun.

Tom and I were in Hungary for the first time since I left as a child. I was invited to have an exhibit and to participate in an artists’ workshop. It was before the end of the Soviet regime, so it was a pretty scary time to be there.

We didn’t have a car on that trip. We did on the next trip, because I remember how ill at ease I was relying on other people to move us around, and worrying about the authorities, these Soviet authorities seemingly hovering everywhere.

Nathan: And about when would this have been?

Laky: 1980. Because of my father's imprisonment, I'd always felt a little uneasy about going to Hungary, and I'd always heard that once a Hungarian citizen, always a Hungarian citizen, so if they ever have any reason to claim you, you're a Hungarian citizen. You cannot give it up, even if you change your passport. That's my understanding. This may have changed subsequently, but that was my understanding then. [added during editing: Due to my family's experience and my father's stories about the Second World War and after, I had a deep-seated fear of the Soviet Communists controlling Hungary. Were it not for Tom's quiet understanding of this and his enormous love and sensitivity, I would never have been able to return at that time.]

When we were about to make this trip, Tom arranged, through a friend, an introduction to the U.S. ambassador in Austria who had been formerly the ambassador to Hungary, so that we could go talk to him before going into Hungary, thinking I would feel a little more comfortable about going. Ambassador Kaiser proceeded to tell us a story about a journalist, a Hungarian-American journalist who went back to visit Hungary with his family, and got a phone call in a hotel while he was in the dining room. They called him to the phone. He never came back. Then later, they told his wife, "Look, we're very sorry. But you know, he got a heart attack, and we had to cremate him. We're very sorry, and here he is," in a little jar.

So this was the story that the ambassador told me on my eve of going into Hungary for the first time since I was four years old. [laughs]

Nathan: And you still went?

Laky: I still went, but Tom and I laughed about that for years afterwards, because we went to him to reassure me. But he did, he gave me his card, and he said, "If anything happens, we'll be there to get you out of jail," or whatever. Anyway, I've gotten off on a tangent here.

Back to my story about visual information. We were driving somewhere with someone, I forget the details, and we pulled into a gas station. There was a couple there with a pickup truck of some sort and a flat tire. They could not figure out where the spare tire was. So sticking my nose into everything in the world around me, as I tend to do, "Oh, maybe I can find your tire."

Nathan: These were Hungarians?

Laky: These were Hungarians. And we were with a Hungarian, so I guess he translated. I don't remember how this was all happening, but you see, it's visual, words didn't matter. I could point. So I looked all over the car, and finally I found the spare tire underneath. It was an unusual vehicle. I had not seen one with a spare configured quite like this. The spare tire was underneath in the front, under the motor, between the wheels. And not only did I find it, but I found out how to unhook it and pull it out so that they could use it. I guess they had borrowed the car, or rented the car, I don't know where they had gotten the car, but they didn't know where the spare tire was. It was not in the usual place.

What You See and Infer, and How You Use It

- Laky: So it's situations like that where I really understand that I have some sort of visual intelligence that is different from theoretical thinking, where you know what spare tires are, know their sort of general purposes and whereabouts, and you work from information. I took it from the visual end: what can I see that will indicate to me what I need to know? Multiple intelligence is an interesting concept. I have to go back and read about it again, different ways of being intelligent. I don't remember if there's a visual one described, but I think there is a visual one. It's all in what you see, and then what you infer from what you see and how you use what you see.
- Nathan: You understand the depth from just one view?
- Laky: Well, then the mechanical drawing and geometry background gives me information, so even things that I can't see, I can imagine. So sure, I'm using aspects of visual viewing. But I think there is something like visual thinking that is different from other kinds of thinking.

More on Art-Math Conference, and Interdisciplinary Questions

- Laky: A lot of people at the art-math conference were involved with computers, and computers are a major, let's say, "player" in the art-math convergence. I think that when we thoroughly understand the visual-verbal combination that's possible in computers, and the visualizing capability of computers, it will be great fun, and we'll probably be able to think more easily and communicate more easily. We'll be able to do a lot of things we can't do now, because we've separated the formula from the physical thing it describes. And these art-math people put the two together. It was just great. It was a really interesting experience to participate.
- Nathan: And who were the people who attended?
- Laky: Mathematicians, computer scientists, teachers who teach math, teachers who teach computer science. There was one presentation by a woman who teaches pilots-to-be, because they have to recognize and understand formulas, work with geometry and the computer, et cetera. Another was a woman who came up with the math formulas that would make snow swirl in a computer-generated animated film. It was quite fascinating. So it was an eclectic mix, but once I began to understand this combination of two different ways of thinking, all these approaches made sense and made the conference a very rich experience for me.

Now, I got the impression here and there—this is fascinating to me about interdisciplinary activity—that some of the participants may not be appreciated by their colleagues who are mathematicians who are not involved in art-making. I met a very creative and very bright guy who said he had just been denied tenure at his university. His colleagues didn't recognize any of the art parts, any of the physical and sculptural realities that he was building based on his mathematical equations. So, poor guy, he did

realize that he took a big risk working in the in-between areas between the fields of art and math. He's not recognized as an artist. He doesn't fit there because he is essentially a mathematician and he doesn't fit in the math end, because he uses math to make art.

We joked about it, I was saying, "Oh, yes, at UC Davis, too, we talk endlessly day and night about how great interdisciplinary activity is, and how we should promote it and do it and so forth." There's just zero support. Not zero support, but it's not supported. It's not rewarded, it's not really encouraged adequately to make it happen very much. Every time I tried to do it, it was like starting from scratch and trying to build a building with just mud and straw that hadn't even been mixed together. [laughter]

When I brought in Joan Erikson, we were trying to get the people who were interested in intelligence together with the people who were interested in writing, together with the people who were interested in studying creativity, together with the people who were psychiatrists and psychologists, together with the gerontologists and the designers and the artists, and with women's studies. Eventually, I managed to do this. I noticed you put Haku Shah on the list of our potential subjects. Haku Shah is again, the same kind of broad individual. I brought together I don't know how many different departments to support his visit, by sort of cajoling and teasing and poking, getting a little money here, a little money there.

Whereas you'd expect, given all the talk about how we love interdisciplinary activity, you'd expect somebody to leap and say, "Here, now what can we do to help? How can we expand on what you're doing here?" Oh, no. It's just like pulling teeth. You have to have a bake sale, you scrape it together, you have to talk everybody into it. That's why it's so incredibly hard to do interdisciplinary events or activities.

Nathan: Is it your thought that this may develop in the future as others come to see—

Laky: The art-math?

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: It has enormous potential, and I think the fact that there are a number of people now who are scientists, mathematicians, who are saying, "We don't care if people are critical of this or think it's not serious enough, we know it's important. We know its potential. We're going to do it anyway." I've found that whenever I mention the conference to lay people, they are absolutely fascinated and want to know about it, want to attend a conference like this. There is I think a lot of interest. Plus, I think we need a new way to teach math, and it might come out of this. It might be easier to learn math if it is presented through art.

What I also realized was that if I had had a different kind of math teacher here and there in grade school and high school, with my great affinity for geometry and my love of it, and my ability to handle all this stuff so easily, I probably could have done better in math overall. I might have today been more conversant and use it more. I might have been truly a math person. Well, maybe that would have deterred me from art-making, so who knows if it would have been a good thing or a bad thing, but I am intrigued by the question.

When it got away from geometry into algebra, nobody could help me make the link, so I lost interest. Even though I could imagine that calculus would be interesting, once we moved away from geometry, I dropped out. I think of all the Hungarian mathematicians, there's probably something in the genes here, [laughter] but I didn't get the whole range of genetic material connected to math.

Nathan: It's interesting to hear you describing how these things are not antithetical but actually work together.

Laky: And I love that. Coming back to my earlier statement about the breadth of all the material that we're talking about here, I am aware that I have a broad embrace. I really like it when I can see a connection from my field to some other field. That was why the anthropology connection early on was such an important one for me, and why traveling and experiences in other countries I can relate to my work and my interests and my ideas, is so important to me, why the architecture connection is so important, the engineering connection. I love it when I look out in the world and see nothing but relationships to textiles. [laughter] You have people in a line waiting for a movie, and it's a textile image to me, a linear, meandering, flexible arrangement: a strand of beads.

[added during editing: My definition of textiles is very broad. I prefer using the word textiles rather than fiber art because fiber is too specific. No one is quite sure what textile means, so there is lots of room and flexibility. Our skin is a textile, a twisted wisteria vine is a textile. I also include scaffolding, fences, trellises, and tents. A sheet of plastic, of course, is a textile, as is a sheet of metal. My definition has also easily included wire, fishing line, and plastic tubing. Some find my wide embrace very uncomfortable, but it is what is so attractive to me about the subject. Textiles have pervaded human existence and through them humans have been extremely inventive.]

I think basically I must be—deep down, interdisciplinary in my whole attitude, which is maybe why my work took the turns and directions it did. I didn't so much stay with techniques or traditional ways of doing textiles, but felt free. If I could recognize my work in architecture, I felt free to move there with my thinking and my constructions. If I could see a connection in furniture to the way I was working, I was free to borrow and use it.

So I don't think I ever felt as if there was a right way to do things, or even a traditional way to do things, that I must follow. This probably goes back to an influence from Ed Rossbach, my professor at UC Berkeley, though, because I think his attitude was always so open. He had an openness to ideas that I thought was really way beyond the norm. If something would come along that was interesting, he could easily open to it and start to explore it. That probably laid the way for me to feel that I could work any way I wanted, that I had tremendous freedom.

Now, one of the interesting things that came out of the connection to math was that I somehow see math as wanting to absolutely control information, to get it so precise, to find out the answer, to work the theorem, get the answer, solve it finally. That is its whole purpose. And then I thought, "Gee, for me, it's to get to the point where you can't solve it. Basically, you're always moving toward the open end." I feel that what really interests me most is when I don't know how to do something, or I don't know what it is exactly, but it's intriguing and I want to explore it. To break the rules, or to disrupt the

theorem, or to—[laughter] to sort of shake it and see what other things you might think of appeals to me. They're very different ways of thinking.

But I'm not sure I'm correct about this. I'm not sure I'm correct. It could be that mathematicians really want a question at the end of every activity. If they want a question, if they want the next unexplored problem, then we're actually working in the same way, probably.

Nathan: Interesting connections.

Laky: It was fascinating to me just to be thinking in this arena. Just interesting to wander off into somebody else's garden.

High School and After. Interests, Activities, Travel

Nathan: When you were in high school and getting ready to graduate, were you thinking along these lines yet, at that time?

Laky: Not thinking. And in fact, when I look back, I'm just astounded at how, as a young person, I'm not sure I was thinking at all. Not until I was well into my thirties. [laughs] I must have just been responding and reacting and kind of moving around the world. I don't know [laughing].

I was doing, I was painting and drawing, and I know in high school I was very active. I did all the political posters for everyone running for office. In middle school I was on the newspaper—newspaper, Harriet—I was the editor of *The Mad Mole*. [laughter] [added during editing: In high school I wrote a column for the *Monterey Peninsula Herald* titled "High School Life." I was the commissioner for publicity at Carmel High School, also president of the Rally Club and member of the Leaders Club, Honor Society, Girls Athletic Association, and vice president of Girls League as well as a cheerleader as a junior and prom queen as a senior.] I ran across a copy the other day.

Nathan: M-o-l-e?

Laky: M-o-l-e. You know, the underground animal. But I used to be very involved in decorating for all the events, and I also loved sports. But I didn't really head into anything I would call sculpture or sculptural work. The further along I got, and I also worked for my parents in the gallery, I kept thinking of myself as an art professional, let's say, or something like that, where I would be an art historian or run a gallery or work in a museum. So that was the direction I headed.

Immediately after high school, I went to the Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada, and I worked in the costume department for the theater and the opera. That was great fun. I took classes also and I had a great time, but my job was working in the costume department, with a really brilliant costume designer. He would get strips of metallic material with holes in it and put it around a bodice, and from the audience, it looked like

the most elaborate gold embroidery. [laughter] The master of illusion this guy was. It was really great.

Nathan: Did you help to design?

Laky: No. I was very young and I was very low on the ladder, so I sewed on buttons and things like that. But what I do remember, which astounds me even today when I think about it, is one of the things for which I was gently reprimanded was that I sewed on buttons with different colors of thread. Same garment, but different colors of thread. Now, I don't know why I did this. [laughs] All the buttons were blue, and the dress was green or whatever it was, and I sewed it on with yellow thread and red thread and black thread and green thread. And I don't know quite why that happened, but I think I have a bit of that tendency yet in me. But otherwise, I think I did a good job, and I learned a lot. It was very interesting.

Nathan: What made you think of going to Canada?

Laky: The opportunity was there. My parents knew Laszlo Funtek, who was a set designer in the fine arts school in Banff, Alberta. Well, this might be a moment to talk a little bit more about education.

Nathan: Good.

Laky: But again, stop me if I've said this, because I sometimes can't quite remember what we've covered.

My junior and senior year in high school, as happens now with all high school students in the U.S., and maybe everywhere, there was a lot of talk about, "Okay, where are you going to go to school, and what are you going to study?" I couldn't answer the questions.

Nathan: Do you mean college?

Laky: Yes. I knew I loved art and I was interested in it, but I didn't know exactly whether I just wanted to say I was going to study art history, or—I didn't know. So I rebelled. I decided that if I couldn't answer the question, and if I didn't know what schools and what subjects, that I shouldn't go. That I should educate myself maybe.

Nathan: Ah. That explains a little bit about Paris, but do go on.

Laky: Yes. So I have a stubborn streak here and there. I think I've done some good work on it over the years, but then, I just put my heels in the dirt and said, "I'm not going to be railroaded into going to college if I don't know why I want to go and where I want to go. I'm going to do this myself." So for four and a half years, I did other things.

Nathan: Is this after high school?

Laky: After high school. So the Banff School of Fine Arts was immediately after high school. I was there for six months. It was a wonderful experience: another country, other people, an art school. So it was great.

Then another piece of it was to go to France for a year. That again was because my parents knew an art dealer with an extended family. They were willing to watch over me. So my thought was, “Well, I will go study French and art.”

Nathan: Did you have any French at all?

Laky: I had studied a lot of French in high school and loved it, and wanted to go do more with that. I’ve always loved languages. If I had nothing else in my life, I think I’d learn one language after another and just spend my time learning languages.

Ten Months in Paris, Emile Lahner, and Art Education ##

Nathan: Are we ready to talk about this almost runaway year to Paris in the mid-sixties?

Laky: It was a very important trip for me. It was my first trip where I was truly feeling like—oh, like maybe I was almost an adult. I was nineteen and twenty for that period of time, because my birthday is in February, so I went as a nineteen-year-old and then became a twenty-year-old while I was there. I was still thinking at that point that I would be studying art history, that somehow the gallery business and studying art history, studying art, all of that seemed just the thing to do.

My parents were showing the work of a wonderful older man. His name was Emile Lahner. He actually was born in Hungary and so he and my father of course hit it off. They could speak Hungarian and became very fond of each other. It’s understandable what a good match that was. My mother also was fluent in Hungarian. He had arrived in Paris at, I think, about the age of twenty, as a very young man, so he really was French in his lifestyle, but still spoke Hungarian well. By the time I arrived in Paris, he must have been in his sixties.

He was married to Jeanne, a very sweet woman. They often quarreled. I know it must have been serious to them, but since it was all in French and since it was all sort of heightened theater in some way, they were both fairly dramatic when they quarreled, it was rather amusing to me. It never got nasty, but I think sometimes he hurt her feelings. It seemed to be part of the French ambiance to me. [laughter] I think sometimes she would get mad at him because he had his eye on other women. I don’t think he ever acted upon it, but you know, it’s the typical French argument. [laughs] But he was a wonderful man, a wonderful painter.

He decided to take hold of my art education. I had a standing invitation to lunch every Sunday.

Now, lunch at the Lahner residence on Sunday was this: I would arrive a little bit before twelve and we would begin drinking. [laughs] We would have a scotch. At the time he loved Vat 69. Slowly the lunch would be prepared. Jeanne was a wonderful cook.

It was a small apartment which was also a studio. It had a bedroom, a kitchen, and then a large open area that was really the studio. Also then upstairs there was another room for storing paintings and things, but the studio was full of paintings.

The studio was also full of interesting objects. Lahner—Mimile, Mimile is what everyone near to him called him. A good friend of his was Comte Guy Bragelogne, a French count. They were good friends. He was a bit of a patron of Emile's, and Emile went to the auction houses and purchased art for this man. Mimile was well versed in ancient art, you know, little figures from Cyprus and all sorts of things, so he had been building a collection for the count for many years. In the meantime, every now and then he would buy a little something for himself. So this was the kind of art historical context I was living in.

Braque was a very close friend of Emile's. There would be stories that he would tell here and there, all in French, mind you, about Braque and other artists of the time. So as the year went on, my French got better and better. I could enjoy these stories more and more, but even in the beginning I understood quite a bit, and so it was very, very interesting for me.

So on Sunday Jeanne would be cooking lunch. Eventually we would eat, we would have several glasses of wine with lunch. We would have a wonderful dessert, and we would have some sort of little after dinner something—Calvados. Actually, that was the first time I ever tasted Calvados. Later, traveling in the countryside in France, I saw the bootleg Calvados-makers with their coils to distill the alcohol [laughs] in a kind of gypsy-like cart at the side of the road. So I was being introduced to all sorts of things. By the end of the afternoon, we'd had a wonderful conversation. But I was really quite snookered by then. I barely managed to wobble down to the Metro to get to my train. I was living just outside the central city area, so I would go on the Metro to the end of one line and then I would get on a train for a few minutes and then I'd be home. I lived in a building next door to the family, and the art dealer whom my parents knew. I lived in an old woman's house. Her family had grown up and moved out and she had lots of room and so I had a room of my own there, which was kind of nice, my own little place. But I took meals with the family, the Dieulangards.

Get on the Metro and get on the train and somehow not fall asleep and miss my stop, and get off and stagger three or four blocks home, and that was it for Sunday. [laughter] But part of Sunday was also looking through the newspaper. Emile would go through it with me, all the art exhibits in Paris, and circle all the ones I needed to see. Then also we would meet during the week. He would walk around with me to the galleries.

Now the sweet part was that occasionally we would get to a gallery and he would say, "Now you go in." And he'd say, "I'll just wait right out here." He would not grace the gallery with his presence, but he wanted me to go in and see certain things, for example Fauve painting, and then we would discuss it afterwards. He had certain quarrels with a gallery, or if he didn't think the work was quite up to the level it should be, he would wait outside. Other galleries he would go into with me and introduce me and talk with the gallery owner. So that was really the major force behind my art education, this curmudgeonly man. He had lots of humor, but what a character, sometimes difficult character but very colorful. He so concerned himself about my education. He decided

that I needed to know the right things and that I needed to see a lot of art. He just took me under his wing, which was great, which was really wonderful.

Nathan: You were willing to do it this way?

Laky: Yes. It was great. It was experiential. It was actual. Here he was, a painter, walking around with me. I had done quite a bit of painting myself, as a young person, I mean, as serious as a high school kid can be, so I knew quite a bit already. At the same time I was taking classes at the Sorbonne and also art history classes at Alliance Française where I was studying French. I had a kind of full immersion program going on with all of these pieces to it.

I loved going in the museums and the galleries. I just loved it. In fact, here in San Francisco now, we have the John Berggruen Gallery which is an important gallery and a very active gallery. One of the galleries I visited many, many times was the Berggruen Gallery in Paris. The Berggruen Gallery was an important Paris gallery. In Berlin there's a whole Berggruen Museum. It's the Berggruen family collection visited by most tourists. Galleries also have, you know, a life that continues; it wasn't just the sixties in Paris, it's on a continuum, let's say. Now here, today, is the offspring of a gallery I visited often in Paris.

Nathan: So therefore you were not just looking at French art?

Laky: No, not only, although that was the main focus. I particularly liked looking at everything. I never knew where I would find something of interest. For example, I went once to one of the museums and I can't remember which one it was, but it's one of the bigger museums—Le Grand Palais or something like that. There was a special exhibition of Russian Impressionists.

Nathan: Wow.

Laky: Fascinating. I'd never seen paintings like these. They were related to what was going on in France at the time, but they were also quite different. It was—yes, let's say the Impressionist period, but some of it wasn't what we think of today as Impressionist painting.

One of the things I remember about that exhibition is that all the paintings were big. They were massive for some reason. That's actually a conception I have about Russia, having visited Russia a few years ago, that it is a big country with big people and lots of space and big buildings, so now in hindsight, I'm not at all surprised that they painted these massively big paintings. They were huge, whereas most of the paintings we see from the French Impressionists, except for maybe Monet's water lily ponds, are not necessarily huge canvasses.

These were huge canvasses, sort of like what happened later in the sixties and seventies in American painting. Paintings got very, very big. Well, these were big Russian paintings, very colorful and quite beautiful. Somehow they have stuck in my mind. I can visualize a number of them, just even describing them now. Such experiences really were a part of my overall education, opening my eyes.

The Lahners had some dear friends. The man was a shoe salesman. This couple took me out into the countryside into Brittany. I went on shoe rounds with this man and his wife. Again, one of the major events of the day (after going to a couple of little towns and a couple of shoe vendors) was lunch. [laughter] Wonderful food. I remember visiting, I think it was where they make Roquefort cheese. I had the opportunity to see a bit of the country, and the meals were wonderful.

During that trip, I have a memory of visiting a weaving studio somewhere, and I bought the first handwoven thing I ever owned. It was a shirt, a blue handwoven shirt with a design around the bottom and around the sleeves. I also remember that it made quite an impression on me, the looms and the weaving studio in the old chateau.

But that was way before I had developed in any interest in textiles. It wasn't until a few years after that that I went to UC Berkeley and began to get interested in that field. But I do remember that visit, and I remember being so interested in the looms.

I also visited the Gobelin studios and I looked at a lot of tapestries in the old chateaux and in the museums. I remember the Unicorn Tapestries and others, so I must have started becoming interested in those kinds of objects and works of art, as well. They were all over the place, extraordinary old pieces that were still in great condition and very elaborate, and so I'm sure that they caught my eye and began being a presence in my head, as well as the painting and sculpture.

I loved painting, but I'm not as fond of painting as I am of three-dimensional works: sculpture, things that have more texture or more substance. Objects, I love objects and furniture and things like that, so even though I was spending most of my time looking at paintings, I think that actually even at such an early stage, I was somehow very interested in three-dimensional work.

Paris was a fascinating experience for me. For the first two weeks of getting bearings in Paris, before I moved into my little room next to the Dieulangard family's home, I stayed in a house, maybe a large apartment, I can't remember, of a woman who rented rooms out to young people. That was potentially going to be a place for me to live. It was a little more downtown Paris, which would have been nice, but I didn't like it that much. Talking to my parents' friends, this other possibility came about and provided me with a good living arrangement.

But one of the things I remember most about that first place that I lived was that the woman spent a lot of time talking about the war [World War II] and about the Germans and about how the French suffered. I'm now finding myself wondering if maybe she was Jewish. I don't know, but what was interesting, now we're talking about 1963, is that it wasn't so long after the war ended, and so it was still in many peoples' minds. It was an area of great pain. People lost relatives or property. It was a terrible time in Europe. And I do remember other people in Paris talking at length about the war as well.

I remember it coming up here and there and I remember that it was an eye-opener for me. Nobody I knew in the U.S. ever talked about the war. My parents did, but about our experiences in Hungary. Somehow in my mind France was not a part of my associations with the war as were Hungary and Poland and Germany. For some reason I was a little

surprised that it was such a strong memory for people in France. My recollection is that many people talked about the war and that they almost couldn't hold it back. They were compelled to talk about it, I think, because it had been such a difficult experience.

Nathan: And I wonder whether they felt that France had perhaps not been heroic in some sense.

Laky: Possibly.

Nathan: Which is very hard.

Laky: Yes, and so there would have been a lot to work out. Talking about it might have been a way, yes.

Nathan: They may have wanted to know what a young American thought?

Laky: Maybe. Yes, and especially because of America getting involved in the war and being so critical to its end. Yes, I was an American, even though they knew, most people, not everybody, there were a lot of people I met to whom I wouldn't say, "Oh, hello, I was born in Hungary," I would rather say, "Oh, yes, I'm American." I probably said that quite often, so it might have been a factor.

Nathan: Were there other students you came across during this time?

Laky: Yes, because Alliance Française was full of students, so I did meet people. And I had friends whom I saw now and then. It was a very lively experience for me. It also was lonely sometimes and it also was difficult sometimes, because there I was without my family and without my close friends and in a strange place, dealing with a strange language. Sometimes I was a little bit sad and lonely and wandering around by myself to my favorite museums and galleries.

It was a really wonderful experience, too. I think I did grow up a lot there. I saw so much. It was so different. It was foreign. It was new, and I was old enough to be in control of my own life. When I found things out, when I had experiences, they were mine, and I was the one who interpreted all this for myself.

I think when you're with your family as a child, you're always bringing home new information and trying it out. There I was in Paris for great portions of time by myself. I mean, Emile spent time with me, members of the family spent time with me and I had some friends, but there were great portions of time when I was off studying or I was off going to museums, I was just doing it on my own. I was my own counsel. It was sometimes difficult but a very good experience for me.

This time in Paris did do one of the things I think I wanted for myself, which was to grow up a little bit, to become an adult. It's a hard transition. I don't know if you remember it, but [laughter]—

Nathan: Yes, I do.

Laky: Somehow I was no longer a child, and yet, at nineteen, twenty, I was a child still. I think about some of my students at the university now, you know, who are twenty years old.

They're still a little naive and they're starting out and they're trying their ideas out and they're seeing what the world is about, and that's very much who I was then. I was a young person, trying to stand on my own two feet.

Nathan: Did you get to any musical events?

Laky: I did, the opera mainly. One of the things that I enjoyed most was French theater, Molière and others. I just loved it. I still like opera, but I don't go to the opera too much now. Then I used to go stand for an entire opera because I'd get the cheapest ticket. [laughs] I'd go and it was perfectly fine to stand throughout, and it was totally worth it.

I saw some wonderful plays. Another of my favorites was Ionesco, and a play I remember very clearly is *Empire Builders*. I do believe that's Ionesco. But I saw several of Ionesco's plays and they were terrific.

The other thing I did was I started reading all the existentialists.

Nathan: Ah.

Laky: So I was reading Camus and Sartre and I just felt as if I was living their lives a bit. I was reading these in French, which was really quite exciting to me. Of course there were moments when I didn't understand something I was reading, but there was always somebody around who could help me through a passage. I really felt as if I had submerged myself in that life in a way that made it a rich experience: the museums, the plays, reading in French. When I got fluent enough in French to read history books and art history books, I just loved it. I thought I was in heaven. I felt almost French, you know. [laughter]

Nathan: Yes. Well, at the end of this experience, did you feel ready for the university? How did you feel at the end?

Laky: I was happy to come home. I remember that. Sorry to leave France, so it was a dual feeling. I don't know that I had thoughts about whether I was ready for the university. I think probably I felt more like I was going to come back to my family's gallery and maybe have a more active role.

The truth was, I came back and I found Carmel very small. My father was not the easiest man to get along with so I almost felt like I had grown beyond my being the child in the family and in Carmel.

It wasn't immediately that I went to school because I came back in 1964 and I didn't start Berkeley until January of '67. But one of the things that started happening that was rather interesting, was that my parents started showing Chinese paintings.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: And that led me to live in San Francisco for a while, and also Los Angeles for a while. So it was a fairly interesting time for me, but I always came back to Carmel. And I think that after a few years I just realized that I needed more than my life in my parents' gallery and in Carmel. It was a realization eventually of what education would mean to

me. I couldn't do it by myself. I couldn't educate myself by myself to the extent that I now was hoping to be educated. [laughs] Well, I guess I needed a little help here. So that's when I decided to continue on to UC Berkeley.

Nathan: Very nice.

Experiencing French and World Politics ##

Nathan: Then let's see, I think we've done very well for this. Were you aware of political issues in France? Was your view that large of what was going on?

Laky: There were, of course, as there are today, those massive strikes where we all had to walk home. There were hundreds of thousands of Parisians walking home. [laughs] And walking to the grocery store and walking everywhere. It made for kind of wonderful camaraderie out of being on the street with everyone else. I was interested and curious: I actually remember more being impressed by being in France and studying French history and being aware of some of the political movements in the historical realm. That seems a little more part of my memory.

Then, of course, I was there in November 1963 when Kennedy was assassinated. So suddenly, I was a part of world politics in a way that I remember was very surprising to me. In fact, at first I didn't even realize what the impact of this was. Things were happening, and I was aware of that, but I was very, very engrossed in my classes and my friends and the French. It was difficult for me to grasp the full impact of my President's assassination.

But the other thing I was aware of is that there were Communists in France. I went skiing with the Young Communist Club and kept thinking to myself, "My father would just freak if he knew this." [laughter] He, of course, was very anti-Communist. It was very tangential, I should say.

Nathan: And then at the end of the year, had you decided that you would be there just for a year and then return?

Laky: That was the pre-arranged plan. I can't remember clearly, but it was as if the day came to go home, so I packed up and I went home.

When I came home I began to work for my parents again in the gallery in Carmel, perhaps because of my year away.

Father's Galleries, Chinese Paintings, Artists

Nathan: You were twenty?

Laky: I was twenty. I already began to be a little disgruntled with tiny Carmel, and going back to my parents' home, but my father, who was always launching new projects, became interested in showing Chinese paintings. It was really fascinating. We all became very intrigued by traditional Chinese paintings, traditional but also contemporary. Chinese painting seemed to be in transformation right at that moment.

He decided to open a gallery for Chinese painting in San Francisco at Ghirardelli Square, which he did, and which I managed. I was the first staff person there. I got an apartment in San Francisco, and I went back and forth between Carmel and San Francisco, but I was basically running the gallery there, which was very interesting. It allowed me to live in another city, a big cosmopolitan, urban center, so that calmed me down for a while. It was so interesting that I was happy. I was learning something new. There are wonderful vignettes, and I'm sure in everyone's life, people who come along, moments that are just right. I became so intrigued with Chinese painting, as was my father, and my mother, but I think mostly my father.

Nathan: They were the ones who purchased the paintings for sale?

Laky: My parents? Well, they actually worked on consignment with three artists who came over. They were mainland Chinese artists but they came via Taiwan, and somehow or other, we got to know them, and we started showing their work. Then we learned more about the subject, we learned about other Chinese artists, and older Chinese artists who were no longer alive. My father was becoming an expert. I was becoming an expert.

But what I wanted to mention was that in San Francisco, a wonderful man wandered into the gallery one day, Jung Ying Tsao. He later opened his own gallery in San Francisco; he is a Chinese art expert. For some reason, he decided to take upon himself educating me in Chinese art. He stopped by the gallery often and spent hours talking with me, and showing me, and bringing in books, and educating me about art of the last couple of centuries as well as current Chinese art. It was an education in a condensed form that I would have taken years to get otherwise. It was fantastic.

Also along the way, I think possibly through Jung Ying Tsao somehow, we met Chang Dai Chien, or now it's spelled Zhang Da Quen. He is today no longer living, but probably is recognized as the most important Chinese painter for moving traditional Chinese painting into contemporary Chinese painting, often abstract contemporary. We got to know him; my father had a couple of exhibitions of his work. This was a tangent of my education that was absolutely fascinating.

We opened a gallery in Los Angeles somewhat later. I moved to Los Angeles for a few months to begin that gallery. So you can see that my life was full and rich, even though it also included lots of fighting with my dear papa. He was difficult, to say the least. There was a lot of struggling between us.

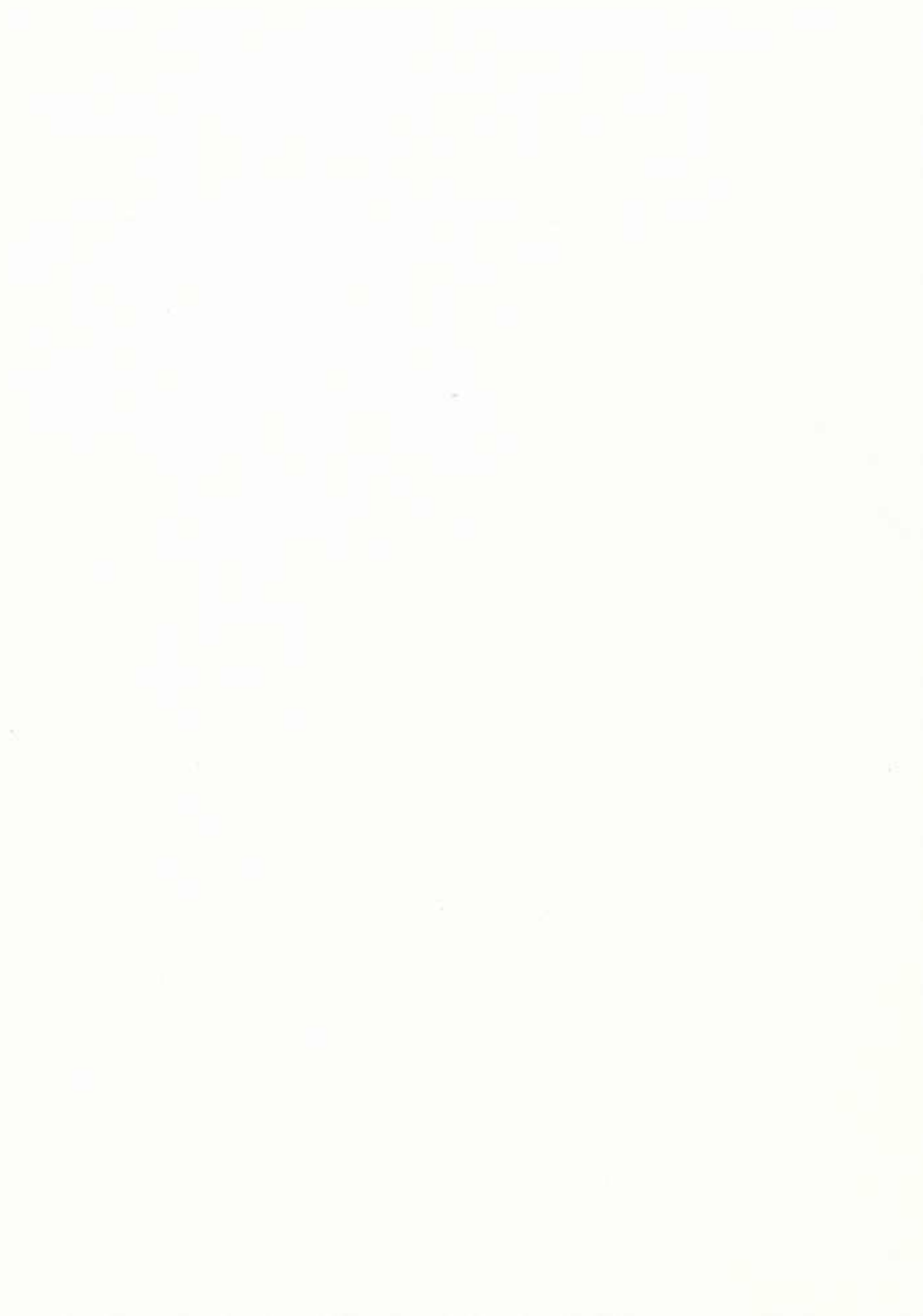
Nathan: Did it help you clarify what was important to you, that kind of back and forth?

Laky: Struggle? Probably, because I think one of the problems was that I didn't want to back down much or easily. I was trying to be strong enough to fight back, and yet he had very clear ideas about ways I should be living my life. It was a clash of wills, and he was a very strong and domineering man. It must have been, what is it called, tested by fire? It

must have had something to do with my strength later on, though at the time, it often felt devastating.

I knew somewhere deep down in his meanspirited attacks, he loved me, but it did often have the impact of undermining my confidence. I think one of the reasons I fought so hard was that I had to become strong. I had to fight back, but it wasn't pleasant. I remember it as really very difficult.

I've thought often about how independent I turned out to be. It must have also encouraged me in some way. I don't know. I think it's a little complicated. But I think also, my mother counterbalanced the troubles with my father to a great extent. I think she believed in me, she thought I could do anything, she thought I was intelligent, she thought I was creative. That was her theme for me in a very unwavering manner, whereas my father often was very, very critical about how hard I worked or how well I did something, and he always found something wrong with what I did. I sometimes wonder, what if he had been more positive and more encouraging? I think it would have been good. I think it's possibly a little harder for fathers and daughters to get along. I think he wanted me to be a strong, independent person, but he also wanted to control me, and that's a difficult mix. [laughter]



IV DECISION: EXTENDING EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Laky: I did eventually decide that I should go to school, that I was doing pretty well educating myself, but that it was harder than I had thought. I could see that I was a little stuck. I didn't imagine my life in Carmel forever, and I was probably, even at that age, pretty ambitious in some way. I didn't have any specific ambitions, but I must have been a generalized ambitious person.

So I did apply to go to UC Berkeley. Both of my brothers had gone there, and I'm sure that that's the reason I applied to go to Berkeley. I also knew somebody else on the faculty, Ted Sarbin. [added during editing: Before my brothers were in school there, Ted and his wife Genevieve had invited me to spend a few days with them in Berkeley—an early version of “take your (borrowed) daughter to work day.”] There were connections to Berkeley. I had visited the campus, and so it's not surprising that I would apply there.

I was accepted, but I didn't attend right away. I asked for deferred admission, which was granted. I think I began six months or a year later. I actually began my studies in January, 1967. I reactivated my application. Somehow, the university lost my application for a while, or something happened. They sent me a little notice saying, “Your application arrived late,” and I knew it had been sent early enough to reach them. I remember by then, I was so determined that this decision was now correct, to go to school, to go to college, that I called them up.

Nathan: This was the Department of Design?

Laky: No, this was the Admissions Office, because at that point I didn't know what I was going to study, but I knew that I needed to go to the university and extend my education. I needed help. I was doing pretty well educating myself, but I wasn't really getting where I wanted to get with that, and I needed help. I needed to go to school.

So I called them up and I said, “This is impossible.” Sort of like, “I'm ready go to now. You've got to accept me now.” Somehow, I must have reached a sympathetic ear, because Admissions did waive the fact that somehow my application seemed to be late, and they did believe me that I mailed it early. So it all went through, and I started in

January of '67. I was twenty-three years old. I often joke that I was the oldest freshman that year. I probably wasn't, but I often felt like the oldest freshman in my classes, but I think I was the most enthusiastic freshman. Many other people had been in school continuously since five or six years of age, and this was just another class for them. To me it was a wonderful new experience, every professor was brilliant, and every class was fascinating. After a couple of years, I became more critical, but it was wonderful to be a student again and to be in these situations that were so exhilarating and full of new information, new things to think about.

Mixing Academic Courses and Art Classes, Finding a Broader Approach in the Design Department

Laky: When I got to the university I felt ill at ease. Not that I was a twenty-three-year-old freshman, that didn't bother me so much, but I had been out of school for a while and thought that maybe I wasn't up to the rigor required of me in the classes. I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to handle the academic pressure, since I'd not been in a school situation for four and a half years. So I constantly took studio art classes side by side with my academic courses. That's probably why I ended up going in a creative direction.

I started out in art history, because that seemed like the obvious thing. That's what I had been doing up until then in my parents' gallery and during my studies in France. But, and this may sound a bit harsh, please, all my dear friends, art historians and whose work I respect and love, forgive me for this: it felt like studying art in a closet. It was so theoretical and so dry suddenly. I'd been working in a gallery, I handled paintings, I talked about them. I was active in the art world and suddenly here I was; it was dry as a bone, reading books, listening to long slide lectures in the dark which were sometimes fascinating and sometimes, ouch, boring. [laughs] Comparatively, let's say.

So somehow, all of a sudden, I thought, "Well, this is not for me. This is not what I thought it would be. I thought it would be so much more exciting and active. It wasn't." Now, that may be because I wasn't meant to be a scholar and an academic person, so this form of dealing with information in the world was not for me.

[added during editing: Then I thought—and this, again, probably has to do with my father—"I have to sort through this father-daughter thing." [laughs] I thought, "Well, I think philosophy would be good for me." And I took a philosophy class, I can no longer remember the professor, but it was absolutely wonderful. It was delightful. It was so exciting to just allow my mind to work. It was creative thinking. It was exhilarating, and I think I took one more philosophy class, but somehow could see that that wouldn't be my direction ultimately either.]

I then switched to anthropology, which I liked very, very much, cultural anthropology. I began seeing myself moving in that direction. I was taking the studio art classes all along, and then I took, I think the first design class I took was a weaving class with Ed Rossbach, just as I was studying these cultural manifestations of early cultures. It just clicked for me. It just made so much sense. It seemed that all my interests could come

together. So as I was introduced to the design department, I became more and more enthusiastic about what it was and what it meant, and what role design played in human activity. It was not as narrow as fine arts. It was interesting, and this seemed important to me at that point in my life.

Nathan: Do you remember discussing with Ed Rossbach what it was you wanted to do? He had suggested that you were impatient with some of the traditional steps, and you decided that you needed to do tapestry. Do you have any recollection of that?

Laky: Well, I do recollect that with almost every project I undertook, I wanted some three-dimensionality. I did work very early on with tapestry, because it was so fluid, but I remember leaving openings in the weaving and inserting sticks and doing all sorts of things so that it would be three-dimensional when it came off the loom.

Then soon after, the next difficult project was wire in the loom, threading wire into the loom. And, oh, one unsuccessful project after another. I mean, they were kind of interesting, but the thing was, what I was trying to do was physically very difficult. The loom was not made to do these kinds of things.

Direct-Hand Methods, Three Dimensions, and the Federal Art-in-Architecture Program

Laky: I did do some work, I think it was after the wire work, in which I wove tubes, and I stuffed the tubes and made three-dimensional forms that way. That started to be more satisfying. In fact, ten years later, I did a piece for the Federal Art-in-Architecture Program, a very big piece, which is permanently installed in Richmond, California, and it was composed entirely of stuffed loom-woven tubes plaited into dimensional forms.

I stopped doing loom weaving after that. It was as if finally, I made this thing do what I had wanted; I finally got a very three-dimensional piece that worked. It was an intriguing, wonderful project to do. I loved it. But it is interesting to think back now. I'll have to think about it a little more carefully, but that was the end of loom weaving for me. It was as if I finally figured it out, and from then on, I was working with direct-hand methods, constructing without the loom.

Nathan: This piece was a great big thing?

Laky: It's a huge piece; it's twenty-five feet long.

Nathan: It must have weighed an awful lot.

Laky: Well, I did it in sections, so I solved the weight problem, because that was an issue. Each section was around five or six feet high and five feet wide, something like that. And then they all went together on the wall next to each other. Each section was about a foot to two feet deep, so it had a very sculptural surface.

It wasn't free-standing sculpture. That's why the basketry was so intriguing as it came into my life: it stood free by itself. It defies gravity. Baskets shoot up in the air without wires and hangers and props and stuffing and they just do this amazing thing: they stand up.

Nathan: So dramatic.

Laky: Well, to me, when I saw them and when I did them myself, it was dramatic. Sometimes I felt like, "Ah. I see. Now I see how I can do this." [laughter] And it was very exciting to so easily make three-dimensional pieces. I don't know if anyone else shared that excitement, but for me, it was like breakthroughs in thinking. That big piece for the federal government, I felt like I finally resolved something. I loved loom weaving, but I also, maybe even early on, understood it wasn't for me. We finally agreed, the loom and I, that we would do this last piece and it would work.

Nathan: How does one get a commission like this?

Laky: Well, that was interesting. Brenda Richardson, who was a curator at the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley, recommended me to the architect. I think the architect went to her and said, "Who do you know?" I'm actually surprised she recommended me. She knew me somewhat, but I'm surprised she knew enough about my work at that time to recommend me.

I had already begun Fiberworks. It had been going for about a year, around a year, when she told the architect about me. So the architect and I met. It was early on in the Federal Art-in-Architecture Program in which a small percentage of the cost of the building was being allocated to art. The architect might not have known quite what the artist selection procedure would be like, so he was doing this directly. He called me.

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Laky: Now that I look back, it's totally peculiar that the architect would call me directly and walk me through the building before I was selected.

Subsequently, a National Endowment for the Arts panel was put together, and I was one of the artists considered. The NEA organized panels that were working with the General Services Administration; the panels then recommended an artist for each commission. Or maybe they recommended a couple.

Nathan: This just didn't sound sufficiently bureaucratic.

Laky: It wasn't sufficiently bureaucratic in the beginning. But by the time I was selected, the bureaucracy was in place. [laughter]

Nathan: Now, let's see. We may want to do a little more with the university. Were there people on the faculty besides Ed Rossbach who were of particular interest to you?

Laky: Yes, yes, and that would be good to talk about.

But let's also make ourselves a note that there are interesting things to discuss about the federal commission, just in terms of what that process was like, and one of the things that I'll just mention and we can go into it later—

Nathan: Fine.

Laky: Or should we do this now?

Nathan: We could, as long as we're doing it, sure.

Laky: Oh, okay. Maybe just a little bit more.

Three artists were selected to do textile pieces for this building. It is the Social Security Administration building in Richmond, California. Lia Cook was one of them, and then there was another artist who I didn't know. These were some of the earliest textile pieces that the federal government had commissioned, which I thought was interesting, just in terms of timing. This was 1976-'77.

Government Contracts, Legal Work, and Looking Ahead to Fiberworks and BALA

Laky: The process was fascinating because I had just gotten to know Hamish Sandison (an Englishman studying law at UC Berkeley) and Bay Area Lawyers for the Arts [BALA]. He and Jerry Carlin were the driving force getting BALA going. Hamish and I had just begun developing workshops in legal and business matters for artists.

Nathan: Now, this is Fiberworks?

Laky: At Fiberworks, yes.

Nathan: Were these workshops, would you call them, or classes, or—?

Laky: Some were workshops and some were classes. Some were a little bit longer, with multiple sessions, but some were like a weekend workshop for artists on how to set up their businesses, and legal and tax issues and things like that. There were no classes like this for artists in northern California. There were no books. There was nothing. Artists' legal rights, how to set up a contract, and many, many other questions.

I was, of course, excited, even ecstatic, about the idea that we could set these classes up, and here was an organization for me to work with in San Francisco, Bay Area Lawyers for the Arts. It was one of those wonderful little things that comes along, and you know it fits, and you know it's information artists need, and it was very successful. That was the beginning. BALA then did classes and workshops other places and it expanded from there.

I invited Hamish Sandison to the meeting with the General Services Administration man to sit in on my discussions about the contract that they presented me for doing this

commissioned work. Well, first of all, the GSA guy was, I think, shocked that I would bring a lawyer. [laughs] Even if he was brand-fresh out of law school and still had a pink glow. But Hamish is a very, very bright individual and very interested in the arts. I wanted him to be able to experience this, and then maybe he could also coach me a little bit if I had to watch out for this or that. It was very interesting. I could tell that the representative of the government was very taken aback.

Now, I don't see why he should have been. They should even encourage artists to come in with somebody who knows the legal aspects of these contracts, because the contracts are for shipbuilders and other government contractors of that scale. The feds used the same contracts, only slightly altering them for the art part. They were inches thick and had all sorts of clauses and subclauses—how to treat your employees and this and that, and dispute clauses.

Well, I was in charge and responsible for installation and everything else. But the only thing that I was interested in adding to the contract was that they clean the piece every now and then, and that they come back to me to repair it if anything needed repairing. But basically, the government's attitude was that not one iota of this contract would be changed in any way. There's nothing to discuss: take it or leave it. Just take it or leave it. It was really fascinating. The amount was acceptable to me, so that wasn't the problem. And basically everything was acceptable to me. I wasn't worried about it, and it didn't scare me. I somehow felt I could do this, even though I had never done anything quite like this before. But it was just a funny and fun experience. [added during editing: The federal negotiator would not change any part of the contract. Recently they had the piece cleaned for the first time in twenty years and paid someone a great deal to do it.]

Nathan: And subsequently, did the government contracts fit better for artists, were you aware?

Laky: I think they worked on them later. I think they made them a little bit better. But even at that time they apologized for not having the appropriate kind of contract. But they took what they had and worked it over a little bit to fit this new circumstance. It actually turned out okay, and the piece went well, and we installed it and it is still there.

Nathan: Great. And about how long did it take you from the time you began to the time it was ready for hanging?

Laky: I'm not sure what the answer to that is (I no longer remember), but it was a number of months. Maybe even six or seven months.

Nathan: Did you have a deadline?

Laky: I did have a deadline. The building was going to be ready at a certain point, and there would be an opening. So we established a date, and then also there was a review midway somewhere. I think they paid in three portions. I had at one point I think five or six people weaving for me. Leo Hobaica did a lot of the finish work on knotting ends, trimming and so forth. He helped me with the final steps of it, and it sort of gave us a bond of friendship. The weavers, unfortunately I've lost touch with all except two or three of them now. The others have moved away and established families and professions and artwork of their own, so I'm not in touch with them all. Occasionally I

hear from somebody, but Leo Hobaica lives in San Francisco. I know about him and his work.

Nathan: And did you run this through Fiberworks, or was this just directly you?

Laky: It was my work directly.

Meanwhile, it was a crazy time to have taken on a project of that magnitude, because I was the chief administrator at Fiberworks, and I had never done anything like that in my life, and I was working day and night to keep it running smoothly. So this art commission, I don't know how I managed it. It happened in the middle of the night and in the morning and on the weekends, and after dinner, and I don't know when. [laughter] But somehow, I managed to do this. So it was a wild time.

Actually, I think we also managed to hire our new director for Fiberworks, Maria Vela, around that time. I can't remember exactly when that was, but that must have eased the pressure on me somewhat.

Nathan: Well, good. We will pick up more on Fiberworks later. I'm glad you got this in. I think this is a very, very important part of it.

Openness, and Significant UC Faculty Members

Laky: Then we wanted to talk a little bit more about UC Berkeley and other people I worked with there.

Nathan: Right. And then there are a few other things, the other things in addition to the posters and work that you did there, sort of the rest of your campus life, if you want to talk about the little lunch place and the other things.

But I don't want to forget to ask you about faculty members who may have been of interest to you.

Laky: Well, one of the faculty members I'd like to mention because I think her presence was significant, although I hardly worked with her, Mary Dumas. Mary Dumas, I remember the day so distinctly, that I walked up to the printing room door and there was a little notice saying that she'd died. It was so shocking, because I think that might have even been during the first and only class I took with her.

What was so intriguing about her and why I remember her so vividly was that I remember she was sitting there sort of reigning over the class, but in a very sweet and charming way, and basically, the message was, "Here are the tables, these are screens, do what you will." It was just like, "Go out and make some screens and then print." And yet, she was there. There was a lot of information. But somehow, my recollection was, "Go forth, my children, and do this thing." [laughter]

It was such a statement of confidence, and such a statement of, “Go out and explore,” but she was there. She was sitting there, and she was always there. Her approach to her own art work was maybe as exploratory and fresh as what we were going to be doing in class with her. The class was very experimental, and her approach was not dogmatic in the least.

Nathan: Was it scary?

Laky: No. That was the interesting thing. It wasn't scary. It was as if there was enough information to get started and to do everything you were going to be doing, but that it was wide open. It was a fascinating combination. I wish I could have gotten to know her better, because I would have loved to soak in what she was like as a teacher. I only experienced this openness and found it so exciting, but I can't say I really understand how she managed to do this as a teacher, how she conveyed information and how she got us so excited, and why it felt so open. But it did. It was very interesting.

I did quite a bit of printing, and I liked what I did. I remember at one point batik on my silkscreen, directly on the screen, and then I printed with that. All I remember was that she thought this was great. I've never heard of one attempting that before or since. It wasn't a great idea. The wax kind of came off mid-print. But, some of what happened with those prints was really beautiful and intriguing. But that's how open her class was. [laughter]

I don't have much to say about her. I don't have much experience with her, but somehow, she was a factor, and in all these years, I've not forgotten about that class and her attitude nor her presence.

I didn't go on with printing because it wasn't my kind of thing, although I did like it a lot and I taught it for a bit when I got to UC Davis.

Another person who was a big influence on me was Pete Voulkos, though I never took a class with him. I did ask him to be on my graduate committee.

Nathan: Really?

Laky: I think he was the most intensely three-dimensional person for me during my studies at UC Berkeley, much more so than Ed Rossbach. Ed did a lot of interesting things, but I think even way back then, I wanted a very strong sculptural approach. I was intrigued by Pete Voulkos's work, and always had my eye on him, even though I did not have a class with him. I wish I had taken a class with him in clay. It would have been very informative and interesting, I think.

But I remember hanging out in the clay area, and I got to know a number of the other people teaching in that medium and with his students. I did take a graduate seminar with Ron Nagle, who also is a sculptural ceramic person, though his work is mostly very small scale. He was also a wonderful person to work with. That was a really terrific seminar.

Another person who had just a brief time in my life but I remember distinctly is Donald Potts. [spells] I do not know where he is now or what he's doing, or whether he's doing

art, but he made very large, voluminous, wooden structures. Like a combination of boat hull and rib cage.

Nathan: Very open?

Laky: Something like that. And if you think about that sort of shape, there is a connection to some of the things that I like and am interested in now. He also built an absolutely extraordinary car (without a shell). It was an open work, basketry-like structure of struts and cables and exhaust pipes. It was just a beautiful piece of machinery. Everyone was very excited about it, and I remember it vividly. I think his work must have related to my interest in mechanical things and machinery, with the open work structure.

His class was a combination of three classes. His class was some sort of three-dimensional form design class. Another part was a group of engineering students, and the third part I believe was architecture students. I'm not quite sure if I remember correctly. Again, going back to my interest in interdisciplinary things, I loved this class. We built play structures, with one engineer, one design person, and one architect.

I remember ours was this thin trough that wound around and had water in it. Little ping-pong balls shot around with the water and down a waterfall, spinning around and going around in this narrow track. We had a paddle wheel or something like that. It was great. It was a wonderful class and a wonderful concept, to bring these three different groups of students together.

Don Potts at the time was there in class if you wanted to come in and talk. He would answer questions but if nobody had any questions he would just talk. So usually, there were a few of us who would sit around and listen. It was great, because it was like a seminar, and yet we had the projects we were working on, and we had three different points of view. A lot of the class was just spontaneous discussion with whoever came in, and whatever subject came up. It was like an early chat room. [laughter] The talk might be about one of the projects or how to make something, or it might be about life and how to live it. It was great to have this freewheeling conversation in that environment with students from different subject areas.

Let me see, who else would I put on the list and what other experiences? Joanne Brandford. She was a visiting lecturer.

Nathan: Is Segal her middle name?

Laky: Yes. She died a couple of years ago, which is really too bad.

Nathan: That was when Lillian Elliott died?

Laky: And Lillian died. In fact, Lillian Elliott died first, and I think Joanne went to Lillian's funeral and I think had a heart attack. She had had a bad heart for quite some time.

Joanne Brandford was a truly brilliant teacher, and she, as Ed Rossbach, reinforced our interest in other cultures. Joanne Brandford taught the History of Textiles class, and just brought it to life. It was quite wonderful. She is also the artist who, years later, introduced me to Projects Environment in England. I will talk about England later.

I'd like to say something in general about the design department at the time. It was a very lively, extraordinarily creative environment. I don't even know all the components that made it so, but I remember that there were people coming from all over the country touring our department to try to figure out why it was so exciting and so good and so innovative. It seemed like students around me knew that it was far more exciting to be in design than in art at that particular time, that the inventiveness and the exploratory nature of the design program were at full flower. So it was a good time to be there. It was very inspiring and very interesting and a very good education.

University Turbulence and Students Questioning Relevance

Laky: Let's now juxtapose that with the times. The Free Speech Movement had occurred. We had demonstrations constantly about the Vietnam War. I remember, and this might be something to talk about at some point, the Cambodian crisis at that time. One of the outcomes of this turbulence for the university, as I think many people know, is that we all began questioning our education and what form it took. There was the issue of relevance—what was relevant education? With our feelings about the Vietnam War, some of the courses we were taking, or had to take, and some of the bureaucratic activity, just did not make sense in such a turbulent world. We started questioning everything.

You might remember at that time things like the soft classroom and all those experiments with education, and alternative education were at their height. So somehow, during some demonstration, the students had taken over two adjacent classrooms downstairs in Wurster Hall. They became impromptu seminar rooms where people from throughout the College of Environmental Design would get together and talk. Faculty members were involved with this too.

It was fantastic. It was as if doors had opened up, and people from various subject areas got together, and the conversation was acute. I don't know how to describe it. These were more intense and more focused than most conversations, because here we were in life-or-death times, and we were questioning everything around us. We were questioning the government, and society, and the way people were doing things, and what was right in the world, and how people should behave, and what is of value, and why art anyway? This kind of questioning was what had attracted me to philosophy, but we were now doing it in the context of my classes in environmental design.

Two Open Rooms and a Rogue Cafe

Laky: So it was a very intense and very exciting time. The students had taken control of those two rooms, and that's where we started the restaurant later. Because those rooms were open, anybody who wanted a seminar or a place to meet or a place to hold a class or whatever, would do it there. We sat on the floor, there weren't desks, there wasn't

traditional note-taking, there weren't traditional lectures, but this is where we all knew education was happening, in these two rooms, so that's where everyone wanted to be.

I remember I was also making a big free-hanging site-specific sculpture in the wide opening that divided these two rooms for a while. [laughs] Three or four friends and I started making sandwiches and bringing them in, and having a big coffee pot, because we so much needed to have a place where people could gather, and that's what these two rooms became.

Nathan: Did the administration not make any fuss about the use of the rooms?

Laky: The administration did not until they realized we were running a rogue cafe. [laughter] Then they stepped in and they said, "We can't have this, because the health department has to approve your kitchen, et cetera." But student power was at its height at that point, so my friends and I met with the administration several times, and it got down to negotiating, "We need food service here in this part of campus, in our building. We've started it, and we'll be happy to stop making sandwiches if you provide us with food." We will give up our café into your hands if...

Nathan: Which building was this?

Laky: This was in Wurster Hall. It is the present Ramona's Cafe. Hayden Valdez came up with that name. He named it; he was a design and architecture student. It was a multidisciplinary group. I remember Hayden was design and architecture. Barbara Thompson was photography. And I think another person was David Peterson. I'm not sure I have his name right. He was architecture. And I remember Topher Delaney from landscape architecture was somewhat involved also.

Now, it's fascinating to me, Harriet, talking with you, having talked a bit about interdisciplinary things and how important they are to me, how these events along the way brought people together from different areas.

Campus Experience and the Context of the Times

[Interview 3: August 28, 1998] ##

Nathan: [tests tape] You were saying that you would like to talk some more about the campus experiences and what you experienced as a student?

Laky: I would, because it was an important experience for me, but I also have a sense that it was a very unusual time. The implications of what was going on around me became a part of my later life. This is probably true of everyone who goes to college, but I believe there was a greater intensity at that time because of the Vietnam War, and the kind of social upheaval that participating in a major war brings.

Everyone around me was somehow touched by it, because all these young men were going off to war, and every evening on the TV news, we got the body count and saw

images of what was being bombed in Vietnam. So it was very much a part of our daily lives.

I must say that most of the people around me, most of the students, were less involved politically. They were art students and design students and architecture students, and generally I would characterize them as not very political. In fact, here and there, we even talked about it, how we weren't very political. But then later, I realized there are lots of different ways of being involved.

I just want to make a few comments about things I remember that began to be important, and they're just little bits and pieces. Oh, by the way, I just remembered, I got it a few days ago, you know the *Bene Legere* from the library?

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: There's been a large gift to the Archive of the Free Speech Movement and the Mario Savio Archives. I was just so pleased to see it. I think that now that I have all these years in between to look back, the impact of that time, certainly on me, was enormous. I remember being somewhat unaware of what was going on around me, except for one thing that struck a deep note and that was the Peoples Park movement.

There were several reasons why that struck a note. One was that I feel that one of the weak parts of contemporary society is that we don't take good enough care of everyone. We don't have enough parks for people to be comfortable nor homes for all. We don't take care of people on the low end well enough. Maybe this is also because there were times in my life when my family was very much on the edge, when we hardly had anything, when we were poor. Maybe that is part of my feeling.

But also, I remember, when I marched in some of the demonstrations, a strong feeling of community and positive purpose. Now, Peoples Park was happening side by side with the more troublesome marches of the antiwar demonstrations. They do go together in the sense that people felt outraged by killing in a small, distant country, and their friends, neighbors, sons, and brothers there. It was a time of heightened awareness about injustice wherever it occurred.

The park property belonged to the university, but we wanted this park open for everyone, a place for people to play and kids to be, and to grow food. So they were to me very interesting parallel statements about society. The demonstrations that became violent, with some people breaking windows and looting, were very distressing. But overall, the feeling was that of making a better world and asking the question, "What's really important in the world and what are we going to do about it?" We were questioning absolutely everything about our lives. That was, to me, a wonderful process and very powerful, and a lot of good things came out of it.

The unfortunate part, I think, is that movements like that seem to come and go so quickly. It seems like the further along we get, the quicker our attitudes roll over. There were many things in the sixties and early seventies that I think we needed to think about for a longer period of time. But we moved on.

Nathan: One thing that you mentioned in this very eloquent statement was a feeling of community. Maybe that's a theme that continues? And would you want to say anything about how identified you felt coming to the University of California at Berkeley, a big place; in Berkeley, which is a city that's not always tranquil. Did you feel you were part of a community?

Laky: Well, that is interesting, because I came from Carmel. Carmel is so teeny and so safe and so comfortable, one would think that would be a pretty big contrast. But my two brothers had gone to school in Berkeley, and I loved visiting them. So I had become familiar with the town and the campus.

It didn't seem difficult for me. Although certainly, it was a big new experience. One of my brothers was still going to school here, and I also knew some of his friends. They were all in architecture, so they were in my general area of the campus. I wasn't involved with design in the beginning, but I certainly enjoyed relating to all the people in architecture whom my brother knew. And I was taking studio art classes in Kroeber Hall nearby.

As I said, I was a little worried about whether I could handle academics after being out for four and a half years, so I tempered my heavy academic courses always with an art course. [laughs]

Nathan: Very wise.

Laky: Yes, in hindsight, I think it was. It actually worked out pretty well.

But let me come back to some of this, because I was describing the situation. Most of my classmates and I were not very directly involved in the antiwar demonstrations. Rather, I tended to march in the Peoples Park marches.

Student Involvement: Cambodia Crisis, Posters, Speaking to the UC Administration

Laky: When the Cambodia crisis hit, however, it jolted me. As I recall, everything shut down at the university for a short while. I don't remember if it was a week or a day or what, but nobody wanted to go to classes. I think the feeling was that things had gone just a bit too far in the war, that you couldn't stay on the sidelines any more and have an opinion, that somehow everyone around me was outraged.

But most of us did not know what to do exactly, because we hadn't been very involved in politics. So we set up a poster-printing factory in our studios.

Nathan: I'd like to hear more about that.

Laky: We had all our silk screens, of course, and we had a lot of space, and we knew how to make things. So we used all those skills. Somebody found that the computer labs had unending quantities of paper, because all the students there were trying out their

theories or their programming or whatever they were doing on those computers on printouts.

Our end of campus was not computerized at all in the late sixties, early seventies. It was pre-computer days, except for certain niches on campus where there were computers. These were big huge humongous things that somehow certain people worked on, and the computers spewed out paper printouts of whatever they were doing. It was kind of mysterious but kind of exciting that there was this art material in great abundance sitting up there in that other part of campus. [laughs] Somebody in our group would run up there and get boxes of it.

Nathan: You're talking about paper?

Laky: Paper. Paper, blank on one side.

Today we try to print on both sides of paper. It is interesting what details can participate in an important way. These papers were accordion folded. At that time, they had perforations, and they had a row of holes on the edges. They were continuous papers. You could tear off a single sheet, or you could tear off two sheets, or you could tear off three sheets. It just seemed like these accorded strips of paper were coming out of the computer labs day and night, nonstop. You could go up there anytime and get a box of this waste paper, clean on one side, and bring it down to our studios, and we would print on them.

Students were coming up with designs. I remember one was based on, I think it was Goya, who painted a series of paintings.

Nathan: Horrors of War?

Laky: The Horrors of War. One was—and who was it, some mythical being—eating his children?

Nathan: Oh, that's Time who eats his children, Father Time?

Laky: Yes. So one student did a brilliant version of Father Time eating his children, and that was such an appropriate metaphor for what was happening, the Vietnam War, and what people were feeling about it. We were eating our children—

Nathan: How horrible!

Laky: —and other people's children. Yes.

These posters were really quite extraordinary. They were designed in an instant and the imagery developed directly on the screens by a photo/light sensitive emulsion process or cut-outs as patterns. We had crews of people ready as soon as a new image was ready. We had gotten paints of all sorts given to us. We had the production set up. We worked all night long, and in the morning, we had crews of people on bicycles with baskets, distributing and posting the new series of posters.

I remember a few years back, maybe about ten or twelve, running into someone who actually had saved some of these posters. Harriet, I threw out every single one I ever had. They were on waste paper. I didn't keep them.

Nathan: Yes, yes.

Laky: When you're in a moment, you often don't know you're in a moment, and you don't know what to save. You just move on. Well, whatever piles of posters I had left; often we posted every single one of them. I kept none. I don't remember if any of my classmates kept any. I don't think my classmates did. I think this person I ran into was one of the people who distributed them or worked somewhere where we distributed the posters. Actually, I remember he talked about having an exhibit one day, but I don't know where he is or if he ever did an exhibition. They were either small single sheets of computer paper, or they were double and occasionally triple.

Nathan: And how were they posted?

Laky: I think it was mostly masking tape.

Nathan: On poles?

Laky: Poles, windows. We would drop them off at cafes, bookstores, and places like that.

What was interesting was how quickly our organization got set up, and how smoothly it worked: design, production, and distribution. I don't know if you remember seeing any of these, but they were all over Berkeley. They were in people's windows, they were everywhere, and each day, there was a new group of them.

Nathan: Yes, I remember the posters. What was your purpose in doing this?

Laky: I think the feeling was that something had to be done, that this war could not continue, that there was too much killing, and that everyone had to become aware. At this point, among my friends in design, there was a feeling that everyone had to participate. So that was it, we had to jump in, and how do you jump in? I think there were lots of meetings and things, so I think some of the posters were about where meetings were taking place, but otherwise it was to increase pressure to stop the bombing.

It was a very, very interesting experience for me, one I would not exchange ever. I often wonder, "What is the moment when something is too much and it's too unjust or too awful, or must be changed, and how do we do that?" It is so often difficult to know. Remember that this was coming out of the sixties and the Civil Rights Movement, which was also very important. I can't remember exactly when black studies was set up and other such ethnic programs, but I do remember Angela Davis speaking, and I do remember Joan Baez's songs about, "Tear this building down," and I do remember the flavor of "The administration must listen now."

Students had to speak first to the [university] administration, and second to the community beyond, and maybe third or fourth or I don't know where, along the way, to the government. I'm sure there were other students who felt they had to get directly involved with the federal government and have delegations formed to go to

Washington, D.C., to find some way to stop the process of war. I think for most students, it was a focus on our community, and then moving beyond that, wanting to change the whole society, but needing a response to our requests for change from our administration first.

I'm still in agreement in a sense, because our core concern as students was, "What is relevant education?" That word "relevant" became almost like an emblazoned stamp on everything. The whole notion of alternative education was really burgeoning at that time. If you recall some of the programs, Lone Mountain College and others, I think many people were struggling with, "How do we educate people today? What is important and what is meaningful and what is relevant, and how do we change our society?"

I think it allowed me some of the thinking that came out with Fiberworks later. It was the groundwork.

Geodesic Domes

Laky: Then there were some other kinds of events here and there. Now, I don't remember the chronology exactly, but in my memory, I fit them together. For example, Sim Van der Rijn, who later became the state architect, was a faculty member in architecture who seemed to be as open to all these questions as any of the students were. He at the time was very interested in geodesic domes, influenced by Buckminster Fuller.

It's interesting, I think Buckminster Fuller was very open to new ideas and borrowed heavily from many different fields, for example, and I've always thought his geodesic domes were upside-down baskets. Of course they make sense, the strongest form in the world, the dome, with very light, flexible materials, and easy to build. It just fit right into my anthropology and my art and my design and my weaving and all my diverse interests. I understood it immediately. Of course I could get involved with architecture and architects: they were building baskets upside down. Well, I knew all about that subject. [laughter] Van der Rijn's class was just great.

And in fact, in one of Jack [Lenor] Larsen's books later I found a wonderful image of a Bavarian architect's work, Reimerschmidt, who did have this image—photographs of baskets upside down. They were models for buildings. He had small model figures in front of these big baskets. There was an interior photo of this huge, beautiful vaulted space, and an exterior shot. They're in Larsen's book, but I thought, "Oh, that Buckminster Fuller, he probably knew about Reimerschmidt's ideas." Plus, so many indigenous forms of early traditional housing, including Native American, African, et cetera, are really upside-down baskets.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: So Sim Van der Rijn had some sort of course, or he organized one—not "organized," because people didn't organize then. I mean, that was out. We wanted "alternative education," not organization. He got a group of students together, it might have been a

special study. The students in the class were very mixed: design students, art students, architecture students, engineers, and others.

I remember at one point, he took us all up to his property in Inverness where we built geodesic domes out of four-by-eight sheets of plywood. I remember one of the underlying interests was inexpensive housing that any group of anybody could put together. These were just bolted together in four-by-eight uncut sheets of plywood whereby one could have windows in the triangular spaces that occurred out of these shapes overlapping. They're really very beautiful structures. They're very elegant, and I don't know if you remember, but during that period, our California landscape became dotted with geodesic domes. Some still exist and even have had rooms added onto them, and you no longer recognize a lot of them [laughter]. Many of them were probably torn down more recently and replaced with conventional buildings.

But at the time, it did allow people to respond to one of the aspects of the philosophy of the time, which was back to earth and back to nature, build your own home, grow your own food. You could actually go out on a piece of property somewhere and whip out a geodesic dome and live in it. And this was happening, this idea of self-sufficiency, low cost, flexibility. Also these structures were a somewhat lighter touch on the land. They tended not to be the kind of building requiring great holes to be dug and extensive concrete foundations for big edifices. Domes were in a more organic relationship to the land.

An activity like that did feel so relevant. Also, it was wonderful to be in a group of people all working together, and working together so well. I remember it was very harmonious. I remember people very quickly and easily setting to work. It was again a sense of community and of working together, and of accomplishing something with others. It was very powerful.

Wanting the University to Become More Human

Nathan: This is so interesting.

I'd like to go back to one question. You explained beautifully how some people would see an issue like the Cambodian war and go directly to the appropriate governmental level. You were working through the structure, basically, trying to go to the administration of the university. What was it that you wanted the administration to do?

Laky: Probably there were some people with very clear ideas about that, the Student Steering Committee and others. But I'm now speaking more from the point of view of being a student in amongst other students in my subject area of people who are not very related to politics or history or governmental studies or anything like that. My friends knew more about an English novel or an art historical reference than they knew about military or public spending.

And so how I would characterize it is that our world and our society had a big problem, and the problem was this seemingly senseless war. It was that people we knew, our

friends, were dying, and also that people we didn't know were dying. I remember one little piece of it, which probably connected to the Civil Rights Movement, which was awareness that these were people from a different ethnic background. We were in their country killing them, a tiny distant country of an Asian group of people, and we were in there killing them and they were killing us. It just didn't seem right in absolutely every way.

Now, when it seems like your world is falling apart all around you, and there is such a big wrong in which you're somehow involved, what do you want? Well, I felt as if we wanted the university to change and become more human and more responsive and more relevant, so to speak.

At the same time, what the sixties movement was about was greater value in day-to-day life. Bake your own bread, make your own clothes. Dropping out meant giving up your corporate job and doing something where there was more intimate human value. Growing crops suddenly felt better than being a corporate lawyer.

Also, many of the books I was reading at the time were about problems in our society. *Man Alone*, I remember that title. It was about the coldness of architecture, the kinds of alienating environments we were building; alienation of the individual, in the context of this horrendous war. So we wanted—I don't know if I can speak for anyone else. To me the desire was for the university to teach us about the world. It seemed clear to me that the university was a big player in the formation of the society, educating people who were going to go out and take on major roles of responsibility.

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Laky: So to finish up the thought, it's a good question that you asked me: "What did we want from the administration?" I'm sure there were very specific demands and lists presented by the Student Steering Committee, but I think in terms of the spirit of it for me, it was really that there was something terribly wrong, it needed to be changed, and that the university was the agent of change. The terrible wrong was not just the war. My friends and my brother and his classmates who were engaged in architecture were talking about designing spaces for human beings. We were trying to humanize the world, we were trying to come back to valuing the individual, we were trying to come back to building places where people could live well, could perform well, could play well and flourish. Those were the kinds of issues. We wanted the university to provide us with an education that would help us solve some of the problems we faced.

Later, I remember being in conversations with some of the people who studied architecture at Berkeley at the time. Life after UC Berkeley was difficult for many of them because they had been prepared with such an idealistic approach to architecture that the world they stepped into as architects could not live up to it. The conflict of what many of them knew was the right approach to take to architecture did not work in corporate America, where the issues were financial, political, and broadly economic. What kinds of buildings do we build, and what are they supposed to mean, and how are they supposed to be used? These young, extremely idealistic, extremely humanitarian people we trained to be sensitive, moved into a world where they had to talk about and deal with issues like the bottom line and not the creation of spaces for human beings.

Spaces for human beings was what their schooling was about. The world of work was different.

So I think we wanted a place that did not teach from the corporate point of view, but rather from the point of view of making the world a better place.

There were lots and lots of interesting things about that time. If you distilled the philosophy out of the hippie, flower-child movement, the underlying attitudes were very good, and very positive. I remember a little involvement with the ACLU which must have come through Tom, even though he had not moved to the Bay Area yet. I was totally opposed to capital punishment, and still am. I found myself trying to find a classmate who was good at drawing who could draw an image for the anti-death penalty aspect of the ACLU. One of my classmates actually did do a drawing of Justice balancing and somehow unbalancing—an electric chair—or she was sitting in one. How far back now we’ve moved from that notion that the state should not kill people. The death penalty is fully installed throughout the U.S.

More on Ramona’s Cafe

Laky: Coming back to Ramona’s Cafe, it was very important to have a discussion. As I said, there was a specific we wanted from the administration: very important that we had healthy food, good food. Yogurt, grains, et cetera. And if they promised to give us good, healthy food, we would stop our revolutionary cafe [laughs] and let them put in their own cafe. Because that was the agreement: that we would stop if they put a cafe in that location and if they supplied good food.

Tofu. [laughs] We don’t want hot dogs and grease and corporate food and non-nutritious food. We want the food that grew out of the sixties philosophy. Sunflower seeds and sprouts. We wanted good, down-to-earth nourishment. Brown bread, not white. Et cetera. I knew Alice Waters and occasionally was invited to eat in her home. She introduced me to the California food revolution she had initiated. So that was the negotiation, but it was a metaphor for what I think people were struggling through, which was, “What are we becoming, and what’s important, and how do you change if you don’t like the way it’s going?” It was a very powerful time in that sense, and that’s why I think it had such an impact on me. That’s why I think I did some of the things that I did later on in my life. It must be.

Nathan: Do you remember the people from the administration who came to negotiate about the cafe?

Laky: About the cafe? No, I don’t. No. I remember the meetings, I remember six or seven people going into an office and sitting down. One meeting, the representatives from the administration came to Wurster Hall and sat with us there, I guess because we looked at the space together and it was our territory.

I remember that we were being tough negotiators. [laughter] But I also think it was a very wise move. Our efforts added a significant amenity to that portion of the campus. It

was a very concrete response to a group of students who basically were not asking for anything damaging or difficult. I think at the time a lot of the alternative classroom activity was coming from the College of Environmental Design, so probably the campus found our emphasis on good and nutritious food to be reasonable. It provided an opportunity for the university to respond positively to a group of students.

My memory is that the administration did come around. And certainly, many of the faculty were right in there with the students, agreeing with their complaints and with their ideas. I think Ramona's Café episode had a very positive impact in lots of ways.

Pace of Change and Need for Constant Reform

Laky: I remember things settling down and finishing my studies in relative calm. After a while, regular class schedules were resumed. It was interesting. We wanted to restructure all the classes and undo everything and do it in a new way because it was so important to change, but then it's hard to do it and maintain the new approach.

Now, sitting on the other side of the fence, I realize what's involved with changing a curriculum. Well, it usually takes several years. And we were only there for four years as undergraduates, maybe a few more in graduate work. So how do you change curriculum if you're a junior and you only have a year and a half to go, and it takes three to five years?

Nathan: Exactly. That time span is crucial.

Laky: I think, if I can be critical of people like me, now that I'm a faculty member and sometimes involved with the administration, we take advantage of the fact that we know the students will be gone in a year or so. Sometimes we drag our feet because we know we can slow down the change, and that the students pushing for something we don't want to do will graduate and go on to other parts of their lives. If we wait, we won't have to deal with the demands. Or we can deal with them just a little bit.

I know—I love the university, I think it's a wonderful educational system, and I certainly love the Berkeley campus. I'm very devoted to my campus now in Davis. But we still do the same kind of thing. Even with the faculty, we do it. The administration tends to have important meetings in the summer, when most faculty aren't around. We try to change things and pull a fast one when the people aren't around who might object or might have something to say. And that's a slightly cowardly way of behaving, I think. We need to face change, we need to constantly reform. We need to just face up to it and do it, but do it together including the dissenting voices. Often we want to take the easy way out.

Most of my interactions as a student with faculty and the administration were quite positive. Occasionally I thought some of the administration's behavior around demonstrations could have been better. Certainly Reagan's notion that "If there has to be a bloodbath, let there be a bloodbath" was a horrendous statement to hear and one of

the worst examples of an administration out of touch with those it serves—Goya's image—father eating his children.

But just speaking from the student side, I thought most of what people were talking about and upset about and wanted were things that I agreed with, that were basically good things. Then how do you get there? How to make lasting change is much more difficult than talking about it.

Nathan: And how do you hang on to any advantage that you've gained?

Laky: Yes. Yes, right. Especially with the pendulum. [laughter]

Nathan: There is the pendulum effect, I think that is true.

Laky: Oh, here it comes, it's swinging back. [laughter]

Personal Pressure to Complete the Master's Degree

Nathan: That's very illuminating, Gyöngy, I do thank you. Now, you went to Cal, you entered—just to get the numbers—you entered in '67.

Laky: I came in January of '67.

Nathan: And then you had your B.A. in '70?

Laky: In '70, right.

Nathan: And then in '71, you had a master's. You got it in one year?

Laky: I was absolutely driven. I was a lunatic. I worked so hard. And I don't know why, Harriet, except for maybe two things that pushed me hard. One was that basically, my family couldn't support this education I was getting, nor could I, so that was an issue. Even though I had part-time jobs and so forth, it was definitely an issue, and the pressure to perform was enormous. I think I got into that pressure, and it was almost like it propelled me forward. I think I was very eager to get out from under the pressure. I felt I had to finish and I had to get out.

I remember one quarter I think I took twenty-five units, and I was getting A's. So I must say, I was an absolutely driven person.

I have used that kind of energy since graduate studies for certain things I wanted to accomplish, but I do recognize it as over the edge; I mean, one wears oneself out. [laughs] I can actually work very, very hard, and it's happened a few times since I was in school, when I've been under pressure to perform or complete an art project. But I was just manically driven when I was a student.

Nathan: In order to receive the—what was it, an M.F.A, a master's in design?

Laky: It was an M.A., because at the time, that was the highest terminal degree offered almost anywhere in the country in terms of design or textile arts. I'm glad you bring that up, because I pushed very, very hard to make sure that our graduate degree in textile arts and costume design at UC Davis is an M.F.A. degree-granting program. That is currently the accepted terminal degree in the field nationwide. If our students are going to the top of the field, educationally speaking, we need to offer the right degree. So at my time, the M.A. was it, and currently the M.F.A. is the accepted terminal degree in the field.

Nathan: Did this involve a particular thesis, or dissertation-like project?

Laky: It did, actually. Let's see, the three individuals I worked with were Lillian Elliott, Ed Rossbach, and Pete Voulkos.

Nathan: Wow.

Laky: My subject was plastic and fiber. There was a written part, which was very, very difficult for me. I was good at the physical art-making part. I am a decent writer, but it doesn't come easily. It's very hard to do, and I was under such pressure with the writing for my degree work.

Synthetic Plus Natural Materials

Laky: I was combining plastic with natural materials, and I was vacuum-forming plastic over rope and shoving twigs down plastic tubes and shrink-wrapping over materials and things like that. Over all I was juxtaposing natural and synthetic material. My question was, "How do we respond to plastic, and are we repulsed by it?" But indeed, it's a wonderful material. And of course, you see how this comes out of Ed Rossbach's teachings, experimentation, and influence on me.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: And it was fascinating for me. I really loved it. The intriguing question was, "How are things perceived when they have both the natural and the unnatural or the synthetic, the manufactured material combined?" Plastic, particularly clear plastic, was a great vehicle for the sort of statement about industrial products and our response to them that I explored, because you could see the other material through it, so it was very convenient to put together objects of art that had the two juxtaposed in such a clear way.

Nathan: Do you still have the objects that you made?

Laky: I have one experimental shrink-down plastic tube over a rope, if I didn't throw it out, but I have some photographs. I have a little bit of a thing of moving on. The, "I'm finished with that work, let's move on" attitude. I don't throw out much work, but I have thrown out work in the past, because of this attitude that I described earlier. Growing older is a very interesting process. Just thinking about, "Maybe I ought to save this. This has some intrinsic value or some interest, or maybe someone will find this

historically relevant at some point” is a new attitude for me, coming with my increasing age and comprehension of what history means.

But at that time, I was just moving on. It was never hard for me to have work sell. Somehow I was always ready to let go of it. Sometimes it went out with the trash. I have a little bit of my early work in storage.

Nathan: Well, let’s hang on to the pictures.

Laky: I’ve got great pictures, of almost everything.

Nathan: Great. Because then we can, at the proper time, select what looks like sequence—

Laky: UC Berkeley was a good experience over all. In my graduate work I liked the issues I was working with, I found them fascinating. The work was very interesting to me. Particularly, I loved working with Ed Rossbach because the communication was so inspirational.

Importance of Not Knowing

Laky: Peter Voulkos was an interesting person to work with. Did I take a seminar with him? I’m not sure, I don’t remember, but somehow, I got to know him, and conversations with him were very, very interesting. I remember once he said to me, “I try very hard to not understand something every day.” [laughter] It was a fascinating statement, because at the time, I was bewildered, but I knew it was an important thing to have heard.

Subsequently, I think I understood what he meant, and I also found ways in which the concept was important to me. One aspect is, well, there are several aspects, but one is the didactic. You don’t want to have everything all neatened up and nailed down. One works out of question marks, and that’s what he was saying, that he needed to work from inquiry. Then later I found I needed to wonder more about things and not to answer everything.

There’s a tendency to have an answer for everything, and I have that tendency very strongly. Figure things out, “Oh, I know what that is.” But when you don’t know, and when you’re reaching towards something, that is when creative things happen. I really used this later in my work. I used it, and tried to open myself up more, and tried to be surprised more, and tried to find out what I didn’t know, rather than work coming out of what I did know.

We want to be expert, we want to know, we want to use our knowledge. So it’s very hard to not just click into your knowledge bank, but rather to open up to new information. So that’s what I thought Pete was talking about.

Nathan: That’s also dangerous and risky in certain ways?

Laky: It is, because you can also flounder around out there constantly, not knowing and not wanting to know. [laughter] But I think I've finally come to the point where I think floundering around is more interesting than working from what you already know, and what you already have conquered or figured out or stabilized in your mind. It's much more interesting to put yourself in a position where you don't know all the answers and where you're using your skill but not your knowledge. Is that correct? Now, let me see.

You bring it all with you to any new task. You cannot leave your knowledge behind anyway. You cannot leave your experience behind. When you try to move towards something that you haven't figured out, you take all your abilities with you (you can't leave them behind). But there is always the risk that you don't know how to do something, or you haven't figured it out, or you don't understand its meaning, and that it won't be as successful as you'd like it to be. Then it seems to me you try again. Or you move on to something else out of that floundering around.

I think that's what Pete was talking about, and certainly it's meant a lot to me since. I like that feeling. I'm always very excited when I don't know what I'm doing. [laughter] Of course, it's a wonderful thing to finish something and step back and look at it and say, "Oh, that's good, I did a good job there. I figured it out, I finished it well." But in a sense, I know I have those skills and I know I can do that, once I get an idea going. What I don't know is this unknown part, something that comes in that I'm trying out and trying to figure out for the first time. Being unsure is somehow exciting and fun.

Nathan: This is probably the best statement about creativity that I've heard. I love it.

Laky: Well, it feels right.

Now, let me just add that I have a lot of good skills about making things, and I have a lot of good skills about order and organizing, and I have a lot of background and skills about understanding the impact of an idea or an image. Some years ago, I started looking at my work and realizing that when all those abilities and all that experience was functioning very well, and when I was in very good control, that the work was less interesting. So I began to experiment with ways that I could disrupt my process. Oh, I'll tell you another little piece that came along the way that adds right into this, since we're talking about the subject.

Letting Go of the Rational

Laky: In about 1979-80, I read a catalogue of a Stephen de Staebler exhibition; I was newly appointed to the faculty at UC Davis (I joined the faculty in '78). I was curating an exhibition for the Honolulu Academy of Art working with an excellent curator there, James Jensen. They had asked me to curate an exhibition of craft, but craft was at the craft/art intersection, let's say. Pete Voulkos was in it. I included him and there were about ten or twelve artists I selected.

Nathan: So as a curator, you selected—

Laky: I selected the work. Stephen de Staebler's work I felt needed to be in it, so I contacted him. He is a ceramic sculptor who lives here in the area, and quite a well known, quite an accomplished one. One of the main works that impressed me was at the [Berkeley] University Art Museum. He had a group of large chunks of clay that were seats you could sit in, but they looked like they had been formed by small elephants that had sat down, made themselves cozy, and then gotten up. So they were indeed very comfortable. This sort of tactile use of the clay I found fascinating, and in fact, he uses his body to form his pieces. That fit right into my ideas about the exhibition.

So I was reading things about Stephen, and I read, I think it was catalogue copy from something at the Oakland Museum. He had a description of his working process. He went to the studio early, as I recall, maybe eight o'clock. And then he described the fact that he futzed around. He prepared clay, he cleaned up, he moved equipment, he fixed something, he added a touch to something.

And then by two o'clock, he was totally worn out and totally disgusted that nothing major had happened that day. He had not accomplished any new work. Then he said that about two-thirty or three, when he was about to go home, something would start happening, and then he'd get to work on his art.

I remember thinking, "Now, isn't that strange? Isn't that fascinating how that happens?" And then I sort of looked at my own process, and I realized that what he was talking about was that you have to get your mind out of your usual rational, organized way of behaving in the world, because everything else supports our good behavior, our standing in line, our folding our clothes, our cleaning up, our getting there on time. Those are not the qualities that one uses in art work. That's not how you think in art work. So somehow, when you're tired and your defenses are down, when he's about to put on his jacket and walk out the door, he lets go of that ordered way of thinking. Creative thinking is different. It relies on form recognition, visualization, juxtapositions, et cetera. Then responses can be fresh and different and disjointed, or not in a straight line, and not one following the other.

Spontaneity and Drawing-Like Twig Constructions

Laky: Stephen's statement dovetailed with Pete Voulkos's statement. And also dovetailed with my friendship with Chere Mah, because Chere intrinsically understood these things and actually was able to verbalize them. So in the mid to late eighties I began to do those almost drawing-like stick constructions on the wall. They were spontaneous and gestural and exploratory, as a drawing can be.

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Laky: Lashing one twig to another can be a sort of decision, much like the immediacy of drawing. I later referred to these as three-dimensional drawing, drawing in space. The twigs gave me a very unusual kind of line, each one different. So in terms of drawing, you'd have to draw a lot of lines before you could get them to be as interesting or diverse as a tree can in just one season.

Then I noticed that I made two different kinds of forms. Actually, I noticed this, but it was a friend visiting the studio saying something about the outer edges of my pieces. It sparked an immediate recognition. “Aha, that makes sense, and I’ve noticed it, but I didn’t quite understand it.” That friend is a psychotherapist and she is very verbal. It’s wonderful to have that kind of response to my work.

She said something about closed outer edges or open outer edges. It just clicked. I learned how to open up that kind of quick drawing process of connecting the twigs, and looking at the line, and letting it be very dynamic and very lively. In fact, I started looking for ways of making work that looked as if it were only a moment in time, as if the lines could rearrange themselves, and that I just had stopped for an instant, and that the next instant, the piece might again change.

I began making the layered twig drawings so that as you moved and altered your viewpoint, the relationships of the lines changed, continuing this spontaneous act of seeing. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art acquired one of these open-ended twig structures. It was just barely constructed, and yet it was very strong. With overlapping intersecting layers of twigs and the angular relationships, the structure becomes very strong. I also did another more major piece commissioned by the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission in this genre of work completed in 1990 for the Council Chamber at City Hall.

And the strength is spread and increased by the numerous interconnections. So I was able to do things which were very improvisational in character and very fresh, spontaneous moments in time. This counteracted my skill in making knot after knot, that other part of me which was so good at organizing.

So what I was doing, because I could see the problem, was I was trying to find these more open-ended ways of working, the exploratory nature of drawing. Which is why I love to teach drawing. You usually don’t know what’s coming. It’s exploratory. You venture out with your pencil. Even if it’s a realistic drawing, it doesn’t matter. One line will suggest another, and it’s this exploratory process.

Now, I don’t like the flat piece of paper. I don’t like relating to the two-dimensionality of drawing. I don’t like doing it; I like doing it, but I like fiddling with the process too. I give my students a project that I stole from Matisse. He taped his charcoal to the end of a long stick, a five- or six-foot-long stick, and drew at stick’s length on papers propped against the wall or on the floor.

Nathan: Was that when he was very old?

Laky: Well, he was doing the drawings for the chapel in Vence, and I believe it was when he was older. Now, I think that’s a great way of drawing. [laughter] But to have a short stick (a pencil) and a flat piece of paper on a table in front of you does not appeal to me. It has no physicality. So for me, the drawing with twig lines in my studio was perfect. It was drawing, it was exploratory, it was spontaneous, and it allowed me to move away from the other aspect of my skill, which was more stable and redundant. The organized aspect was actually the part of me that accomplished a work well once I had figured it out. Both are good to have. One works well for idea development and the other aids in the fabrication.

Some Early Awards, and Patchwork Funding for Education, Travel

Nathan: There are just a few questions, really, that relate back to your UC Berkeley experience. If these interest you, fine; if you don't want to bother, we certainly don't have to. But I noticed that you got the Bernard Hobson Undergraduate Scholarship in '69 and another one in '71. How did that come about?

Laky: Most of my education was financed by grants and loans and scholarships. I didn't get that many scholarships, but some here and there. I worked very closely with the Financial Aid Office, and each year we figured out how I was going to do this, and what they were going to give me, and what they were going to loan me, and what else I might scrape together. So I don't believe that was an application process. I think it was one of those scholarships that, because I had need and because I had good grades and so forth, I was eligible for.

And then when I was doing my graduate work, I got a McEnerny Fellowship, and that was very important. I got a one-year large fellowship.

Nathan: Does this sound right: Genevieve McEnerny Graduate Fellowship?

Laky: Yes. And I was absolutely thrilled and delighted, because basically, that meant I was able to go on to graduate work.

Nathan: I did wonder about this McEnerny Fellowship, did it have anything to do with funding your year in India?

Laky: No, and I'm not sure I'm totally clear on the source of the money for India. But it happened in two ways. The India program, Professional Studies in India Program, was half fellowship and half I had to pay for. I wonder if I could ever go back and figure out how I came up with the half that I'd have to pay, but somehow, I did. I remember a figure of \$1,600.

There was a round-trip ticket included, on which I could make several stops, like three or four stops. This was on Pan American Airlines going to India, and I stopped a couple of places on the way over. And then coming back from India, I stopped a couple of places coming back. In addition, there was a monthly stipend in India for the eight or nine months that I was there. So it was really a small amount of money that I was required to contribute.

Evidently, the stipend in India came as a part of the return of a wheat debt. We gave India wheat, and instead of sending dollars back to the U.S., these stipends were given in rupees in India. So I think the entire program, which is still going on and which is a wonderful program, was somehow put together out of these pieces.

I do believe that for my share of it, I got some sort of loan probably, something for postgraduate study, so it was probably put together a little bit by money I earned with a job over the summer, loans on my National Defense Education Act Loan, and possibly a bit of grant-in-aid financial aid through the Financial Aid Office. I remember once I was

selected, everyone was working very hard to help me figure out how to do this, and it was quite a wonderful process.

Nathan: When you applied for your M.A. from Berkeley, were you interested in any other campuses or programs? UCLA, Davis, or, but you chose Berkeley?

Laky: I found what I was doing to be so wonderful and so exciting, and so relevant [laughter] and so creative that I wanted to continue. The design department—I don't know if we talked about this, but the design department was a very, very creative program. I think I did mention this when I was talking about Mary Dumas, and I think I mentioned that there were people coming from all over the country and the world, passing through and visiting, because the word was out that this program was exceptional.

Closing the Berkeley Design Department, Loss to Creative Life

Laky: In addition to the war demonstrations, there was another major activity going on in my last year of undergraduate work and then during my graduate year. The campus decided to reorganize, came up with some ceilings for enrollment, went through some struggles over space and resources, and decided to close the design department.

Now, they did not admit that they were desiring to close the design department, but that in fact was what was being attempted. And that is in fact what did occur, but it took several years to complete. One thing I appreciated in Ed Rossbach so much was that he kept taking graduate students up until his retirement, and he basically prolonged the life of the design department several years by just continuing to work with graduate students.

Nathan: The list of courses that he was giving is remarkable.

Laky: Because he was by himself at this point.

Nathan: No FTEs [full-time equivalents].

Laky: Yes, that's right. I was tremendously involved with the struggle against closing the department. I even have some files of papers still from those meetings. It was a very, very interesting time and event. And I think it was a major mistake by the administration of UC Berkeley. I'll just say that flat out, and I'll try to back it up with my comments.

I think it was a great loss, a great loss to the creative life of California, particularly northern California. I think it's a testimonial to the occasional near-sightedness of the university in terms of what serving California is. I don't think we pay adequate attention to the creative aspect of our society in California. And then if you want to take the ripples out to the nation, the University of California is a very important educational system. It does have an impact on the entire nation, if not the world. Think of all the foreign students who study here, for example.

I think we (at the University of California) do a wonderful job in many areas, so many, you know how long a list would be. We do a miserable job when it comes to art, design, and creativity. These are major subjects for human beings, for a society, for a culture. And the University of California basically acts as if that realm hardly exists. We have this little program and that little program. We hardly support them. We hardly give them resources to perform well. And even so, some become very good, strong, wonderful programs, limping along on meager resources. We just don't comprehend the role of art in society. Maybe I'll end there.

V EMERGING AS A PROFESSIONAL ARTIST

[Interview 4: February 5, 1999] ##

Nathan: Gyöngy, tell me a little bit more about the way your eyes cleared and you knew you wanted to be an artist.

Nature and Nurture

Laky: I will because I believe that's a very interesting question. You had said earlier, Harriet, that you believed that artists knew they were artists from their first breath. I do think that is true. I think it is more genetic than we realize. I mean, I think it is a combination of nature and nurture. I think it is who we are as well as who we become. Some people have perfect pitch, and some people can remember music; and some people can't. And some people have certain capabilities and other people have different ones. I think that's all part of being individual human beings.

Then, of course, how you grow up interacts with the genetic differences. I actually went to UC Berkeley with the notion of being an academic of some sort, but I didn't really understand what being a scholar was. I had a notion of having a serious profession. I knew I wanted to be some sort of active professional. I wasn't going to the university to get married; that was clear in my mind. And I think fewer and fewer women are doing that, and fewer and fewer women were doing that twenty-five, thirty years ago, so my attitude was not so unusual.

My mother was a painter and played the piano beautifully and she was a dancer. My father and mother opened an art gallery. You would think I would have slipped right into being an active practicing artist. So there is something there that's interesting to think about.

Meanwhile, I did live the life of an artist. I always was making things and always drawing. I painted right next to my mother often. I silk-screened Christmas cards. I was capable of sitting and carefully cutting a stencil for hours and hours and hours, then

making one little mistake and cheerfully starting right up again and cutting the same stencil until I got it to be perfect.

If it was creative, it didn't matter how hard it was or how long it took or how frustrating it was along the way, I always felt it was worth doing. I think that's the foundation of what the creative mentality is, like the dancer who practices over and over and over again. Now, if you get sick of practicing after one hour, you're probably not going to be a dancer. [laughs]

And for example, in high school, whenever there was an event or a dance or anything like that, I was very involved, and often the person organizing the decorations and changing the gym into whatever it was to become. What was the Li'l Abner bit when the girls invite the boys?

Nathan: Oh, yes, Sadie Hawkins Day.

Laky: Yes, Sadie Hawkins Day. There we go. Well, I remember transforming the gym into a Sadie Hawkins environment. [laughter]

Nathan: Great.

Laky: I liked to build my own bookshelves. I made a lot of my own clothes. So I was doing something creative all the time. It never occurred to me that that was unusual. To me it was just how people behaved: my mother was like that, I was like that. I didn't really think of myself as an artist particularly. I mean, I didn't step back and have the perspective of, "Oh, gee, I must be a visually creative person;" that was just what I did every day. It seemed normal.

Now, my father didn't make anything with his hands. He tended to be a thinker and talker. But somehow, I never identified with that, well, let me take that back. That's maybe the reason why when I went to the university, I thought I needed to be a thinker and a talker and chose an academic field, not an artistic one.

Now that I think about it, it's fascinating to me that I would relegate my creative work to a secondary role so easily. And I think that may be because now, I'm going to analyze myself in this amateur psychologist manner. [laughs] I think the world at that time was still male dominated, and even today I must say, we look to men to establish what is important, so it's not surprising that I would love and appreciate everything my mother did and behave that way myself, do all the things that she did, and yet choose my father, the male role, as the role to which I aspired when I went to a university.

I think that's a feminist issue, let's say. It's the socio-political environment within which we existed then. Today, as this comes out in my interview with you, I'm a little bit embarrassed to admit it. Here I have this brilliant artist as a mother, and yet of the two career paths, I felt that my father's was the more acceptable one. Now, that's pretty surprising.

I happened to be living with two painters while at UC Berkeley. They were graduate students already, wonderful people, Judy Foosner and John King. Just delightful people. I remember coming home one day and sitting down with them and saying,

“Look, I’ve got to talk to you because I need to answer some questions. Do you really think that I can be an artist? Do you think that I can leave behind the academic stuff that I thought I would be doing, and go in the art direction? Is there a life out there? Can I have a profession as an artist?”

Now this is so peculiar because my mother with her painting kept our family alive for years. She’s the one who made the sales. [laughs] You know, my father had several different jobs before he and she opened the gallery and she was the one who had the consistent profession and maintained a family of five. So why I’m asking these questions, I don’t know. It’s so interesting to me.

But I was asking two painters and they said immediately, “Yes, of course.” [laughs] You know, “Look at us.” So here they were in graduate study with the full intention of being professional artists in their lives ahead and they were important encouragement to me, as was Ed Rossbach, I must say. So that’s when I really took the turn. It must have been sophomore or junior year. It was an overt decision at that point. It was a decision about life’s work as a profession and job.

What the job might be I didn’t answer. It was unanswerable. I didn’t quite see the job related to all of my interests. It was an optimistic time, even though we were struggling with major societal issues. There was an optimism about one’s future. It was not so difficult to rent a little apartment and feed yourself and get a job.

Jobs to Pay Off Debts

Laky: I did have lots of jobs when I was going to school and I borrowed money. I had low-interest NDEA, National Defense Education Act, loans and they were critical. These later were paid off by teaching. And that was a wonderful piece of the NDEA plan. It was a very slow process, but as long as you were involved with teaching, you slowly, slowly whittled away your loan. Bringing university educated people into the educational system that way, encouraging them in the direction of teaching, was very beneficial.

One of the jobs I had was at the Arts and Crafts Co-op in Berkeley, and I greatly appreciated their interest in me and their support. Dana Sambor brought me into the co-op. I taught classes and I worked for them, and at one point they even let me redesign their display sections and system. I redid it entirely. I put in vertical beams and we cantilevered the shelves on them. [laughs] And here I was a mere college student redesigning their approach to display. They were really quite wonderful. They seemed very enthusiastic about my capabilities, both in the teaching realm and otherwise, and I greatly appreciated that.

It makes me think today about little ways in which we encourage young people and give them that step or two out into the world that helps them establish themselves in their chosen areas. As I was saying before, I want this society to have a major commitment to education and to funding education so that the young people in our midst are not tied up in debt when they step out to become participants. We need to find a way to help them

jump out there and start right away and not be burdened by a mound of debt. That's why the kind of loan I had was so important.

I also worked for the University Art Museum, for the membership part of it. That was great fun and I enjoyed it. It got me back into the art exhibition area of museums and galleries, and I appreciated that. I also found ways to teach and other things to do. I always had a number of jobs going on at the same time, and lots of money-making schemes, because even though I did get the loans and grants, it was never quite enough.

Money was a problem because my parents' support was there when they could send me \$100 here and there, and it wasn't there if they felt they couldn't send it. And yet I had to continue. There was a brief period while I was going to school during which I had miscalculated and my little jobs didn't quite add up to the difference. I was profoundly depressed for a number of months. It was so difficult to make ends meet and if it hadn't been for my two sweet painter friends, I don't know what I would have done.

Nathan: Might you have had to drop out for a while?

Laky: I might have. You know, it's interesting that that never occurred to me, but not eating enough did occur to me. [laughs] But they always had something cooking on the stove when I came home. So after I got through with my big cry about how desperate I was feeling, we ate dinner. They took good care of me, and it made the difference.

Graduate Students' Need for Time

Laky: Then the next round, the next year of funding and jobs and scrambling, I was a little more careful and did manage to pull things together. The economic factor pushed me to streak through school. I was sort of a maniac. I took lots of units whenever I could. I finished my undergraduate work in three and a half years, and graduate degree in one. Now that I look back and now that I'm working with graduate students, I think it's absolutely crazy to do that. It's too fast, and if anything, it should be a little longer.

That's the funny part of it. But I think perhaps the financial situation was just pushing me, I just constantly felt pushed.

Nathan: Were you improving?

Laky: I was, and it did work out. I was an A student and I think my work was appreciated. It did work out.

Need to Live in Another Culture, and the Professional Studies in India Program

Laky: As I mentioned, I went to India for postgraduate study following my graduate work. Even though I'd spent a year in France, France is not that different from the U.S. It is

very different, but it's not that different. It's western culture, it's European culture. Being Hungarian-Polish, I already had a good measure of European culture. Going to India was absolutely different. It was startlingly different. It was being on another planet. It was an unusual, wonderful experience.

Nathan: Did you feel that your studies in anthropology and comparative cultures helped you when you went to India?

Laky: Yes. Oh, yes, and in fact I knew I wanted to go to another culture different from ours. I was already thinking, "Now how am I going to do this?" I knew that I had to get away and experience something very different.

Also, I must have been influenced by the attitudes of the times. In the sixties, early seventies, as a culture we were beginning to be more interested in other people. Even the Civil Rights Movement, starting in the South, was saying to us, "There are differences in people, we're not all alike, and we need to reach out and we need to embrace people who are different." And I think that resonated with me because I knew inside that I was from a different country. I started out with a different language. I knew difference. Internally I knew what difference was. Plus, the Beatles had gone off to India.

It just happened that a friend of mine, Bill Coleman, went to India on the same program that was organized by the University of California at Berkeley—Professional Studies in India Program, it was called. My friend eventually ended up in medical school, but when he was in India, a design student who had done graduate work with Ed Rossbach and who was also in the program and he became good friends. When they both came back they came to me and said, "Hey, this is a great experience and you should do it."

Susan Wick was the person from design who went, and there had been someone else from design before her, so the information started piling up.

Nathan: And this was '71 to '72?

Laky: '71 and '72.



VI EXPERIENCING INDIA

Laky: That day came when I had to pack my bags and actually start my trip. I had just barely finished writing my thesis, it wasn't a thesis. We had created visual work, but we had to write a very extensive illustrated paper. That was the hardest part of my graduate work. [laughter] I just barely finished by the skin of my teeth before getting on Pan Am, the good old historical airline, Pan Am. It was very exciting.

I stopped in Japan for one day, maybe it was a day and a half, it was overnight, to buy a camera, cheap. There I am, I've gone through undergraduate and graduate work in design and art and I did not own a camera, I knew somehow that I needed a camera for this adventure. I had to have a camera [laughter] and I think my parents might have given me some extra money. Somehow that had been dealt with. I stopped to get a camera, some lenses, I'd done a little research ahead of time. It became a wonderful tool. It became my second set of eyes. It became my set of eyes to keep. I still use those slides in my teaching and sometimes in lectures I give.

That experience, a little under a year, was the foundation of my professional life in many, many ways. And I think it will come up as we talk about the kind of work, the kind of teaching, the kind of activities in which I became involved later.

Postgraduates and Variety of Disciplines

Nathan: Were there other professional studies in other countries offered?

Laky: There were, because the University of California has an extensive education abroad program. I had actually finished my graduate degree, so one unusual aspect of this program was that it included people in a post-graduate form. It also included people from other universities.

There were people in our group from NYU and a couple of other universities. Our group had somewhere around twenty students in it, a nutritionist, an architect, et cetera—I think there was a lawyer. There were different people from different professional

backgrounds studying what was going on in India in those subjects. Mine was nice and open, art and design, [laughter] although I did specifically want to study art and textiles.

Nathan: So you could take your own emphasis?

Laky: Oh, well, it was, let's say, a sort of negotiated emphasis, because of course I came to the program applying as a design student. The idea was taking professionals to India to work in a field related to professionals in that country.

Nathan: Now, were you free to travel once you were in India?

Laky: I was, and whatever I could manage to afford on my stipend, I could do. We also had seminars. We were based in Delhi.

Choosing Primary-Source Textiles, Travels, Delhi Seminars ##

Laky: We had seminars in Delhi, where the program office was located, giving us information about the history of India and the society and how the government functioned. [added during editing: The UC Berkeley director of the program was a faculty member, Don Kennedy. His wife, Beth, accompanied him to India. They were wonderful. Beth became a significant part of my experience. They had both lived and done research in India before. They knew it and loved it and were able to convey this to us. They also helped us through the inevitable culture shock we all experienced being in such a different environment. My mother died of a brain tumor while I was in India. Beth Kennedy held my hand and with great sensitivity and caring led me through my grief for several weeks.] Beth had a keen understanding of creativity. She and I had many wonderful conversations about what I was finding and experiencing in India.

We were each connected to a supervisor. Mine was a bit busy and didn't spend too much time with me, [laughs] but I liked her. She was actually involved with a very contemporary textile firm. Her company made textiles and they had a large retail operation and export business. So it was all very interesting, but it was quite far removed from my interests, which were more in the folk arena: what people did in their daily lives that was creative and how they expressed this, a little closer to the origins, rather than a business version. My supervisor was a businesswoman and I was interested in the creative end of it.

I wanted to get back to where these things were made, and how they were made, how they—and this is where the anthropology fits in—how they emerged from that society, how these forms, these beautiful things, how they sprang up. What was the impetus? How did people make them? What were they thinking? Where did they happen? What did the landscape look like where the village existed that produced that particular kind of cloth, or rope, or basket?

Nathan: You're suggesting that this was in the villages, not in the main big cities, where you were particularly interested?

Laky: I found wonderful things in the big cities. But I guess the division I would like to make is not so much urban-rural, but rather, primary source-secondary source-tertiary source. Business level is really the go-between. Once the ideas are generated, then a business comes in, uses those ideas, mass-produces, and conveys them to a larger audience. The ideas emerge from somewhere else. I wanted to be on the idea end.

[added during editing: Early in my stay in India, a young couple from Jaipur, Rajasthan, Faith and John Singh, came to Delhi with a display of their clothing designs. She was English (her mother had been a doctor in India for many years) and he Rajasthani. They were using traditional fabrics to make contemporary Western-style clothing. They were also reviving traditional methods in small villages such as use of natural dyes and block cutting and printing. The Singhs were just starting their business, Anokhi. Their designs were wonderful and eventually influenced style in the U.S. and Europe, even Australia. Their stores are now in many countries. We became friends and I brought them village and tribal textiles and embroideries I discovered in my travels. They then used these in some of their designs. Do you remember all those Indian blouses and dresses with the traditional block prints in red, tan, and black that we all wore in the 1970s? Those were Faith and John's designs ripped off by garment manufacturers and sold in the U.S. Even J.C. Penny's had "borrowed" their design ideas.]

Nathan: Very good.

Laky: I mean, I love business and I think it's great and sometimes wonderful things are created by a company or corporation. I'll give you one example about how creative Indian business can be, and from that I extrapolate that almost any business anywhere can be extremely creative in lots of ways, but I'm now more interested in the visual, in the visual design/art sense.

Patola Techniques: Weaving, Painting, Moving

Laky: There are ancient textiles, ancient in the sense that they were thought up long, long ago. And they are still made today, although only I think by one family. These are textiles in which the threads are dyed with a design before the fabric is woven. They're called Patola saris.

Nathan: Is this like ikat?

Laky: Yes, ikat.

Nathan: And it's Patola?

Laky: Patola is the family or the town where these are made, a small village, probably a larger village today.

The threads are dyed in two directions. And yes, ikat—the word ikat comes from Indonesia. It's called something like kasuri, ikasuri, in Japan, and was also developed in Spain, so it happened many places in the world; there are many names for this method

of predetermining a design by dyeing thread. I don't think anybody knows exactly where it happened first, but you know, some people are working on questions like that and it will be interesting to figure that out one day. But certainly it was an ancient form in India.

How spectacularly, engineeringly brilliant this method is. Threads are dyed both horizontally and vertically and when they meet, they very clearly, specifically, and crisply produce a design, so it's a mathematical feat and it's an engineering feat as well as an artistic feat. These are beautiful textiles, and collectors adore them. And as I say, there's only one family left doing them. For the early vegetable-dyed ones, they're pretty sought after and now quite rare.

Nathan: In what medium are they? Wool?

Laky: They're cotton and silk.

So, I have described the traditional ones that are really quite wonderful and world-renowned. (I think this was near Varanasi.) I happened upon some people who were weaving a sari, painting an image or a design on it, unweaving it, and then reweaving it, in order to get the shifty, fluid kind of look of the space-dyed, Patola sari, but on a different scale and with a different basic design, large, floral patterns, for example. As I said, they wanted the look, so they wove a piece of cloth, they painted a piece of cloth, they unwove that piece of cloth and then they reweave the piece of cloth and when they reweave it, this design had blurred a little bit, had shifted a little bit, and resembled a Patola in technique. It looked like something that had been dumped into water and was beginning to disappear.

It was the magic moment of movement that this new "knock-off" product had captured, and it was a commercial product being produced by the zillions. And they were a hot item [laughter] so you see what I mean. I don't want to just say that the good stuff happens in the little village, the hand-made thing; that's not the case. You can find it everywhere, especially in a country like India. India is one of the most creative places I've ever been.

It's as if every person or every other person is creative, visually creative, or a dancer or a musician or a poet. But I was focusing on the visual and it seemed to me I saw it everywhere: the way people painted their houses, the way they decorated things, the way they dressed. They painted little scenes on their trucks and rickshaws of where they would like to travel. I've never been in a society, ever, where I felt so much art all around me. It was really quite wonderful.

Nathan: Was it a different palette? Were the colors different?

Laky: Yes. There was a love of intensity. You could find very subtle things, very sort of minimalist images, some of the Tantric art was like that. But I would say, also, I've never seen a group of people who loved intense color as brilliant as you could make it, so much and as garishly bunched together as possible. There didn't seem to be a problem at all about what brilliant, wild colors one put next to other wild, brilliant colors. [laughter] It was really an amazing experience in terms of color. I know that for a long time I worked with color as intensely as I could and I believe it was coming from

my experience in India. For example, the federal commission I completed in 1977, a few years after my return, was a piece with intense color.

But now my more recent work has a greater emphasis on nature and natural materials. I'm finding I'm not using color for the moment. I know it's still very much a part of me, that love of the intensity of color, but it's not a player for me in terms of the work I'm doing presently. It may come up again. I'm certain it will.

Nathan: It's still in your memory bank somewhere?

Laky: Oh, it is, definitely. It definitely is part of the way I look at the world, but I think this is just an emphasis difference. I feel as if my entire career has been many things that I'm interested in and the emphasis will just move something to the surface for a period of time and then something else comes to the surface for a period of time. And the threads (I love textiles because of all the words that we have derived from them)—the threads of continuity are there all the time, it just depends on what is becoming prominent in the work at a given period.

Camel Festival, Pushcar Mela

Nathan: Well, as all this is going on, I wondered where you lived. You would travel, so you weren't in a dorm?

Laky: No.

That's a good question because I feel that, I don't know what my religion is, but every now and then I talk about "luck." I don't know what luck is really, either, but whatever it was, it came to me in abundance. We arrived in September. The full moon of October to November is when there is a wonderful festival in India in Rajasthan, called the Pushcar Mela. It is a camel fair. Thousands, and thousands, and thousands of people bring their camels to this one location, and they bring their camels decorated as much as they can decorate them. They actually trim their hair into patterns and they festoon them with appliques and broderies and bells and beads. They trade them. They buy and sell and they have camel races and camel antics and camel performances and whatever else. Plus there was a whole fair with it, all sorts of vendors come and all sorts of food booths, music, Ferris wheels, et cetera.

By the way, Ferris wheels are included because it is auspicious to have your feet up off the ground for a few minutes every year. I am wondering if our Ferris wheel didn't come from India. There was a hand-cranked wooden Ferris wheel with four compartments. Each little box was full of women and children. Then there were several men on the crank moving these four little boxes, so they'd go up in the air one at a time [laughs] on a wheel. It really just amazed me.

Nathan: (I'm going to turn the heat on, but do talk some more.)

Three in a Delhi Apartment: Travel in Northern India

Laky: Oh, I'm talking. [laughs] At this mela, this festival, I met a young woman about my age, Chander Chopra. Chander was born in Kenya. There was a large population of Indians in Kenya and other parts of Africa. Gandhi came from Africa, as well. Chander's father was a policeman in Kenya and she was born and raised there. She went to school in England and Finland and is a textile designer and painter.

She had just come back to India about six or eight months before I met her and was experiencing India for the first time. Of course she spoke Punjabi and she cooked Punjabi dishes and she knew all about India because of her background. She felt herself very Indian, and had always wanted to go live in India. She got a job designing in a textile company and she was now living in New Delhi.

She had just gotten an apartment on the third floor of a three-floor building and she was looking for a roommate. Perfect. We were a match made in heaven if there is such a thing, because she was just an absolute delight, and we both loved the same things. She was painting and drawing. We both loved village textiles, we loved the ropes and the camel decorations and the big appliqued tents, and the paintings on walls and the little Hindu figurines, and all the other things. We were a very happy twosome going around and looking at things and visiting other villages.

She, of course, could speak the language, she knew her way around, she knew the culture and the money, et cetera, so it was a wonderful education for me. Plus, she was delightful to be with, a charming, intelligent, wonderful woman.

Later a third woman, a friend of mine who was also in the program from Berkeley, joined us also, so there were eventually three of us. It was really a great way to live in India.

I traveled quite a bit on my own also in search of textiles and art. Sometimes I would study up a little bit beforehand, figure out what I wanted to go seek out, photograph, look at, or find out about. I would go to that area, go to the villages, see if I could find it, and then see if I could find someone making it. So I traveled west and east from Delhi. I loved Rajasthan and Gujarat and spent most of my time in those two states to the west. I did go to Calcutta and also Bihar state and some other areas and enjoyed them tremendously but the real delight for me was in the western desert. It's very rich in art and culture, and the people are wonderful. It was really an area that I loved spending time in and studying, endlessly fascinating.

There are lots of different kinds of groups in India. First I should interject that India is huge and enormously populous and so I found rather quickly that it was probably not a good idea to try to travel all over the country. It didn't bother me to limit my travels to the northern part of India that way because there was plenty there for me. Actually that's continued to be an attitude of mine about travel. I don't have to get out and see every last thing in a country. It's fine for me to be in just one area. Maybe I'll come back, maybe I won't; maybe I'll see that next town, maybe I won't. I'm completely comfortable experiencing what I experience and I don't have the need to put everything on the list.

So I didn't feel deprived, although later when I went to South India, I was very happy to be able to do so because it is so different from the north. But for that first period, it was eight or nine months of study, it seemed that my time was absolutely full just in northern India. Even then I felt like I was skimming over a lot of things.

Nathan: It sounds so incredibly rich. Did you have to submit a paper? No, you had finished your master's.

Sparkling Glass and Mica; Ironing Saris; Buying Tie-Dye

Laky: I had finished my master's. I did do a study, a specific study that was written up as part of the program. What I focused on was the small mirror work that appears on so many textiles. The earliest mirrors it turns out, were bits of mica from the landscape.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Moving around by train, I could actually see flecks of it in the landscape, in the desert broiling away. India was hot most of the time I was there. Once I was wandering around in Ahmadabad in the marketplace at 113 degrees.

Nathan: Oh, my.

Laky: For some strange reason, hot weather appealed to my body. I loved it. It was dry, it was not tropical, humid, hot, and there is a big, big difference. 113 in the dry heat is possible. I don't know if 113 at the equator is possible to take, or at any high humidity level.

In this hot, hot landscape, I would see small glints of mica. I always thought it looked like water drops glistening in the sun. And then I began to use that amateur part of me that wanted to play anthropologist. I began to surmise that maybe these glints on the fabrics were so appealing because they were like flecks of water in the landscape. This image would give a sense of well-being in such a hot and dry place. But also they sparkle. They're like little lights, so maybe as light, they would also be very appealing. I wondered what would motivate people to put little pieces of glass or little pieces of mica on their clothing. And they actually also embedded them in mud walls inside their homes. Inside. I never saw any outside, but inside they would give light to an otherwise dimly lit interior. They would sparkle with whatever limited light would be coming in through the door or a small window or from the flickering of a candle. So you can see what the appeal might have been. I studied that small aspect of what I saw around me.

Nathan: Were you interested also in, say, jewelry or facepainting?

Laky: Tangentially. I liked looking at it, I liked noticing it, I liked wondering about it. I didn't directly look for it. And even now I'd describe myself as having little interest in jewelry or makeup. I'm actually more interested in the three-dimensional and structural. I found the cloth fascinating as the three-dimensional, sculptural activity it was as people wore it and used it.

That was the area within which I was working at the university, very three-dimensional, very sculptural. I was very interested in structure and movement and shape and form, and that continued in India.

Even though I was interested in the actual fabric, I liked it better once it was not folded up and no longer flat. I liked it better if it was moving around or [laughs] active in some way or on someone. I remember ironing a sari. Saris are made out of the very finest threads, very, very fine. You can actually put them over your head and see through them, which I think has maybe several purposes. One use is as protection in a sandstorm, which I was in once. I happened to have just purchased a textile and put it over my head. I could see through it and yet protect myself with it from the sand. It has a kind of down-to-earth utility. Well, to iron a sari, it's made damp and then two people grasp it, one person on one end of the six yards and one person on the other end of the six yards. And since it's hot, they just wave this damp length up and down a few times, all the wrinkles disappear, perfectly ironed and perfectly dry. [laughter]

When you buy a sari in a store, it's all wrinkled up because it's been folded up. They just spray it, two guys jump out on a street, they wave it up and down, before you know it, it is ironed. [laughs] It's so brilliant. I loved seeing this ironing process. That, to me, was more exciting than a close-up look at the cloth.

Speaking of that, tie-dye is a ubiquitous cloth in India, and tie-dyed saris, tie-dyed turbans, all kinds of tie-dye are beautifully done. When you buy tie-dye, it is important that you do not buy it untied. Any proper woman looking for a sari, any self-respecting man looking for a turban would never buy one that was already untied. But in the store there is a ceremony of pulling open and popping off some of the little tying threads on a corner, just to reveal the quality, and then if you like it, you buy it. So you buy this wrinkled mass of little knots, it's so ugly, it's so awkward and it's so compacted, [laughter] and that's what you carry away. I found that whole process so delightful.

And I liked these grotesque little bundles wrinkled, tied, knotted, with this potential within, with this beauty within. Once you opened it up it was glorious, the cloth's potential revealed only in this small corner that you were allowed to examine.

I brought several of these back to the U.S. I had great fun in my classes bringing one in and slowly popping off the ties and opening this thing up, and then ironing it the way I'd learned in India.

Interest in Basketry, Rope Weaving

Nathan: Lovely. Was there basketry in India, as well?

Laky: Lots.

Nathan: Did that catch your imagination?

Laky: It did, and it did actually early on because that was what I found myself looking for: the animal trappings, the ropes, the baskets, the onion bags, the camel belts, the belts that held a cradle under a tree, the cradle itself, the weaving that was done with handmade rope and twine, basketry-type weaving to make cot beds. The beds that people slept on were interlacings of rope in a pattern on a frame. All of these appealed to me tremendously. It related to my own work so directly. I had a very hard time, however, finding such items. I noticed many interesting things around me, an animal harness or someone carrying a basket.

One can actually hire “carriers” in India. You go to a place where there are a group of men sitting on their baskets, upside down. You hire one, he puts it on his head, and he goes with you and carries your items wherever you go in his basket on his head. There were buggies horses led around that were basically big baskets. They were really quite extraordinary. A lot of hand-built houses that were actually using textile technology in the use of grasses or ropes or twigs, were just fascinating to me.

But I was there in ‘71 and ‘72. India had actually become independent in, what was it, ‘47? It wasn’t that much earlier. Nobody wanted to talk to me about rope, baskets, or other such lowly items. They wanted to talk to me about nylon georgette saris or at least embroidered silk. They wanted me to look at what the Raj wore. Now I wasn’t interested in that, what I came to call the royal court and/or Westernized textiles.
[laughter]

Neither interested me. These were too far removed from the popular culture. The court textiles and the new, industrial fabrics were influenced by politics, wealth, outside forces or import/export businesses. They did not spring from the general creativity of the people. I would notice a basket or something of interest to me and I would keep asking, “Where was it made? How can I find one? Or where could I buy one?” Until I tracked it down. Generally everyone wanted to steer me away from them because such objects were not deemed worthy of my attention. So it was actually quite difficult in the beginning.

I wanted to pursue village textiles but then I couldn’t get the information. The various museums I found had very little of this kind of material. They had the robes, the silken gowns from some rich person. I did find the shoes were interesting. The shoes were always interesting, handmade and very sculptural. I found shoes in the museums and could find examples in the marketplace as well. I liked that. Some headdresses I was able to find also. Some of these fit into what I was forming as my interests because they were so inventively constructed. But things like a basket, like a mundane basket, seemed not to be valued. It was seen as too utilitarian, too quotidian, too commonplace.

I think the caste system plays out in a number of different ways in India, and one is that a hierarchy of things exists. Maybe it exists in our society, too. Maybe we think a silk weaving is intrinsically more valuable than a basket even if the basket is more ingeniously made, I don’t know. But there in India, such hierarchical separations definitely existed, so I found it difficult to find information. The items that interested me were rarely written about and were not generally to be found in museums; nobody collected them.

Slowing the Rush to Modernize: Subramanyan, Haku Shah, and the Tribal Museum

Laky: Someone sent me to a man named Subramanyan in Baroda. He was a professor at the Baroda School of Fine Arts. Actually I can't remember who sent me to see him, but I wish I could, because I would like to say "thanks"—I will be forever grateful. A wonderful man. I sat down and started talking with him. After a while he began to realize who I was and what interested me. He pulled out an amazing coconut fiber onion bag and started talking to me about it. It was just wonderful. Then he told me where to find it in the market, and he told me how it was used, and why it was such brilliant structure, and a number of other things about it. He was the first person I met in India who understood why I sought such items. He also found them ingenious as well as beautiful.

The entire country was so engaged in modernizing at that time that India risked leaving its rich treasure of folk and indigenous art and culture behind. It seemed to me that people did not want to have such things around them because they reminded them of their backward state, somehow. They wanted modernization and that was what I felt everywhere I went. That's what was moving everyone forward. They wanted to leave their villages, rural life, and tribal groups behind.

The fascinating thing is that some ten to fifteen years later, it had started to turn around. On a return trip to India I remember seeing, speaking of turning around, a traffic roundabout. In the middle of the roundabout were huge waterpots, a sculpture based on the brass waterpots that women carry on their heads.

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Laky: So the roundabout with this public sculpture of women's waterjugs would not have happened in 1971-72. Never would this ancient way of carrying water have been selected to be in so prominent a place. I also found in the new hotels that in the early seventies these gorgeous old embroideries were being used as decorations. That never would have happened when I was there earlier.

They did somehow, in the midst of their push to modernization, manage to put on the brakes a little bit before they threw out or destroyed all of their prior village culture and folk art. Some time in the late seventies or early eighties they began to appreciate it. One of the individuals who worked tirelessly for this change was a student of K. G. Subramanyan, Haku Shah, but I knew about Haku through other sources as well.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: Whom you know.

Nathan: Yes. So he was in on this preserving of some the original culture?

Laky: He was director of the Tribal Museum. The Tribal Museum in Ahmadabad, an extraordinary museum that he built up out of scratch. He had such an honest and profound love of human creativity, and he found it in the tribal groups in India.

There are a number of tribal groups, they're separate from the mainstream Hindu or Muslim societies. They are distinct groups of people. Some of their cultural manifestations overlap Hindu and Muslim ways, but usually they bring in a very different point of view and a very different way of working. So for instance, the kinds of drawings they do on their hand-rubbed mud buildings would be not at all the kind of drawings you would find in, let's say, a Hindu village. So, Haku brought people from tribal villages and they'd make a mud wall in the middle of the museum. He so loved the real creativity that came from these tribal people. He was so respectful of it, he constantly brought people directly into the museum to make things there in person.

Oh, and he often supported them and took care of their children and paid the medical bills and whatever it took to take care of these artists he was finding out in the landscape and bringing into the museum. Wonderful. He really was my main mentor in India.

When I was in Ahmadabad, I was also involved with the National Institute of Design a little. I spent some time living there. I met and talked with people there who were students, faculty, and technicians. I didn't do anything formal there; nonetheless, it was very helpful to have that connection and home base. But it was sitting in Haku Shah's living room that helped me most, an unforgettable experience. He is a truly remarkable man who has the ability to recognize creativity and to see the value in it. So he played a major role with people visiting from the U.S. and from Europe: architects, designers, artists, who were interested in India and wanted to understand it.

He would tell you about the creativity in India in a way that you would never find out about otherwise, and so he was instrumental to my learning as well. He later became a National Treasure acknowledged for his contributions as well as his own work in painting. Padmashri they call it. He was granted this title at a very young age, sixty or something. It is usually reserved for eighty or ninety-year-olds. India did turn around and did begin to appreciate its village, tribal, and folk art.

Nathan: Well, in a way, it does remind one of a turnaround in this country in some ways, wanting to preserve certain aspects of our culture; and in Japan, when there was a great rush to modernize, and then they rediscovered their National Treasures. What do you think?

Laky: Yes, maybe it was something that was like "psychic unity" happening. Maybe it was a time when somehow people all over were beginning to appreciate their grassroots cultures. Look what was happening in the U.S. Look why I went to India. People in the U.S. were raising their own sheep and spinning their wool and wanting to create their own things out of these materials and get back to the earth, preserving and learning how to do it all again. Yes, I think your reference to Japan seems to fit, that was concurrent as well, chronologically. Wasn't it about that time?

Nathan: Yes, I believe so.

Laky: Interesting. It may have come out of the widespread attitudes of the fifties, sixties, seventies.

Complexity of India and Skills of the Untouchables

Nathan: Did you want to say anything more about other aspects of India, the caste system, color, intermarriage, education, for whom?

Laky: Oh, there's so much to say about India. It's—

Nathan: Too much? Are you ready to say, "No, this is not what I want to talk about?"

Laky: Well, I have a deep, deep love and fondness for India. When I came home I began to speak about India and I was invited to give slide shows and talk about my experiences. I found as time passed, I got more and more confused about India because every time I made a statement, I could immediately think of an example from my travels there of the exact opposite. It was almost as if in India there was something of everything. And if you said, "Well, here's how it's done in India," you would immediately be wrong in that it's done in exactly the opposite way there, also. [laughs] I mean, it is such a complex place, such a complex culture, that it's just very hard to make a definitive statement about it. I think it would take a lifetime or maybe several, of major study to really know India, to be able to sort out all the contradictions and say with confidence, "This is India." Maybe if you're Indian you can do that. So I hesitate to go on.

I hesitate to make statements about what I saw there except as they are part of my personal response. But I must add that the most troubling part was the caste system. It was the most troubling part, but I see evidence of similar things here in the U.S. I think the fact that women still are earning, what are we up to, 78 or 79 cents on the dollar for jobs that men do? This is a version of our own caste system.

It appears similar to me, in that there seems to be some sort of rigidified system that dictates that this group of human beings is at one level and another group of human beings is at some other level. I try to be respectful and understand but I don't. Everything in my being rebels against the caste system. When I was in India, there were beginnings of working on changing the caste system. For instance, an effort was being made to do away with the whole concept of untouchability.

Now maybe one reason why I became so sensitive to this is that all the things that I now so dearly love were made by untouchables. All who worked leather were untouchables. Probably anybody who made rope was an untouchable, and I think all the basket weavers, and on, and on.

I should probably look into this and find out more, but basically it goes like this: the top, you're in your head; the bottom, you work with your hands. Can you imagine how more opposed I could be to a system like that when it's the intelligence through hands that I feel is so incredible about human beings? It's the untouchable who touches and makes. I'm repulsed by the caste system and the entire concept that some people are not to be touched. Maybe we should end.

Nathan: Okay, good.

VII SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY, TRAVEL

[Interview 5: February 21, 1999] ##

Nathan: We were just talking about other areas we want to be sure to cover, which would, of course, include Fiberworks, the travel and the education, and of course the Davis campus experience.

But maybe this is as good a time as any to talk about otherness, what it really means to bring your otherness with you and to recognize it when you get there. And what travel does for education and art education. Would you like to do that now?

The Immigrant Experience

Laky: Yes, I would. All right. I think about coming from another country and another culture sometimes, not because I'm so connected to my other culture, but I think about the significance for me in my life. How am I formed by the fact that I was born in Budapest?

I came here when I was five, so of course I learned the language quickly. Evidently, I spoke both German and Hungarian when I was little, and of course as a small child, I had a small child's vocabulary. I don't really speak Hungarian at all any more, but I remember the names of everything to eat, all the desserts, all the dishes, all the vegetables. And I can pronounce them perfectly. [laughter] I haven't changed—not a bit. Food is still a favorite topic. But speaking two languages did make English-speaking very quick to pick up and very easy; I'm sure of that.

Otherness, and Creative Thinking

Laky: So I was an immigrant, and I very quickly became an American, but then I think about the fact that I must have something of that different culture, that different background that is a part of who I am today. My feeling is that travel is very important. Being aware of others in the world, of differences in the world, of different ways of thinking; and doing things in different forms of culture; different ideas, different-looking people, even, different behaviors is enriching. Travel gives an individual a broad view. It just must somehow and I think that's critical to creative thinking, somehow.

Nathan: This sense of otherness that you were talking about, has that influenced you as an artist?

Laky: I think it has. I'd call it a connectedness to some other part of the world. So here I am in the U.S., I'm growing up as an American, I wanted to be as American as I could be right away. The whole family had this attitude about, "We're no longer Hungarians. We've got a new home, and we're now Americans." We loved that. We thought that was great. So my parents stopped speaking Hungarian to the kids, they spoke only English, which is why I don't speak the language today. I'm really sorry about that, but I understand how and why it happened. I wasn't interested; I was interested in being American, as my brothers were. But nonetheless, I had, built-in, this other part that belonged to another country, another group of people, other childhood languages.

There's more to add: my mother was half Polish, half Hungarian. The Hungarian part was the strongest part. I'd say I was three-quarters Hungarian and a quarter Polish, but she, of course, talked about Poland a lot because she was born there and her family was there. Poland was very important to her and it formed her. So there's a big chunk of Polish in me and in my background. I think her love of music came from her childhood in Poland.

So I'm not just being American. It's impossible to be just American. Maybe Native Americans can be, but for the rest there's an overlay of European or other culture, so who is just American? But if somebody's born as a fifth generation somebody or other, that person's not going to bring another piece of culture in the same way that an immigrant will. An immigrant has that; even a young child, even as I was just five years old, I brought my Hungarian connectedness with me. My parents have the stories, and food, and the point of view. It was built-in, so even though I was working feverishly trying to become totally American, that was my milieu. My home culture was the combination of Eastern Europe and what I was getting being here in the U.S.

I was turning my back on it as a child because I didn't want to be different. Now here's the funny thing, when you're young you don't want to be different at all. Not at all. You want to be just exactly like everyone else, fit right in. Then you turn around as an adult, and difference becomes everything, it becomes richness and possibility and opening the world and opening your eyes. So it's funny to me how as a young developing person I didn't want to have anything to do with difference, and now, to me, it is what makes my life so rich.

Now, for some reason, my brother Mat, who studied architecture at Berkeley and who was at Berkeley when I began my studies at Berkeley, was very attracted to other

cultures and people from other places. His core group of friends included a couple of Americans from the U.S., but included a Brazilian, someone from Switzerland, someone from France, actually, a Sephardic Jew. Now if I get this right from my memory, his parents were Italian and Greek and he grew up in Egypt, a wonderful guy. Then there was a guy from Greece, another from Israel, a friend from Iran, and one from Thailand. They really were from all over and they were a very tightly knit group of friends. My brother didn't live at the International House, but he somehow gathered up these international students as his core group of friends.

Yearly, he and his roommate from São Paulo, Brazil, had a carnival party at their apartment. I adored going to their annual party before I actually became a student at Cal. I'm sure that I was influenced to come to UC Berkeley, and to that group of people. My brother was still in school. He introduced me to the campus and to my new life and of course to his friends who were always hanging around. I got to know them well. So that environment was very rich and very exciting and wonderful for me also. I loved that diversity. It must have played into that otherness and who I was becoming.

So these are the bits and pieces that I can think of right in my immediate world that made me interested in travel and in other cultures. Of course, let's now connect it to the sixties. I went to UC Berkeley in January of 1967 at the height of the sixties movements and development of the Beat Generation and antiwar philosophy. We have talked about that, but when I think about my interest in other cultures, the social context is a piece of it as well.

One of the things that was happening in the sixties that I appreciate now, looking back, is that we were beginning to reach out and look at other cultures, not as the ugly (rich) American traveling and siphoning off the best and having a good time, but really trying to think about what other people were like and what other cultures offered. I mentioned that the Beatles went for enlightenment to India. I can't think of any more mainstream group at the time in terms of connecting to what young people were doing and thinking than that rock group. So there was interest in a culture as different from their own as India. It was a big indication of what was going on in the society at large.

I also think the interest in Native American cultures, Indian cultures, was growing rapidly at that time and had not been the case, let's say, in the forties and the fifties. Of course I don't know that era as well, but it seemed to me that in the sixties, part of the culture, part of the youth culture at the time was also interested in Native Americans and pulling that influence into the mix.

We have groups of people who are so different from one another, who are all part of this place. My impression is that in the sixties, awareness of others was a big piece of what was happening and it was influencing me of course. So when I finished my graduate work, I did travel.

Travel as Self-Education, as Influence on Art Work

Laky: Now I would say I push my students to travel, go anywhere. I mean, even from Davis, go to the Bay Area, for God's sake, because [laughter] sometimes they're working so hard and studying so hard... They're from Lodi, or wherever they're from, so all they know is Lodi and Davis. It's, of course, very important to come to a larger, metropolitan area where more is happening in their fields and in other fields related to theirs, culturally and politically.

I think it's a process of educating themselves. When a person travels, a person is experiencing and viewing and hearing and learning. It's condensing education and doing it yourself. It's motivated from inside. So I do push my students to go somewhere. My current student assistant is heading to Italy. That's great. That's wonderful. And one of the graduate students I worked with recently went down to Guatemala and did some wonderful work there, so it's something I think is very, very important. In fact, Tom and I have put as the biggest chunk of our will a fund for travel and education for young people. We have to figure out how to select the people, but that's what we want to do.

Nathan: Interesting.

Laky: And I know for my husband Tom, also, travel has been extremely important to how he leads his life professionally and individually, and so that's something we do together as much as we can.

The interesting thing for me is that I know traveling directly affects my art work. Sometimes I can actually pinpoint an instance. I experience something, I see something, I soak it in and it will come out in my work, and I recognize it. Most often, I can't be precise and can't describe it in language, though I feel it. Sometimes I know it's happening because certain imagery will come back clearly to my mind. Like certain rock walls will be residing in a spot in my mind where if I want to, I just hesitate for a moment, and I'll see that rock wall in my mind, and it'll come back and back and back. I know that I work visually out of my brain. When we say visualize it means that something is happening inside our heads which has form and shape and line and visual manifestations. It's inside our heads like a hologram.

Everyone does this. Everyone imagines, everyone dreams, everyone has visual imagery in the brain. What happens in creative work, I think, is that you take those visual bits out of your brain and you use them in your work. Now, you don't take them all. Or if I say a rock wall is influencing me, I don't then try to make a rock wall, but there are things about the relationships, like color, or there's something about the wall, the impact on its surrounding, something, that I will want to use in my art. And it just comes out and takes a visual form in the creative work.

It would be analogous to writing. You form ideas about statements in your head and then you write down the ones that you want to. I think it's very similar. I don't really know. I'm always reading articles about brain function and how we do these things, but it feels so clear and precise that I'm fairly certain it's happening in some form like that.

Now, it's not always visual. Sometimes it will be just the way people around me are doing things that will have a certain kind of impact on me. Sometimes things that people say will stick somehow in my brain and will have some role potentially in my work. I say potentially because it's a big resource, that visualizing capability, and so it's something that I draw up on.

I think the gathering in happens pretty much to everyone. Using the resource effectively in creative work is not so common. In fact, I would love it to be designed into our educational system, that people actually practice soaking in influences and how to convert these into visual possibilities.

Nathan: So you're interested in recharging the brain constantly?

Laky: I guess that's what it does. When I'm not in my own comfortable setting, I'm just so much more alert.

Nathan: Okay.

Flexibility in Graduate Programs; the Practicum

Laky: I'm not sitting at my own dinner table and somehow that makes a huge difference. I'm so much more aware of what's around me because it's not taken for granted.

I would just like to make a comment about UC Berkeley. As I recall, my program as a student had great possibility for individually designing one's graduate study. That was my recollection, and I certainly used it that way. I felt that I had a great deal of flexibility and that I used it and that it was very beneficial.

Later I wrote the graduate program for Fiberworks, which was then carried out through Lone Mountain College in San Francisco. Following that, in the early nineties, I wrote the graduate program for our design program at UC Davis. I wrote the drafts and my colleagues read them and made comments. The resulting MFA program started in '94-'95 with the first group of students, and so we're in like our fifth year of it now.

We did put something in the program we call a "practicum" which is described as encouraging people to get out and go somewhere, work with someone, work in someone's studio, travel, get out, get out and look around. Of course we don't say to students they have to do it; that fits my philosophy of a highly individualized program. Basically I don't like making everyone do the same thing. It's counter to my way of thinking. But on the other hand, I would love travel to be a requirement, [laughter] because I think it's so important, I believe it's so important. Some students take advantage of this in our current program and some don't, but it is there as a possibility and I think that's important.

Fiberworks actually formed right after I came back from my year away. The year away was about eight or nine months in India. Then because of the additional travel that was possible, I stopped in Afghanistan, by myself, which was really quite something at that

time. I also went to Greece to visit a classmate from Berkeley, Barbara Thompson. I stopped to visit my mother's family in Poland and I went to France for a short while to visit the people I had lived with in Paris.

More on Afghanistan and India: Camel Belts, Split-Ply Techniques; the Market

Laky: I look back and, now, given the current atrocious Taliban government in Afghanistan, I am so grateful that I could visit when I did. I was there two or three days. I went to the market, I looked around; it was absolutely fascinating. I took a bus trip out into the country into some small villages: beautiful textiles everywhere. Beautiful, rich, gorgeous textiles, inventive things, odd things. Kabul seemed to be some sort of major intersection and I think from trade routes of the past it really was that still. It had a cosmopolitan feel to it, even though it was a very traditional society.

When I looked at people's faces in the marketplace, they looked like people from all over. There were people with red hair, there were people who looked absolutely central Chinese, and then there were people who looked like Indians from India. There were a few westerners, not very many, very few, and people who looked Turkish, North African, Italian. It seemed to be a crossroads with a big mix. I'm so concerned about what it's become, a closed off, narrowly focused Muslim fundamentalist place.

But the market there was fantastic when I visited. Textiles and other goods were brought from Uzbekistan, Bokhara, and all over, so what I could find was just dazzling, including the jewelry. I, of course, had very, very little money with me. [laughter] I found a couple of good bargains and bought a few things. The felted work was fantastic, and very different aesthetically from India. India is so big, has so many different kinds of aesthetic in its different parts, but still has an overall character. When I see something from India, having spent some time there, I can recognize it's Indian, even though there are vast differences in that country.

Afghanistan and the realm from which it drew, which is I guess Central Asia, had a very different flavor to it. The way stripes were assembled and the colors in the stripes were absolutely different than anything I'd seen in India. It was fascinating to me how in such close geographic proximity there can be that kind of major difference built out of tiny details, like the width and color of stripes. It represents a different character culturally. Those stripes cannot be Indian, just as Guatemalan stripes are recognizable. Once I became familiar with them, I would never confuse them with stripes from Mexico or Afghanistan.

Nathan: Are there still images in your mind about what you saw there?

Laky: Oh, yes. I got accustomed to India. By the time I left India, I felt so happy there, and so comfortable, I found it so enriching and so interesting, I could have just stayed on and on and on.

So then moving over to Afghanistan, which was my first stop, suddenly everything is different. The landscape is different, the language is different, the people are different,

the market is different, the colors are different, the baskets are different, so yes, I have flashes of very precise images that I still have in my head from that time. I can see myself walking down the street in Kabul, I can see where my hotel was in the square, and I can see the market. It may look very different after all the fighting and bombing recently, but in my mind I still have very clear images.

Did I take photographs then? I had my camera, but I think I might have been shy of taking photographs, being a woman by myself and uncovered. Somehow, and this is part of my character (I know, it's part of what I think is good and I use, and I also think is bad and gets me in trouble) which is I'm stubborn. I would not cover myself in India nor in Afghanistan.

Nathan: Like covering your head?

Laky: Right. I don't believe women have to be covered. I believe that's a man-ownership manifestation. I only covered myself if the sun was too warm or if there was a sandstorm. Now, there's another side to my behavior that could be interpreted as disrespect for another culture. I might behave a little differently today, but I was young and headstrong and rebellious then, so I made it a point not to cover myself as the women of those countries were required to be covered. I just didn't believe in it.

But I was careful in Afghanistan. I felt it might have been just as enriching and good an environment as India, but it was unknown to me. And I was only there for three days, so I think I was more self-conscious and careful.

Nathan: Were there still caravans coming into the city?

Laky: I didn't see a caravan, but I think there were, and definitely for the market. I don't remember seeing camels and people bringing in goods.

Nathan: There was some interest in camel girths or belts?

Laky: Oh, yes.

Nathan: I thought that may be connected?

Laky: Yes, let's talk about that a little bit because it is connected. I think I mentioned the Pushcar Mela, the fair in western India near Ajmer, Rajasthan. It's a camel fair. Other animals are brought there as well and bought and sold and bartered, also, but its core is really thousands of camels. It's a little bit of a hilly area on the edge of a big flat desert. From a hill, looking out you see camels and dust and little tents endlessly into the horizon. There were millions, I don't know if there were millions, but thousands upon thousands of camels. [laughs]

One of the items I purchased going to that festival was a camel belt, a very beautiful, interesting camel belt. When I came home I showed it to Lillian Elliot and to Ed [Rossbach], and to Kay Sekimachi and to a couple of other artist friends. Everyone was fascinated by it.

##

Laky: It's made of two-ply strands crossing over one another diagonally right to left and left to right. As the strands from opposite directions meet, a spot in the ply is forced open and the opposing strand is inserted through it. This step in the process alternates so that each strand of the weaving both opens to accommodate its opposing partner and is next inserted through an opening itself. It is easy to show and hard to explain in words.

Nathan: Is that especially strong, then?

Laky: It's very strong, yes, but it's also very peculiar. You do not see this kind of work anywhere else in the world. Whoever invented it was brilliant because it is very strong and ingeniously constructed. The twist in a ply is strong anyway, it's what forms and keeps a rope together. When you open the twist and insert another element across, you're actually diminishing the amount of space along the length, so you tighten the overall twist of each strand. You're actually condensing and tightening the material. It's a very interesting way of working.

I didn't know what I was looking at, of course, but I recognized that it was unusual and fascinating. Earlier I mentioned Subramanyan at Baroda School of Art, who led me to my first experience of searching in a marketplace for constructed textiles. These became the basic structures informing my whole life as an artist, if I think about it. I had that direction and interest anyway: I loved basketry, I loved making and building things, I loved three-dimensional work. I had already done that at the university, but these experiences then really embedded an understanding of structure in my thinking and in what I later used to build my work. So he showed me the onion bag—and I won't repeat the whole thing, because I know we talked about this. He showed me an onion bag, sent me to the market for it. It is a fantastic item. It is open-worked split-ply twining. The camel belts are a closed, condensed form of the same method.

Now, I didn't really even put that together in my mind until way after I came home, and so I don't even know if I ever showed the onion bag to Lillian [Elliott] or Kay [Sekimachi], or to Virginia Harvey who eventually did a monograph on camel belts. Other artists later went to India to study camel belts. There are camel belts in western India far more elaborate and wonderful than the one I bought early on in Rajasthan. They have various images including figures on horseback, and they're made in double-faced cloth, so they have dark images on one side with a light background, and on the flip side, the figures are light on a dark background. It's very complex imagery and they're very beautiful, just a lowly camel belt.

Since then I found out that somebody I met at the National Institute of Design in Ahmadabad actually did a camel belt study, as well; so the camel belt blossomed into a major focus of interest in and among textile artists, both here and in India. So it's an interesting chapter. It's an interesting episode. And I believe it got kicked off by the camel belt I found at the Pushcar Mela.

As I mentioned, Lillian Elliott borrowed my belt and replicated it but by card weaving, if I remember correctly. I think Lillian was the person who did it with the cards and the card-weaving approach, which structurally is exactly it, though not how the belt is made in India. Card-weaving twists elements that can be inserted in opposing directions.

Nathan: So is that like a right-angle direction, like warp and weft?

Laky: Yes, right angle, but on a diagonal over all. Sometimes it doesn't have to be right angle, but it's essentially right angle, coming in from another direction. Yes, like warp and weft. They actually interchange the roles of warp and weft alternately. The split-ply in India is done with an already twisted, already two-ply strand but it can be more, four-ply, whatever. The card-weaving creates a four-ply strand, but you can also just thread two elements into each card and then you're creating a twisted two-ply strand. Just one card with two yarns in it twisting the way card-weaving occurs, that one card would end up making a two-ply strand. That's what you'd make by just twisting a card over and over that had two threads in it. You'd make a two-ply element.

So I understood how it happened with card weaving. Structurally it looked exactly right, but it was achieved in an entirely different way. This just shows you, this little window on this one little belt, shows you how fascinating, how complex, and how wonderful textiles can be. Structurally they are so fascinating and they're so profound. It's no wonder that we've built so many things in the world based on textiles. It's very ingenious the way they work.

Nathan: That's very exciting to hear about.

Laky: And then I remember all the wonderful work Kay Sekimachi did with the split-ply. After Lillian worked with the belt, Ed and Kay did also. I think both of them replicated the technique by opening or "splitting" the ply in the method used in India. I remember all the wonderful work Kay did with the split-ply approach. As I recall, she even worked it in the round, creating tubular forms. See, now if we talk about travel, this belt episode might never have happened without it.

Most Indians thought I was a little crazy. It was kind of a lowly pursuit. Like the onion bag: "What are you, an American, an important person, doing, buying such a lowly item as a camel belt?" Oh, yes. Oh, this attitude was not even mildly camouflaged. I think I mentioned earlier how the easiest thing for me to see in India at that time was a nylon-georgette sari that was wash and wear. [laughter] And I wasn't interested in those at all.

I've always been attracted to human ingenuity and the kind of brilliance of the human brain that thinks up a little wonderful something like a paper clip. I find in textiles, especially constructed textiles, so much of that kind of human brilliance, that capability to figure something out, that ingeniousness to invent something out of nothing. If you think of two pieces of yarn, or two pieces of string and what even they are and can do. Even a piece of string is a miracle and so inventive and so useful. I am terribly attracted to that human ingenuity. [tape interruption] There are endless examples of human inventiveness throughout textiles, suspension bridges just to name one. This is one of the main aspects of the textile field that attracts me to it.

Nathan: This suggests that when you created *Fiberworks*—what was it, 1973?

Laky: Yes.

Nathan: That you came kind of loaded for bear; you did have lots of inspiration. So let's talk a little about how you came to do this extraordinary thing, to create a school.

Laky: Naiveté. [laughter] What you suggest is very much I think the case. I would describe myself at the time as a convert. I was so full of enthusiasm for my field and for what I had seen and for what I had learned. I was brimming over. I loved it so, I felt it fit in the world.



Zyta Udrycka on the day of her marriage to Laszlo Laky, 1936.



Laszlo Laky, 1936.



Gyöngy Laky and her mother, Zyta, in Hungary, 1946 or 1947.

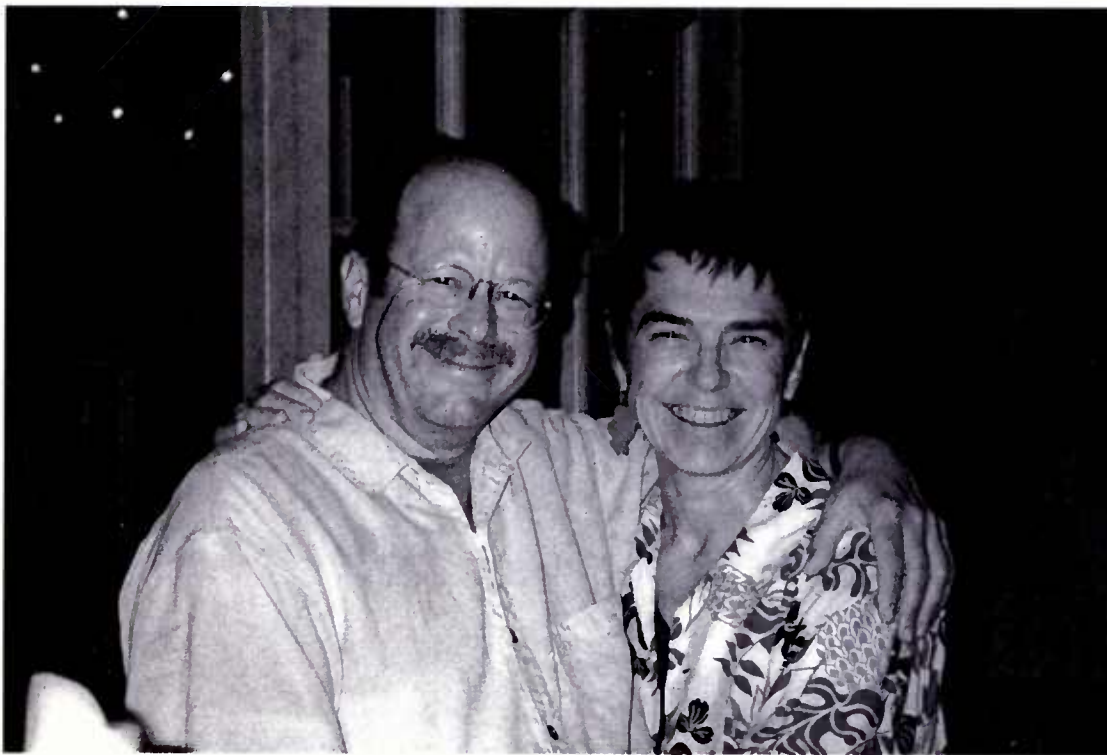


The Stocker family with the Laky children, early 1950s.

Left to right: Jane, Nancy, Laszlo, Jr., Mary Ann, Paul, Mattias, Gyöngy, and Beth (behind)

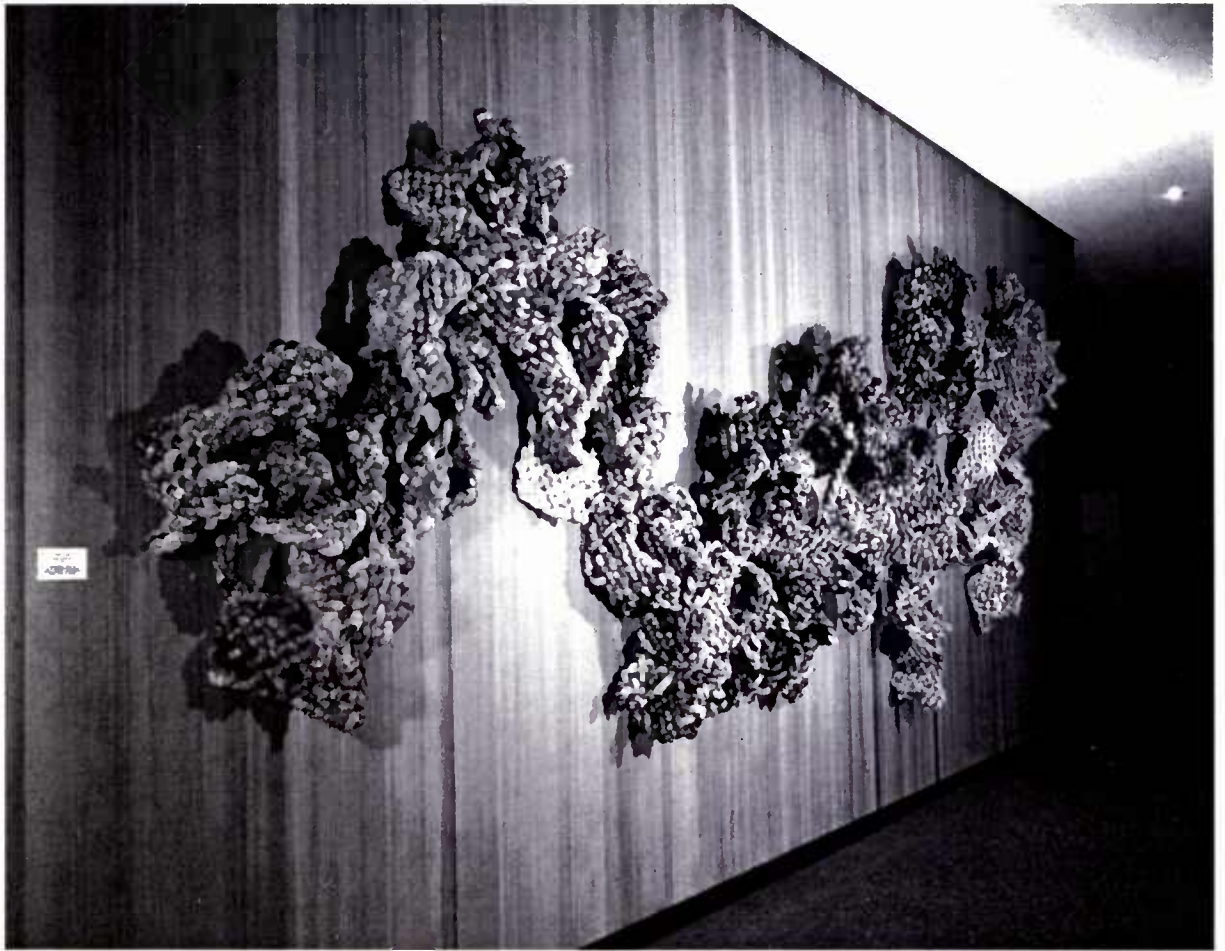


Zyta Laky self portrait, 1950. Pastel.



Gyöngy Laky and her husband, Tom Layton, Hawaii, 1999.

Photo by Eleanor Friedman



Gyöngy Laky, "Inner Glyphs Out," 1977. 120"x300"x18". Loom woven tubes, plaited. Synthetic and natural yarns. Federal Art-in-Architecture: Western Regional Social Security Administration, Richmond, California.



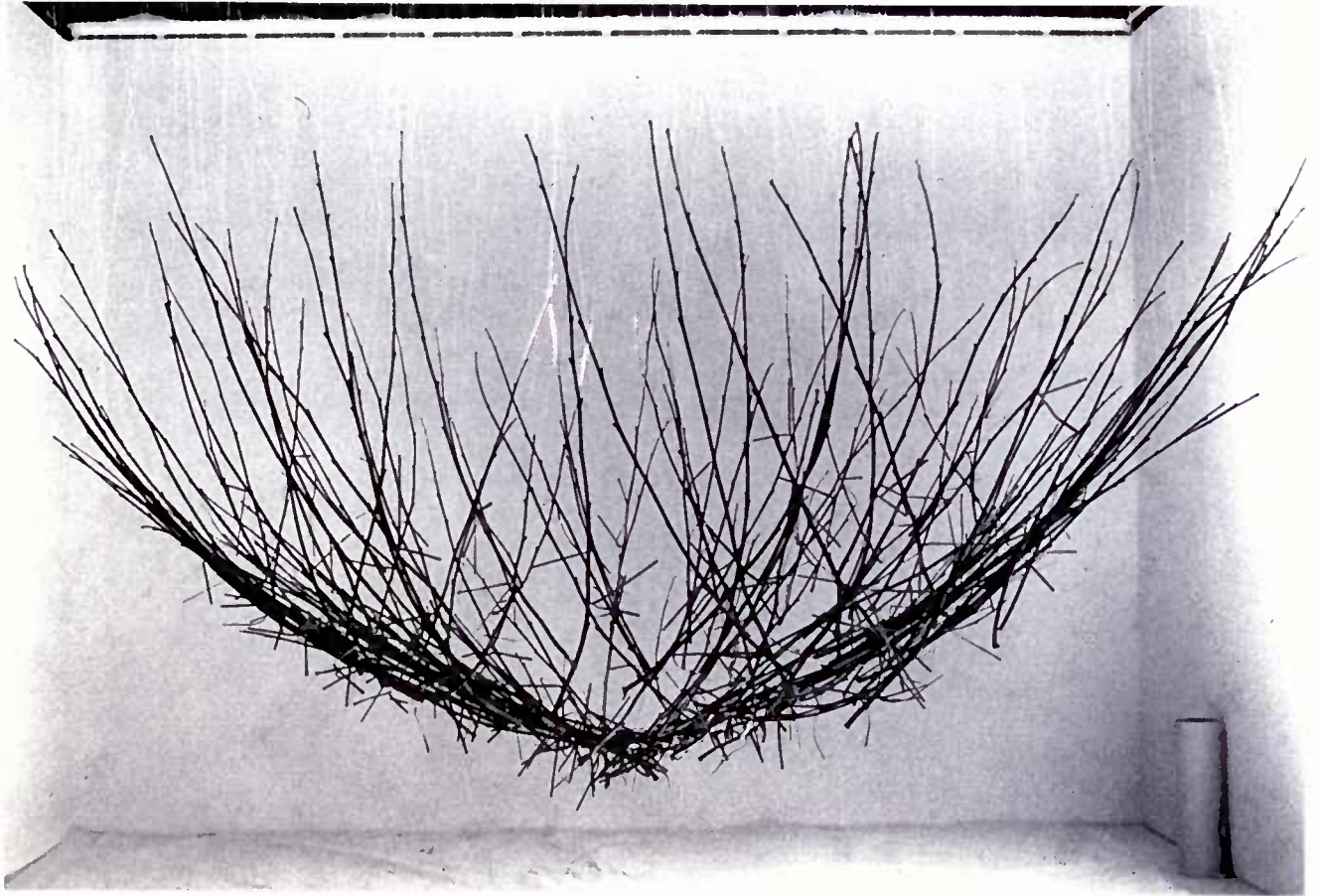
Gyöngy Laky, "Inner Glyphs Out," detail.



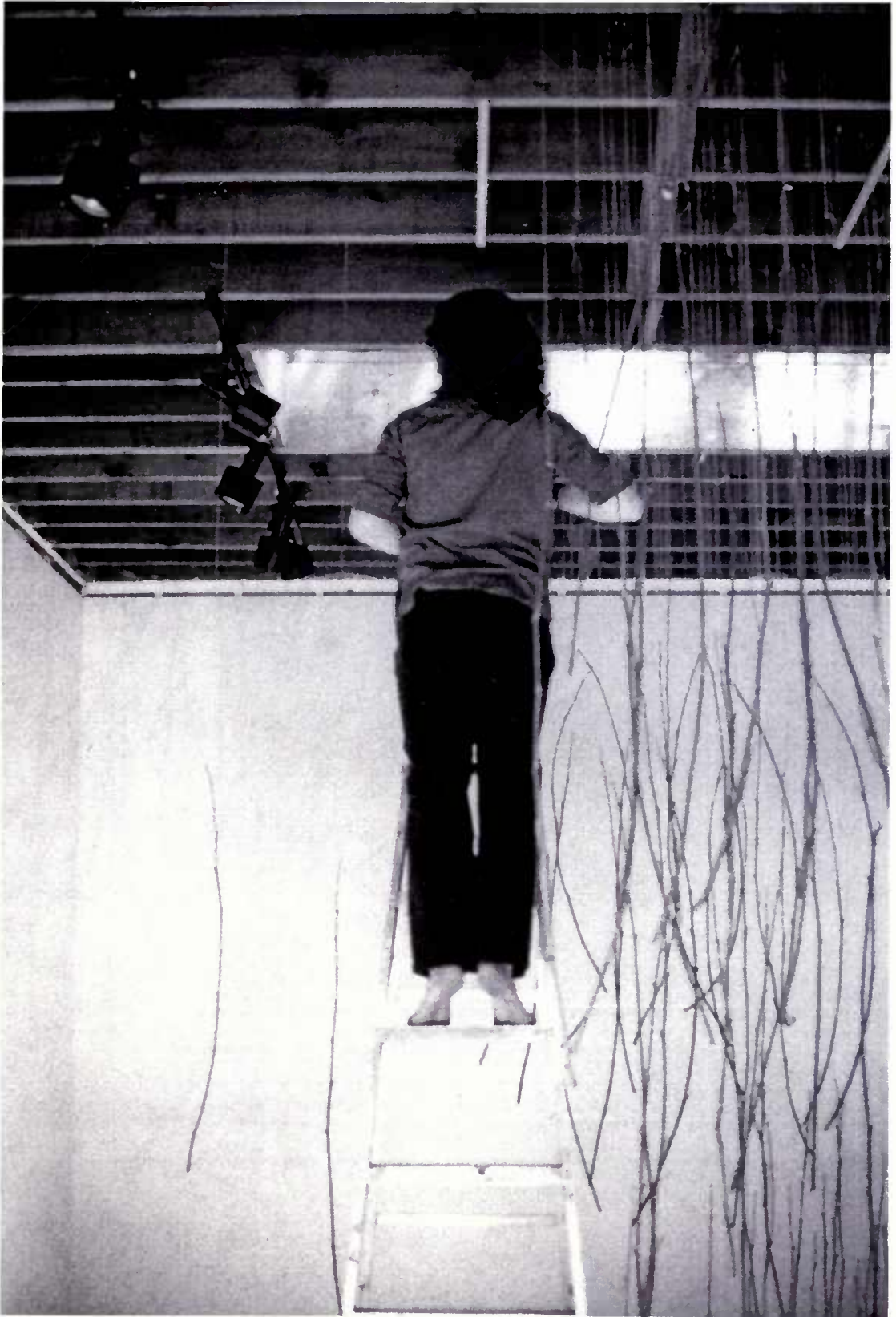
Gyöngy Laky, "Inner Glyphs Out," in process.



Gyöngy Laky, "Forms for Language," 1989. Paper from end rolls of printing recycled into handmade rope. Part of site-specific work throughout All Saints Garden commissioned by Projects Environment for International Conference, "Landscape and Sculpture," Manchester, England.



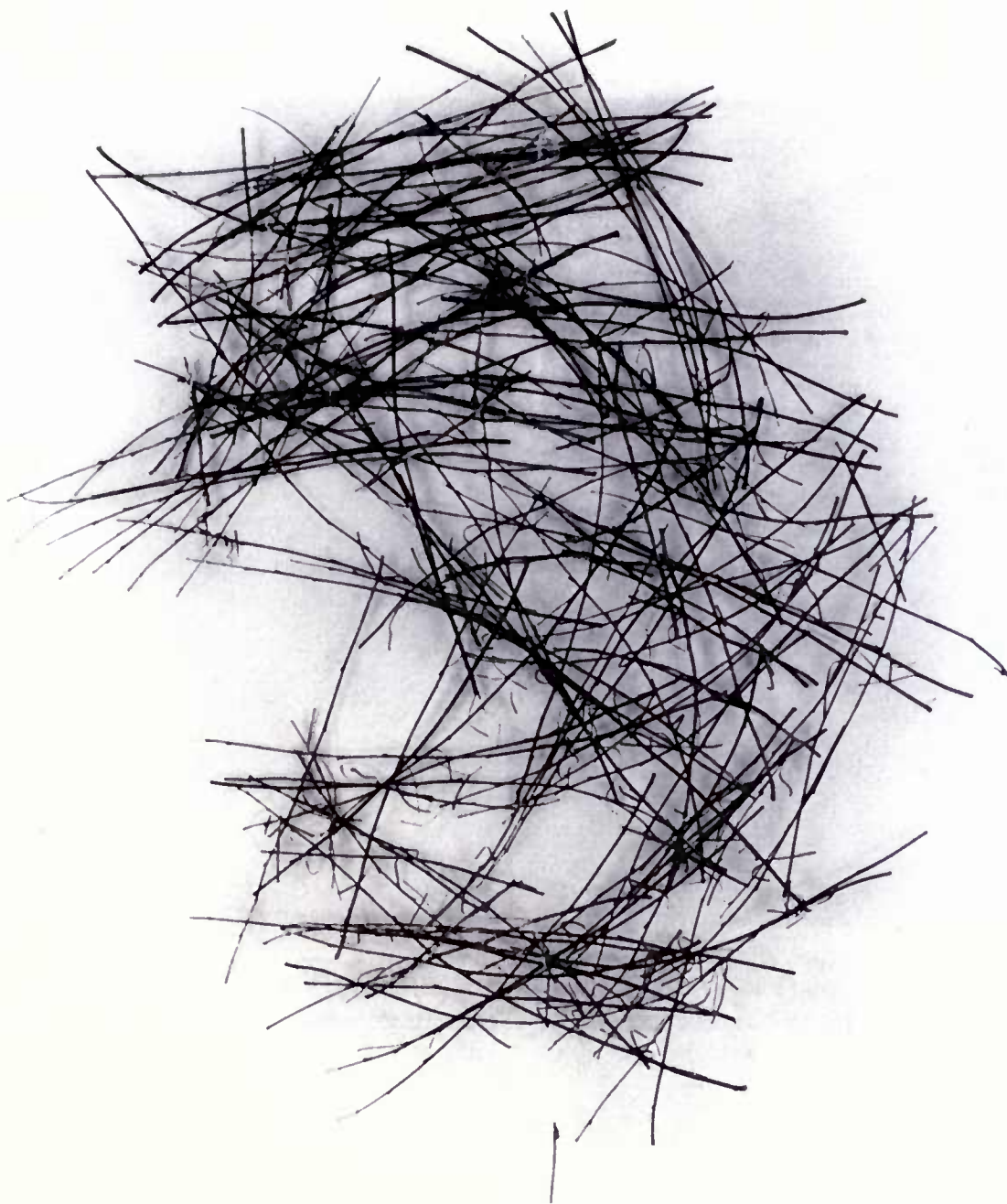
Gyöngy Laky, "Episodes in Textile Thinking," 1983. Approximately 140" in diameter. Sycamore branches, string, paper twist ties. Suspended site-specific installation in Fiberworks Gallery, Berkeley, California.



Gyöngy Laky, "Episodes in Textile Thinking," the work in progress.



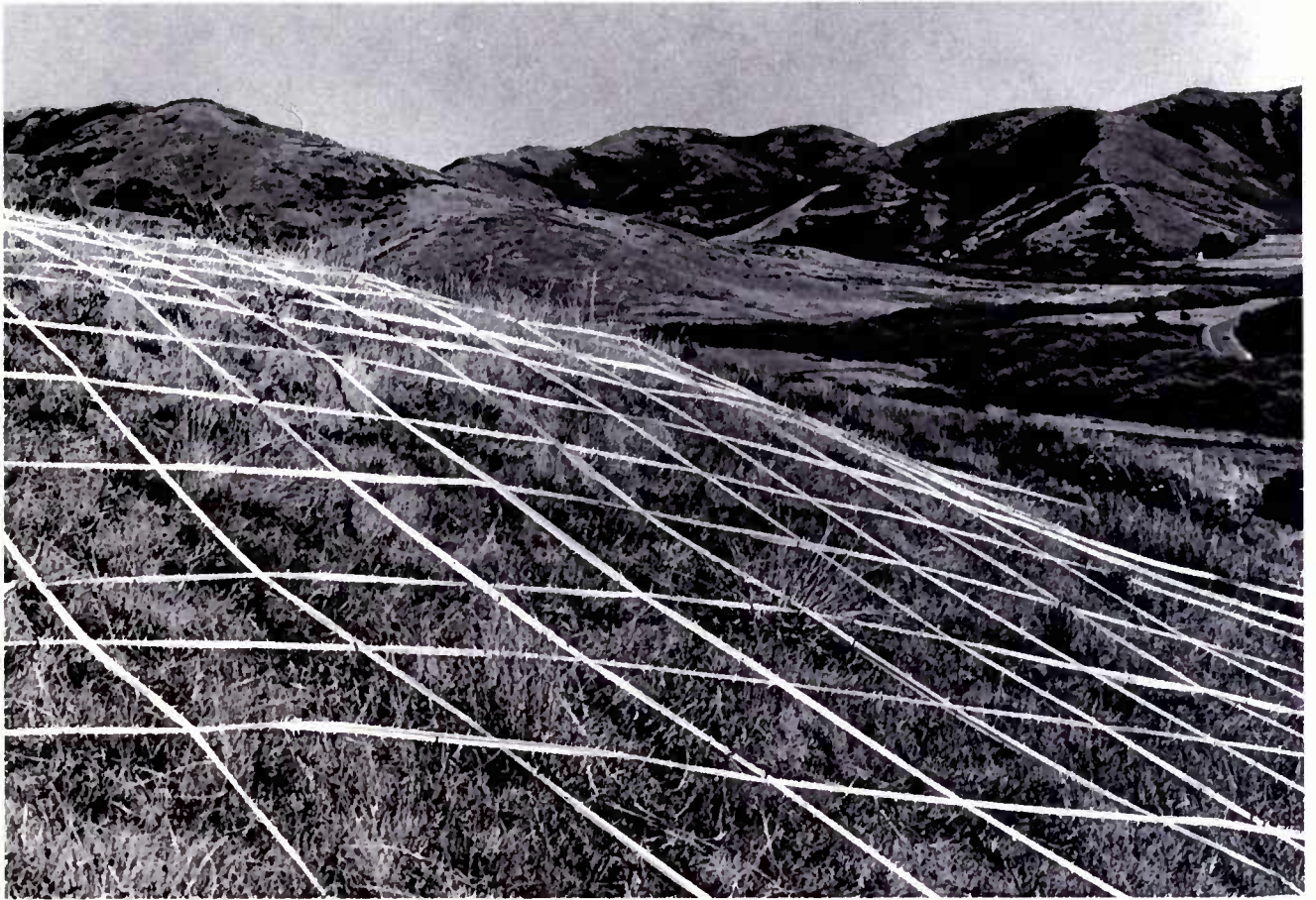
Gyöngy Laky, "Episodes in Textile Thinking," the work in progress.



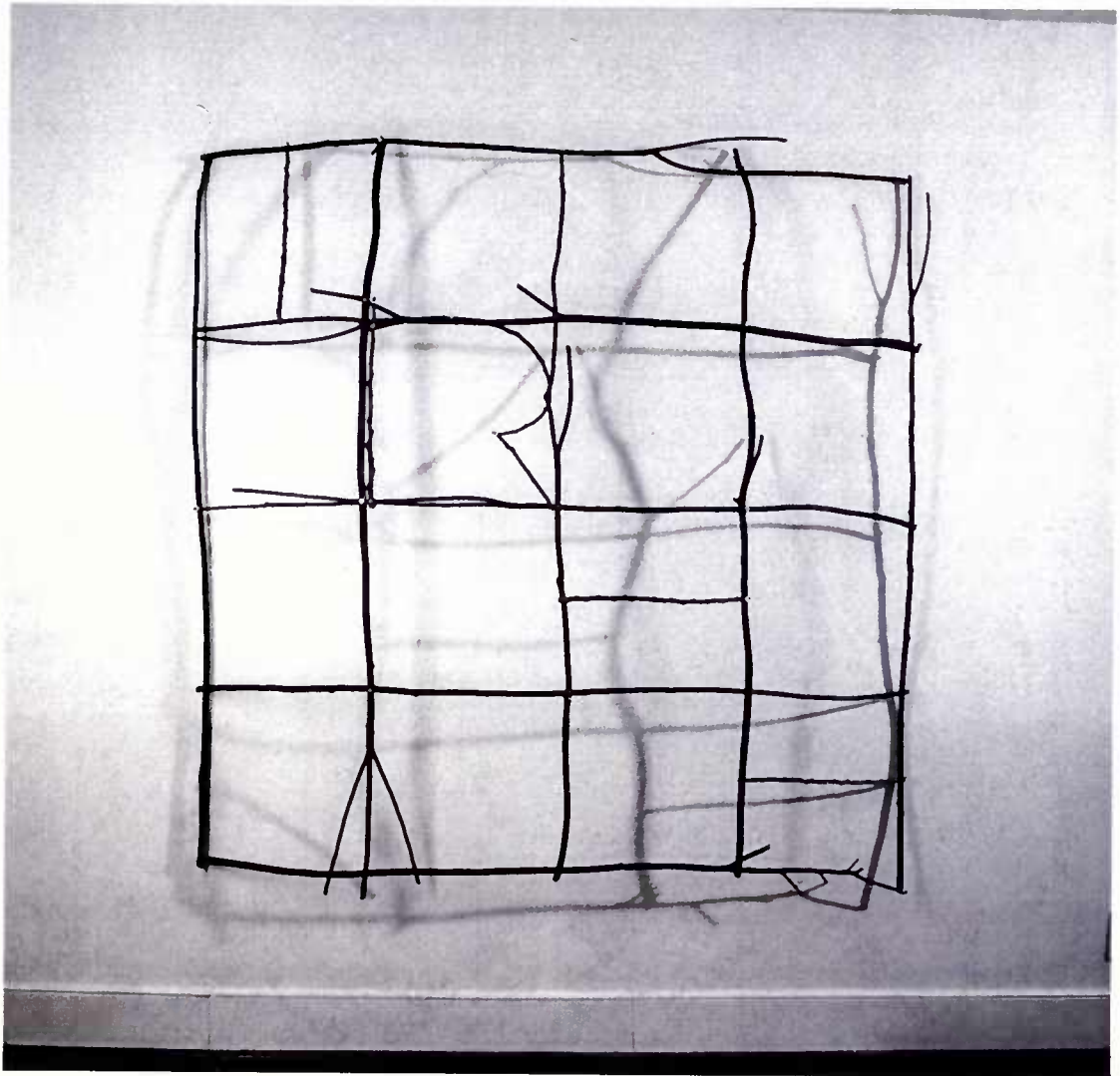
Gyöngy Laky, "Stick Episode," 1983. 90"x75"x6". Sycamore branches, string, paper twist ties, assorted wire. Permanent collection: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Gyöngy Laky, "Red Piece," 1984. Approximately 125'x150'. Red surveyor's tape. Landmarks Exhibition: W. Wiley & G. Laky, Headlands Center for the Arts (inaugural exhibition), Sausalito, California.

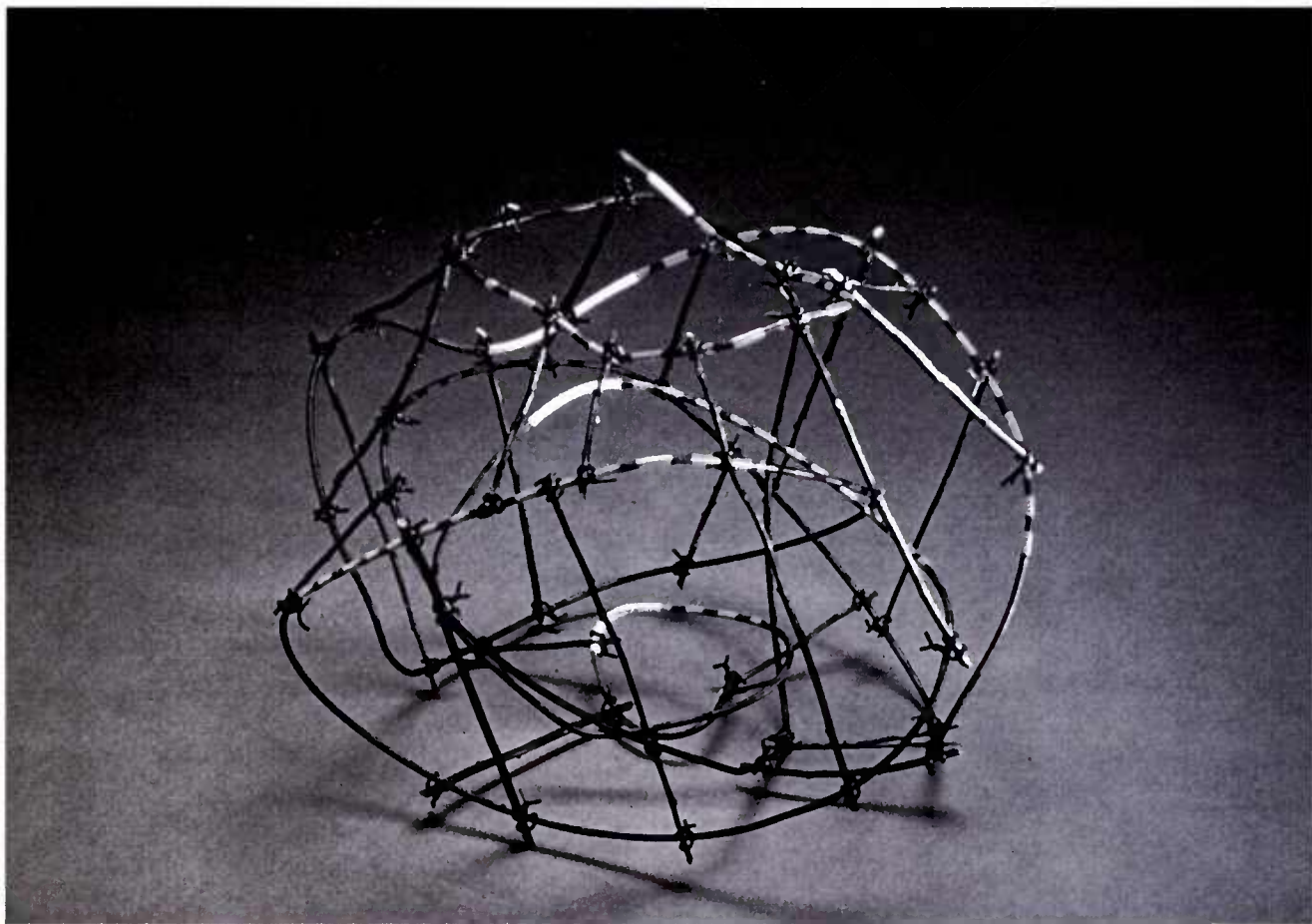


Gyöngy Laky, "Yellow Piece," 1984. Approximately 100'x125'. Yellow surveyor's tape. Landmarks Exhibition: W. Wiley & G. Laky, Headlands Center for the Arts (inaugural exhibition), Sausalito, California.



Gyöngy Laky, "Proximity," 1997. 65"x62"x9". Acacia, apricot, brass nuts/bolts. Private collection: New Jersey.

Photo by Tom Grotta



Gyöngy Laky, "Retreats and Disclosures," 1992. 18" high. Plum prunings, tape over wire.

Photo by John Friedman



Gyöngy Laký working in her San Francisco studio, 1994.

Photo by David Isaacson

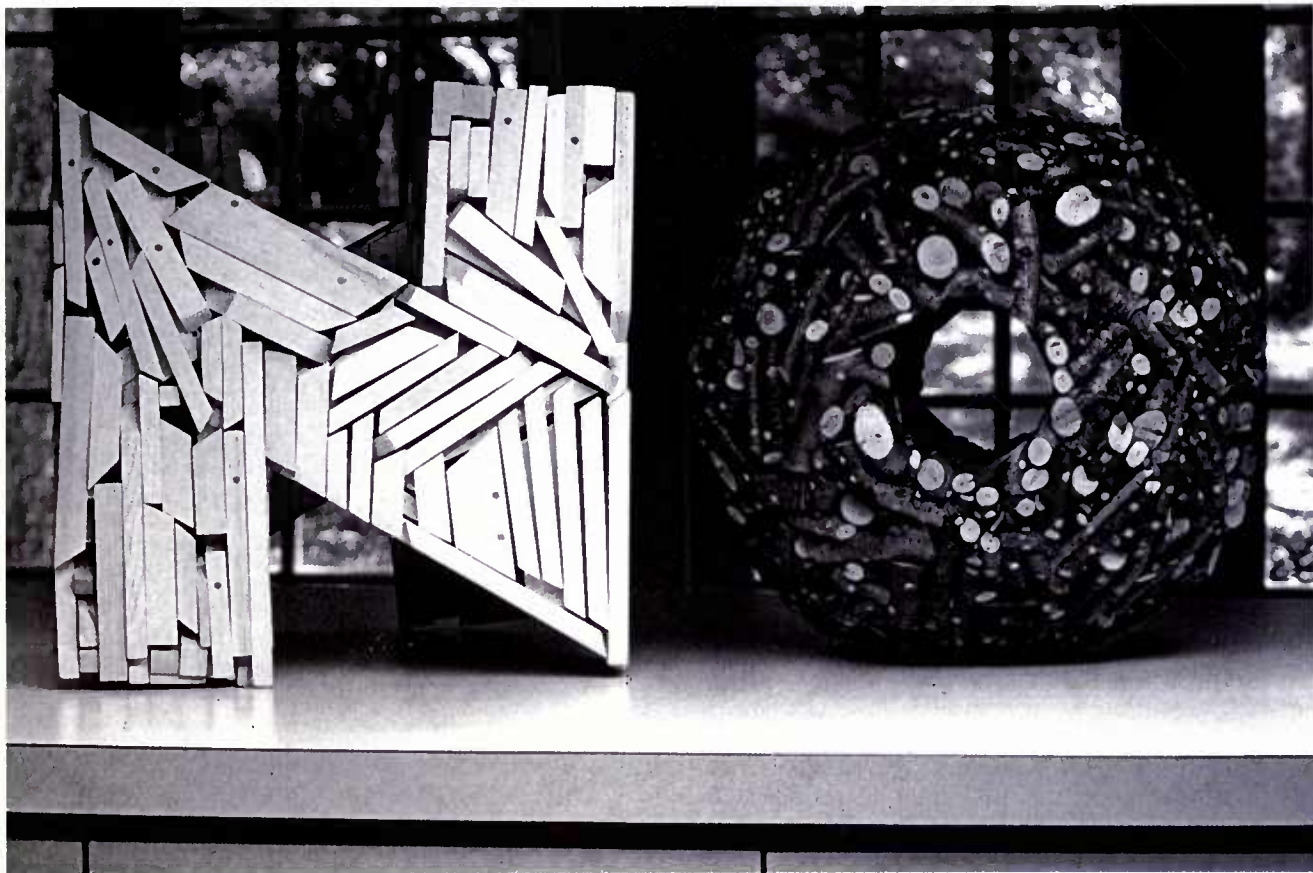


Gyöngy Laky, "That Word," 1989. 90"x54"x54" each letter. Musee Cantonal des Beaux Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland, "14e Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie." Orchard prunings, electrical wire on welded substructure.

Photo by Barbara McKee

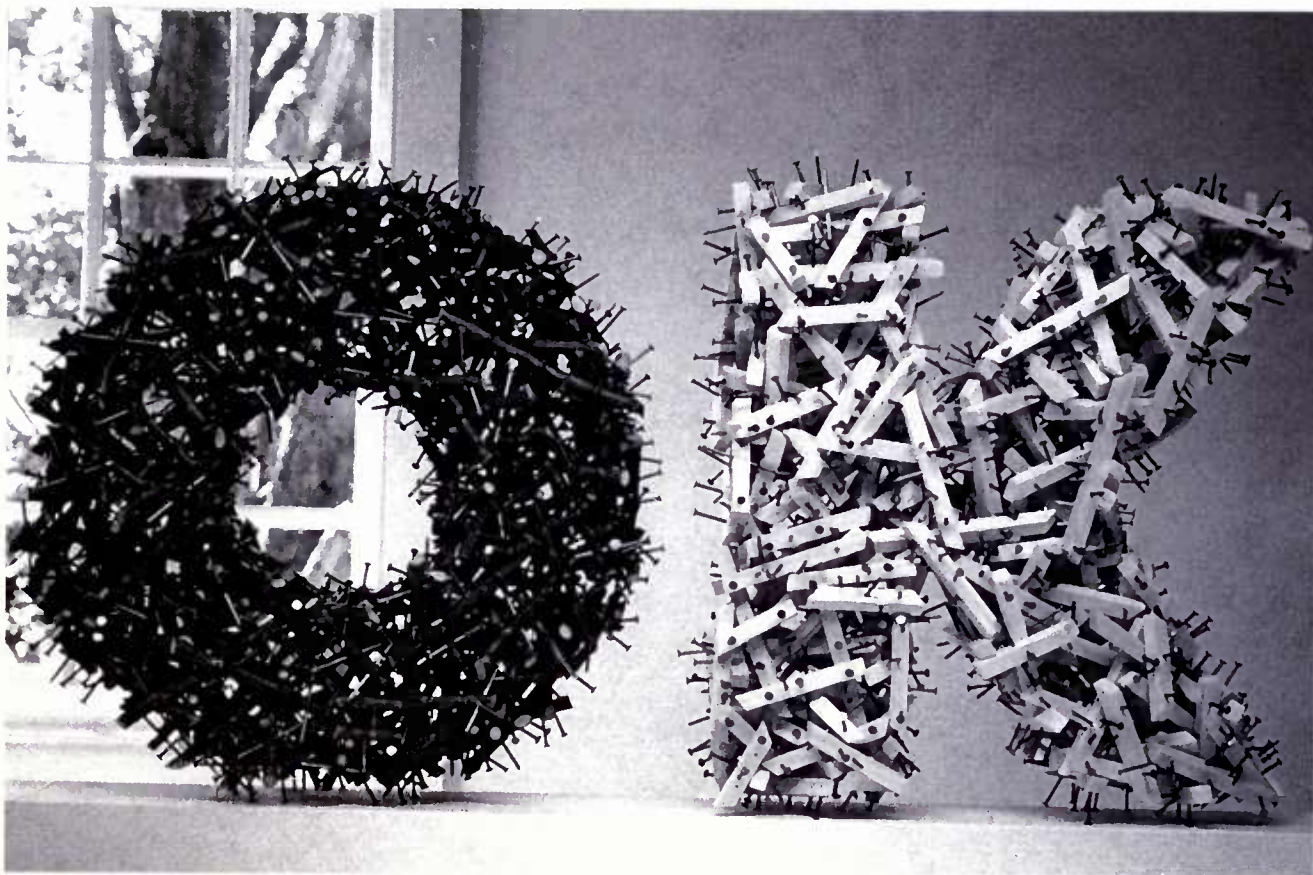


Gyöngy Laky, "That Word," in process with two friends helping.



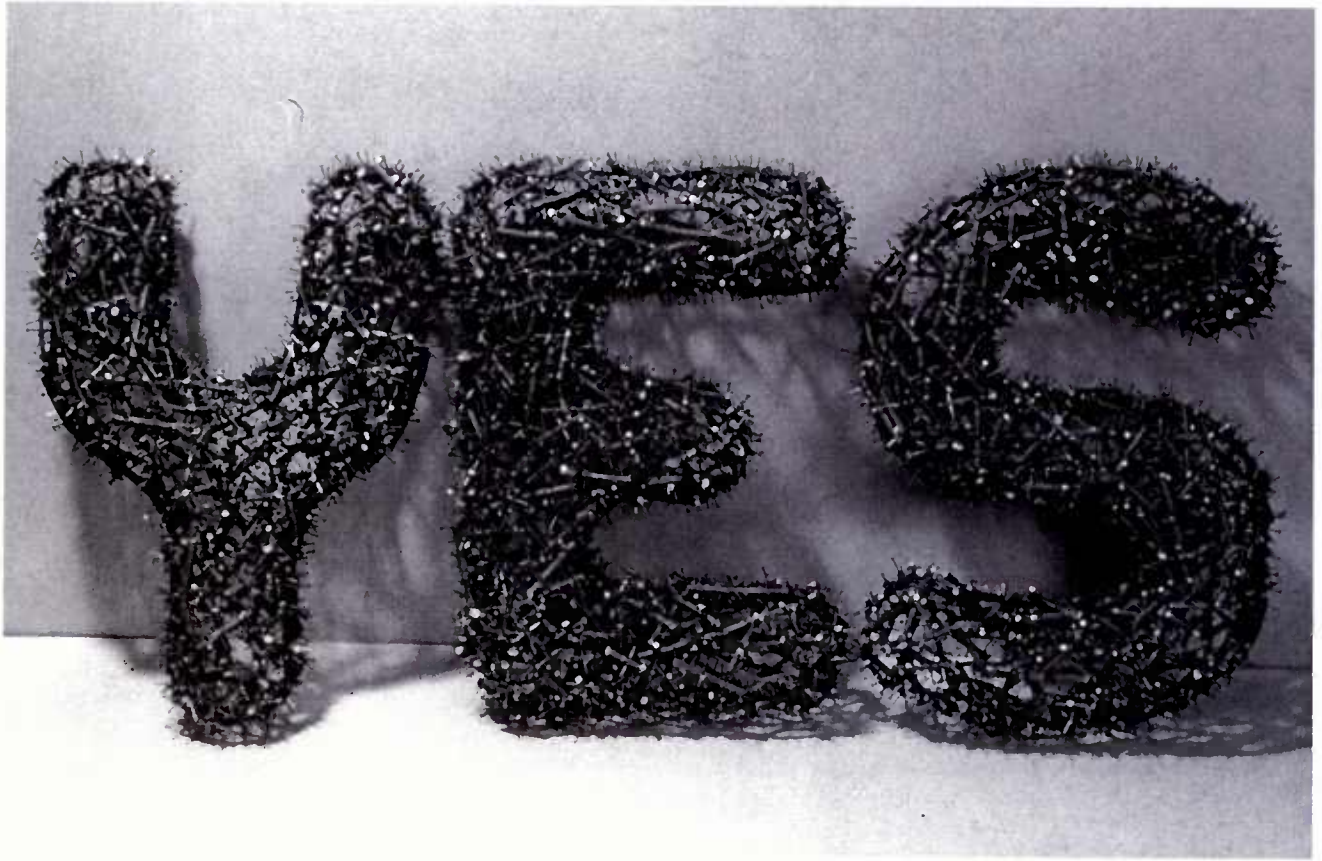
Gyöngy Laky, "Affirmative No. 2," 1996. 14"x14"x14" each letter. Orchard purnings and finished pine doweled. Private collection: New York.

Photo by Tom Grotta



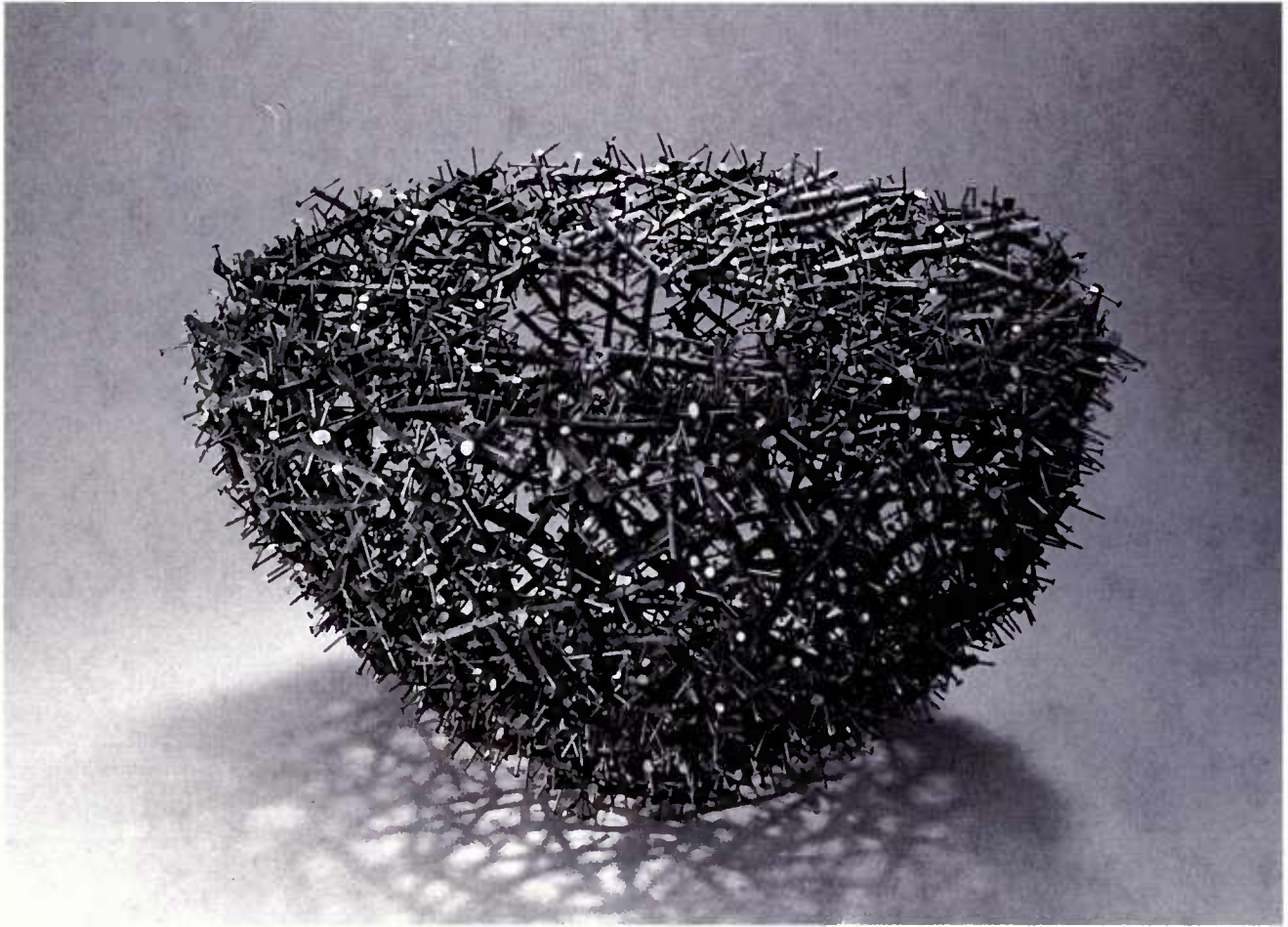
Gyöngy Laky, "Oll Korrekt," 1998. 18"x18"x7" each letter. Apricot prunings and finished pine, vinyl-coated steel nails. Private collection: Florida.

Photo by Tom Grotta



Gyöngy Laky, "Negative," 1998. 29"x60"x8". Apple prunings, vinyl-coated steel nails.

Photo by M. Lee Fatherree



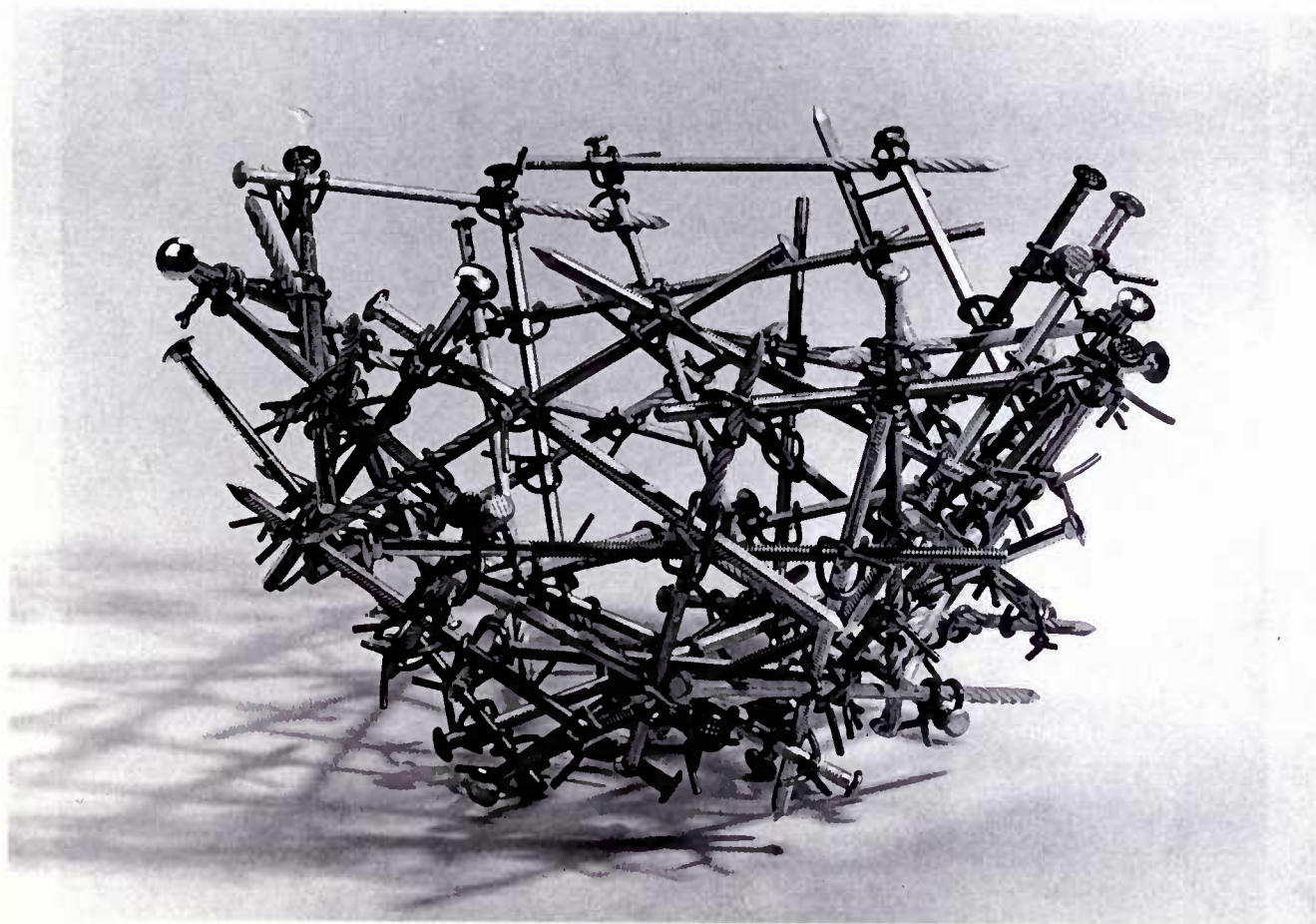
Gyöngy Laky, "Spike," 1998. 13" high, 21" diameter. Apple prunings, vinyl-coated steel nails. Permanent collection: Renwick Gallery of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

Photo by M. Lee Fatherree



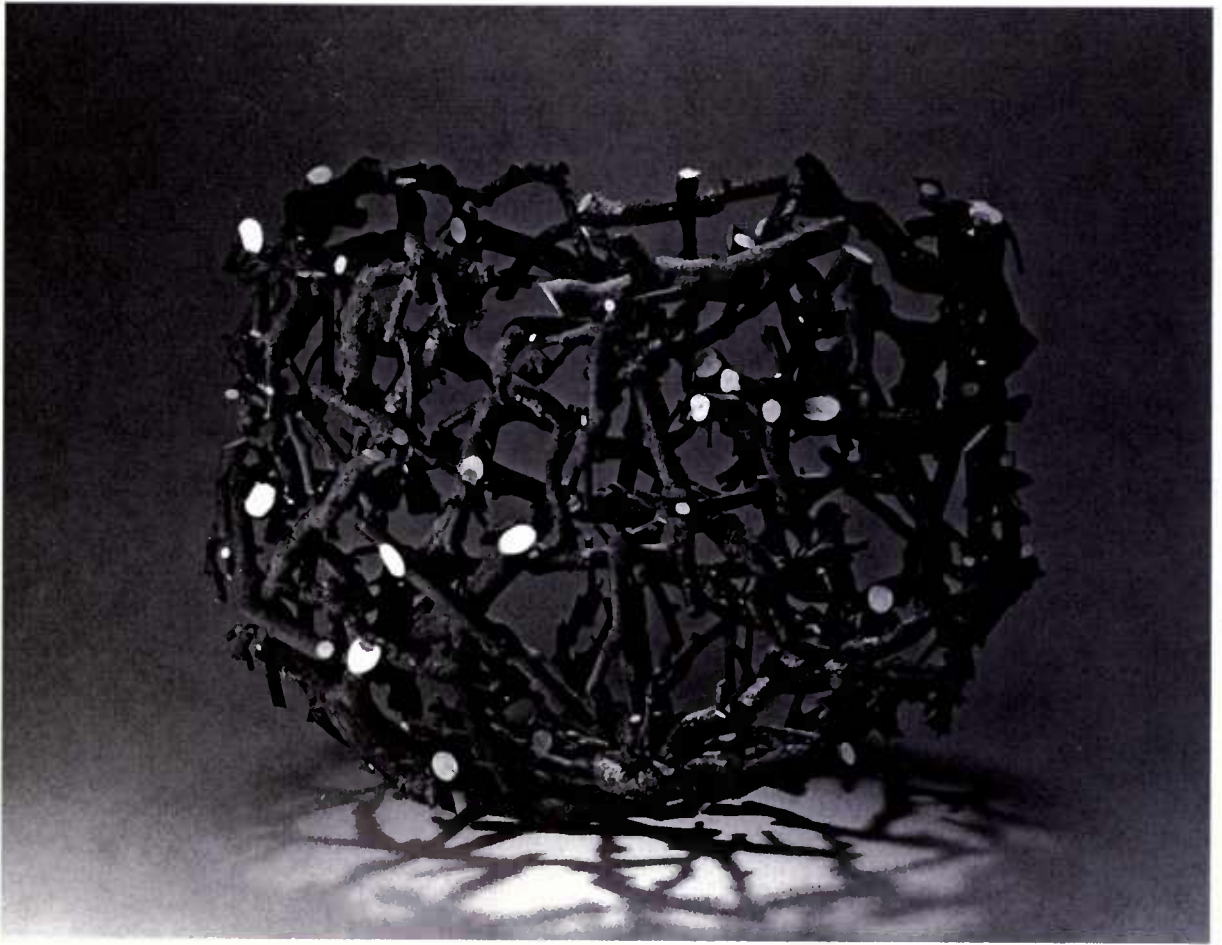
Gyöngy Laky, "Pale Weather," 1994. 20" high, 31" diameter. Almond, doweled. Private collection: Convent Station, New Jersey.

Photo by Jacques Gael Cressaty



Gyöngy Laky, "Industrial Prunings," 1993. 8" high, 13" diameter. Aluminum nails/screws, electrical wire. Tools as Art: The Hechinger Collection: Washington, D.C.

Photo by Jacques Gael Cressaty



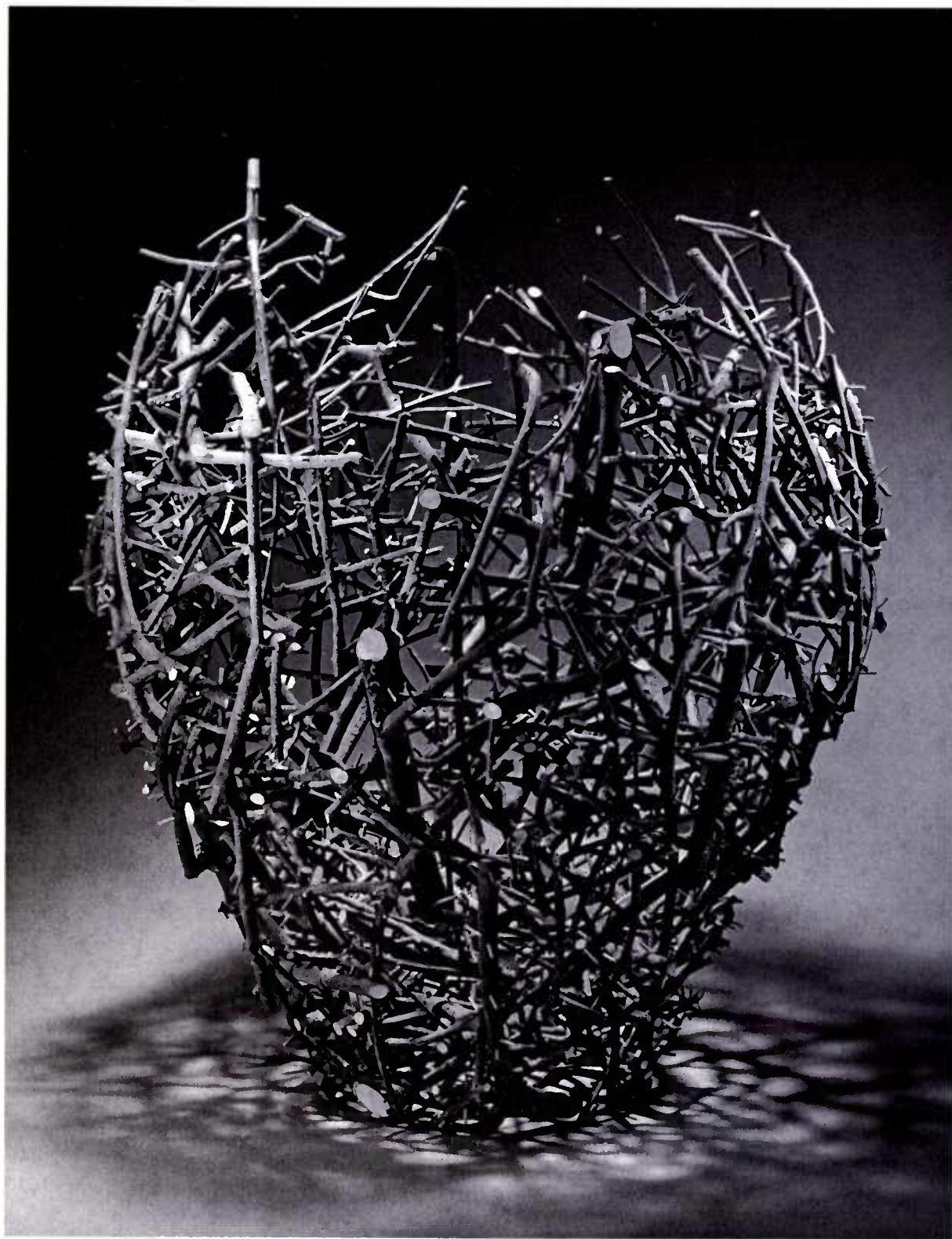
Gyöngy Laky, "Valley House," 1998. 19"x24"x16". Plum prunings, drywall bullets. Private collection: Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Photo by M. Lee Fatherree



Gyöngy Laky, "Thicket," 1997. 13" high, 25" diameter. Apricot prunings, doweled. Private collection: Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Photo by M. Lee Fatherree



Gyöngy Laky, "Oh Live," 2000. 36" high, 31" diameter. Olive prunings, handpainted wooden dowels. Private collection: San Mateo, California.

Photo by M. Lee Fatherree

VIII CREATING AND LEADING FIBERWORKS CENTER FOR THE TEXTILE ARTS

Laky: I came back from India. It was September, I believe, and I was just brimming over. I was so excited and enthusiastic. I'd seen so much, I felt so intrigued by my field. I loved doing creative work, but I came back and I had nothing to do. [laughs] I came back home and here I was. My father looked happy to see me, that was nice, and I did do some work for him, so I was able to develop a little income. I think I started flitting around with some teaching workshops I gave. I taught for a summer session at the Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada. I don't know what else I was doing then to make ends meet.

My sweet husband Tom, now husband, not then, happened to move to San Francisco about that time from Los Angeles. He was very supportive and encouraging and when ends weren't meeting, of course he'd take me out to dinner, so somehow I was managing that fall.

The Berkeley Tapestryworks and Its Potential

Laky: A friend of mine, Dennis Morinaka, an artist who had studied at CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts], took me to see a studio he thought he might rent. It was in downtown Berkeley. It happened to be a place I'd heard about but never visited, called The Berkeley Tapestryworks.

Nathan: The Berkeley Tapestryworks?

Laky: Yes. Now, you see where the "works" of Fiberworks comes from. The sixties and seventies were fraught with "works" of all kinds, there were Bookworks, and Poetryworks—[laughter] so I'm not surprised we ended up with a name like Fiberworks.

I fell in love with the place. There were vertical looms, which are really just big frames, but there they were, huge looms, several of them, in front of several walls in the space.

The space was, oh, what do I remember about it—2-3,000 square feet, a nice big space. Skylights. It was back in the block, it was quiet, I loved the space. I feel like big space means big possibility. I just was attracted to it immediately.

Well, I started yammering away with Dennis about, “Oh, and this room could be a gallery, and we could have classes here. And this is terrific. And look, they have a little kitchen in this corner, and it has bathrooms. And this would be such a great school.” Well, I overwhelmed Dennis in probably ten minutes. He said, “Well, if you are really so enthusiastic, all right, I won’t rent it.” There were also some floor looms there, and it had even a short mailing list. It was ready to go. Actually it wasn’t ready to go, as I found out, it needed a lot of work. But I was ready to go. So Dennis, dear Dennis, took a step or two back and said, “Okay, you do this.” I was just so excited, and so enthusiastic.

At the time there already existed the Pacific Basin Textile Art Center, and it was very interesting and doing wonderful things. Now that I look back, I wonder, “How did I think to have two textile art centers in such a small community? Maybe this was not such a brilliant thing to do.” But actually there was room for two. They both flourished for quite a while. I believe the two together made this an incredibly rich area for the creative work that came out. It was a wonderful area for encouraging artists and for educating people. I can imagine for them, they were a little bit horrified, that “Here comes competition.” Berkeley is big, but Berkeley is small.

Nathan: True.

Laky: So, I think there might have been a negative piece. I was so enthusiastic, and so excited about this project that I wasn’t thinking about competition. I wasn’t hesitating at all.

Penniless Fund-Raiser

Laky: Now, here’s a person with no savings account.

Nathan: I was wondering.

Laky: Had just spent her last loose penny on the last textile purchase in Afghanistan. I think I arrived home in the U.S. after visiting my brother in Ohio with twenty dollars in my pocket. I think I had just enough money to get home from the airport.

I did have an apartment here. A friend had been living in it, but I was able to go back to it, so I had a place to live. Leslie Correll and I shared a split apartment. It had two little kitchens and two bathrooms and so forth. It was an interesting place. Leslie Correll was at the time a jeweler. She’s no longer making jewelry but she was a remarkable jeweler, a very creative person. It was a wonderful thing to have lived with her. So I had my teeny apartment and I moved back in, so that was okay, but here I’m embarking on opening an art center with classes and a gallery and so forth and have no money.

So I called up my father and I talked and talked and talked and talked. He was in one of his better moods about me at the time, [laughs] because we had a rough history, he and I. But that particular time he was very happy to see me and he was very supportive, so he loaned me \$1,000.

Another friend, Ruth Tamura, an artist friend, also loaned me \$1,000. And I had the nerve to walk into United California Bank, where I banked, sit down with the loan officer and proceed to attempt to talk him into giving me a line of credit. [laughs]

Nathan: How did that go?

Laky: Here's a person with no job, no collateral, no cosigners, no nothing. I'd rented the place by now. Yes, right. Eeeek. That's why I say there's a large measure of inexperience that allows one to take a risk and leap into something foolishly. I was a person with naiveté. [laughing] I did my homework before visiting the banker. Woody Cross was his name and I must thank him in my thoughts now because I'm still amazed to this day that he accepted my plan.

I did some homework preparing for my meeting with Cross. I wrote down how many classes, what kind of classes, how long, what we might charge for them, what we might pay an instructor, et cetera, et cetera., how income would be generated. At this point, this was not a nonprofit organization; this was me, the individual entrepreneur opening a business. Naiveté. It's got to be some form of ignorance. I did make an attempt to do a business plan in a sense. I showed this to him.

You know, when I'm thinking about it now, one of the things I must have inherited from my father was the ability to talk, and to talk people into things. My father was very good at that. And maybe when my enthusiasm is full-blown, I just talk until I wear people down and they say "yes." [laughs] Because I can't believe that Cross looked at all of this. He asked me lots of questions about my background and who I am and what I did and so forth, and he did give me a very small line of credit. I think it was something like \$2,000 or \$3,000; maybe it was as much as \$5,000. Amazing. And today, I hear about microeconomics, micro-loans for women in various countries and even in the U.S. It's now such a common program and it works so well. For example, a woman is given \$200 to buy the right sewing machine and three years later she's paid off her loan and she has a business and she's making an income.

I'm now realizing that this same model happened to me. Somebody, Woody Cross, (I remember his name even though I forget my best friend's names these days) sat down and listened to me and decided to take a risk and decided to support my enterprise. And those three little financial pieces really made Fiberworks possible.

And then Tom's loving, enthusiastic support. He didn't have a great income at the time either, but his love and support were tremendously important, and I couldn't have done it without that. Really.

Good Will and a Mailing List

Laky: The mailing list was interesting. The assets I purchased with the lease in January, 1973, included this tiny mailing list. The woman who had the place and I came up with an agreement. Her name was True—Geraldine True. There were a few counter balance floor looms. They were not very good, but they were good as a start. Then there were these larger vertical tapestry looms that were quite nice. So I don't know what it was, maybe \$500, somewhere around that, I forget what it was, I was buying the equipment, the good will, and the mailing list. I didn't even know what business "good will" meant until that moment, and so I was learning fast, and that was exciting and fun.

I love learning new things and I love challenges, and it turned out I loved entrepreneuring, business, and administrative work. I love and hate it. I was also working harder than I'd ever worked in my life and I needed to learn fast because I needed immediately to know how to run a business.

That mailing list then was very small. I don't know, 100 names. So I put all my friends on the mailing list and I put their friends on the mailing list and their neighbors and their relatives. If somebody had a mother vaguely interested in all of this, we put her on the mailing list, and if somebody's uncle came to town and wanted to see the place, we put his name on. We put them all on the list. [laughs] The mailing list was the grocer and the people down the street and the guy who walked his dog by the studio every day. That's how we put together the mailing list.

I actually tell my students this today. I say, "Look to the left and look to the right, and look in front of you, look behind you. These are your colleagues in the future. These are the people who will be part of your professional group. These are the people you put on your first mailing list when you have your first exhibition or your showing or your first interior design debut or whatever you're doing. Who else? You don't know anybody. It's going to be your parents and their neighbors and the people who live behind you and the people sitting next to you in class and me and my husband. Who else do you have to invite to your first exhibitions? So be aware that it's the people immediately around you who help you become active in your field, who are your early support."

It is hindsight now that I can say this to my students. Those people were not just names on a list. They actually did come, and they did support, and they did tell their friends, and they did take the classes. The little concentric circles of people in our lives are the people who then make our ventures possible.

Nathan: (I'm going to stop this for a moment.) [tape interruption] So you were really learning how to create and to operate an institution?

Laky: I was. It's fun for me to think back on those early days and realize just how many, many, many levels of learning there were.

From Business Venture to Nonprofit Organization

Laky: I'll tell you another small detail which now I think is so funny. We announced, you know, I say, "we," even though it was a private entrepreneurship in the sense that I had opened a business. My friends and my artist friends were intrigued and came around and started participating right away. It really was "we" from the beginning. I just didn't know what a nonprofit organization was, and I didn't really know what a school was. I didn't know the form that Fiberworks should take.

I only knew a little bit about business because my parents had an art gallery where I had worked. So I functioned out of my limited knowledge and limited background. It was about six to eight months, maybe even a year later that we reformulated it into a nonprofit organization and got a board of directors. But it took that year or so to learn, for me to learn. So there were some classes, just a few classes in the spring of 1973.

I opened Fiberworks to the public in February of 1973. That spring there were a few classes and workshops. I kept a list of who signed up for classes in a little spiral bound notebook, not even eight and a half by eleven, just half that, [laughs] and when someone dropped out or canceled, I crossed out that name. But if that person was the third person, number three on the list, of course then I had a number three to fill. I had to put the number three down at the bottom after number twelve or whatever it was, so my page got very messy if there were several shifts with cancellations or somebody moved and wanted a different class. The whole business was in this little notebook. I didn't even know how to set things up. You know, a filing cabinet. I didn't even have one. How to keep track of things? It was just this little book that fit in my purse.

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Nathan: So somehow you knew that if you had the school, they would come. Was that part of it?

Laky: I don't know. I functioned, I think, out of a great deal of just—positive energy, just full of hope and anticipation. I wouldn't even call it hope, because hope suggests that there's a possibility that it won't work.

Nathan: Yes.

"It Will Work Out"

Laky: I think it was just energy, enthusiasm, and anticipation, not hope. I would not allow myself to even imagine that it wouldn't work. I don't know where I get that, but I do function that way quite a bit. I leap into things with a sense that, "It will work out." I found the film *Shakespeare in Love* interesting because the theater owner, in whose theater Shakespeare was putting on his plays as he wrote them, had a saying that he repeated, especially when some big problem would occur, "It will work out." And then Shakespeare would say, "But how? We need an actor for that role and we don't have

one.” The theater owner would answer, “I don’t know how. It’s a mystery, but it will work out.”

Nathan: Wonderful.

Laky: He said it over and over. It really struck a chord in me, because I recognized that I functioned that way so often. It’s a mystery. I don’t know how it’s going to work. I’m just assuming it will. Somehow it’ll work out. That’s a little Pollyanna-ish, but I think what happens is that I’m putting so much energy towards something that there’s no time or space to doubt.

That may connect to creative work in some way, also. I find, working with students, one of the main issues is to build up their confidence so that they know their work will succeed. The thing that stops work is self-doubt and worry. Anxiety does not help. If you can just forget about anxiety long enough to create the work, [laughs] then we can sit and analyze it to see how well it worked afterward, because that’s really the issue when the work is finished.

Now, if no students had shown up and paid their fees for those workshops and classes at Fiberworks, I would have been in a big soup. I can imagine that probably the thing I would have done next is gotten busy thinking of something else, maybe artists in residence, low-cost studio space, or, I don’t know, I probably would have been pedaling like mad to keep the bicycle going. But I do think there might be a parallel somehow, with the kind of risk-taking in creative work, where you just have to assume it will work out. You’re going to take the risk, it will work out, and you put all your energy and time in the direction of making it happen, not in worrying about it ahead of time.

Now, the only thing is, you have to think through what you’re doing. You can’t just leap about, hoping that anything and everything that comes to your mind will work. But I think that is part of the process, also. It comes out of experience. You build on your experience. Now, with Fiberworks, I wasn’t building on very much experience, I was really building more on enthusiasm.

I had done some teaching at the Arts and Crafts Co-op in Berkeley, and in fact, it was a very nice place to work. It was a very good place to start out, so I had a little experience. Also, in the university, I remember that I got involved with other students and organizations and events. That’s experience, too, of a kind.

Nathan: Sure, or even Ramona’s Cafe, for example.

Laky: That’s right. And having to figure it out and make it work, that had a financial piece. I bought five dozen eggs and got ready to sell egg salad sandwiches. [laughter] I had to be able to afford to buy eggs the next day again, and bread and mayonnaise and whatever. So I think there were bits and pieces of experience which I drew together, but certainly not very much experience about anything like starting an art center. I’d never really started a business of any sort. But it was exhilarating.

Developing the “Salon Effect”

Laky: It also seemed to catch the imagination of a lot of people. One of the things that happened there right from the beginning; it was a beautiful space, it had a lot of ambiance, so that others wanted to spend time there. I think sometimes environment is important. Just the kind of ambiance somewhere will be conducive to things happening.

We used to joke all the time about the “salon effect.” No matter who came by with a little bit of interest, there’d be coffee—Peet’s—on the stove. There’d be tea, all the right kinds of herb teas that we loved. There might be a little something else. Someone would come by with a little snack or cookies or whatever, and drop them off. So, we spent a lot of time sitting around talking. It was wonderful.

Some of those conversations were fabulous, meaningful, out of the heart. They were really great. The fact that there wasn’t too much going on left room for this. As I recall, only two or three of the classes had enough students. So what do you do the rest of the time?

I bought chairs at fifty cents to two dollars each; I think the most expensive used chair I bought was two dollars. We, of course, needed to strip them and sand them and then paint them to make them look great. Somewhere along the way somebody had given me large spools, PG&E wire spools, but these were huge. One of them was like six or seven feet in diameter. A couple of the others were four and five feet, and those were really nice for small group gatherings. There wasn’t a lot of business going on, since most of us didn’t have career jobs yet. There wasn’t a lot of pressure or activity, we sat around and had conversations. It was really and truly wonderful.

There was another thing about these conversations. Right from the beginning there was a sense of openness. If somebody came by and that individual was interested, that individual sat down and joined the group and got into the conversation. It didn’t matter whether we knew each other or not. There was a spirit of openness and inclusiveness which was wonderful. It led to many, many good things happening.

Nathan: Were many of these people former students of Ed Rossbach at Cal?

Laky: Most were. Most of the core of people who showed up and painted chairs and sanded and fixed the lights and things like that were my closest friends and colleagues. Chere Mah, Wendy Kashiwa, Nance O’Banion, and Susan Druding, who is owner of Straw Into Gold. There were a number of others. The circle widened very easily and spontaneously.

Indonesian Textile Exhibition, Third-World Riches

Nathan: Drudy?

Laky: Druding. D-R-U-D-I-N-G. Straw Into Gold is a textile art supply store here in Berkeley. She happened to know somebody who had collected Indonesian textiles. Wonderful things. Most of us had never seen any of these textiles before. Most of the people in California had never seen any of these things before. She introduced me to this collector and the first exhibition in the gallery was spectacular textiles from Indonesia: Sumba, Timor, Roti and other islands, traditional works that were truly magnificent.

That summer was just wonderful. Lydia van Gelder gave an ikat workshop to show people how these things were made. Our first major brochure was exciting. The whole summer was full of activity and learning and people coming in to visit. So suddenly, after a very quiet spring, suddenly there was lots of activity and Fiberworks took off. The exhibition particularly attracted a lot of attention. There had never been one like that in this area.

This now brings to my mind some of the key things that I appreciated about that time, and goings on around Fiberworks that really had a profound impact on me. One was that for whatever reasons, interest in the rest of the world and largely the third world was strong. The textiles and the art pieces and the culture from other areas were so enriching to us. For example, the Indonesian textile exhibition had an impact. None of us had ever been there, so we didn't know anything about them. The textiles were so beautiful and so complex and so interesting with their space-dyed threads, images, colors. They influenced other people's work. The Indonesian ikats influenced a lot of doing and thinking from then on.

Somehow it seemed that automatically through this institution, we were reaching out to other cultures all over the world. We were very interested in traditional textiles from all over, but when we started looking, the places we found the most interesting ones were in the third world countries. We found wonderful things in Africa, China, India, Central and South America, Mexico, Japan, Uzbekistan, that's where we found the riches that we were after. It was the non-European world. We knew the European world's textiles. We knew the beautiful Spanish brocades and Italian silks. We didn't know this other realm. There was a very automatic way in which people reached out to other cultures and other ethnic cultural expressions.

Paralleling this, it seemed that we were recognizing those cultures within our own midst, within our own sphere, in our own neighborhoods, in and out of Berkeley. There was an automatic interest in the diversity around us. So as the sixties were taking us into the Civil Rights Movement, and teaching the acceptance of difference, and acceptance of ethnic groups in our midst, we were easily propelled in that direction. We were automatically interested in increasing our awareness and contact.

For example, a little while later, in the spring of 1976, we had an exhibition of Chinese textiles, even more startling and wonderful than the Indonesian textiles just because of the scope of it. It was exceptional.

We found out at that time that there had been no exhibition of Chinese textiles in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1944. I think in 1944 there was an exhibition at Stanford. Here it was, 1974, in an area where there were many, many Chinese Americans living, and there had been no exhibitions of Chinese textiles. Chinese textiles are extraordinary. They're really very beautiful, very interesting, and done with enormous

skill. Some of the embroidery is just outrageously beautiful. So here we are, heading into something where, very naturally, the greatest inspiration is coming from the most disenfranchised groups around us. It was very interesting, I found myself becoming even more political than I'd been before. Though it was just a little art center with interested people dabbling around with something that they loved, many issues were at play.

Women as Leaders: and the Huge Weaving

Laky: Another issue at play, this was bra-burning time and the rise of feminism, was the fact that it was mostly women who were involved in the textile field. We had hardly noticed. The art work was very intelligent and very creative, and very inventive. Here was a place where women could excel. There were a few men around, I remember them. I notice them in the photographs from that time. [laughs] They were there, but here was a field gaining in strength and momentum in which women were the leaders and women were doing the extraordinary works. It was exhilarating. I was a woman, I was exhilarated.

We knew about and used the women's movement, but we also somehow stumbled upon a field where women automatically were the leaders, where women automatically could excel, where women automatically were supported in their ideas. It was quite exciting.

For some reason, being in the early seventies at this point, we were also very neighborhood and community-oriented. At one point we put on a one-day workshop for a drug rehabilitation group. In the workshop we made a huge weaving that we dyed all together and wove all together. The people in the drug rehabilitation program didn't know how to do any of these things, but we had as many artists [laughs] around and interested and involved as we had participants from the program, so it didn't matter who knew what; we all did it together. It was a great event. The piece resulting was quite beautiful, startlingly beautiful, considering it happened so quickly.

Nathan: How can art—I'm just curious—how can a large group of people work on the same weaving?

Laky: Well, actually that was something I dreamed up. I think it was because Geraldine True left us those counterbalance looms. Those little looms when I looked at them closely weren't great, but they were okay. What they were was wooden bars in sets of two suspended on a pole, and between the two bars were strung strings that had a little eyelet in the middle of the strand. Those threads with an eye in the middle where what one threaded yarns through; those were the heddles of the loom. I said to myself, "We can do this, we can do this on a large scale." So we hung poles from the ceiling, in two sets.

Nathan: Those are hung vertically?

Laky: No, they're hung horizontally.

Nathan: I see.

Laky: Two looped ropes came down from the ceiling to hold a pole suspended parallel to the floor. Then from the pole hung two sets of double bars below it and parallel—one set balancing the other—hence, a “counter balance” loom. The two bars held the ten- to twelve-inch heddles between them. Each heddle has an eye in the middle. That means you can thread them with warp yarns. If you have two situations like that, harnesses, they are called, you have a loom. It turns out looms are the simplest mechanisms in the world. With any group of parallel threads under tension, you have a loom potentially. This is the simplest form. Threads are manipulated with the fingers. In backstrap weaving, you tie the bunch of yarns to a tree, and you tie the other end to your waist, you have a loom. Now the more complex looms have more harnesses, and metal heddles, and can now be computerized. Looms can be very sophisticated, but if you can simply suspend some yarns under tension, you’ve got the makings of a loom.

Hanging these bars with heddles from the ceiling, we already had a very mechanized loom. With the two harnesses half of the warp (alternating yarns—odd numbered yarns) can be raised up, making a space in between the two sets of warp strands to pass the weft across. Then the looped pulley system we had rigged up allowed us to pull the other harness up with the other set of warps (even numbered yarns) as the next step. This makes a new opening, for the next pass of the weft across. This alternation is repeated as the weaving progresses. It could not be simpler.

So we decided we would do it on this grand, enormous, huge scale. The strands we used for the warp were actually from the upholstery industry. They were about an inch in diameter and they were cotton with a webbing over the surface. This sort of rope-like strand was huge in scale, but it was soft and it was cotton, so these warps would take dyes. We sprayed and we splashed and walked on them and colored and then we hung them up, stretched them across the room from one side of the studio to the other side of the studio. With these harnesses and the heddles hanging in the middle, we needed two people to move each harness up or down, and that’s times two, so four people were moving the loom mechanism. Others were weaving from underneath and up above, pulling the wefts into place and packing them down. We did that with our hands, our fingers, because the scale was so enormous, or sticks or whatever anybody found, for pushing and pulling the weft across the eight-foot width of the weaving. Everybody was busy. It took twenty-five or thirty of us to make this huge weaving, but that was it, it happened in a weekend, it was great.

Nathan: What happened to this immense weaving?

Laky: I remember it was actually hanging in the Neighborhood Arts office. It hung there for a while. I don’t know where it finally ended up, I don’t know where it is today. I eventually went on to the university at Davis and other people were involved with Fiberworks. Who knows where the weaving is now? A work by committee sometimes doesn’t look good at the end, but this piece was really beautiful and very interesting, and on that scale, it was quite something. When we hung it up, it was probably about eight feet wide because the harness bars were standard lumber length. I think they were one by twos, eight feet long. It was all together twenty feet high, eight feet wide—huge. And very colorful.

Nathan: Very heavy, I would think?

Laky: Very heavy. It took several people to hoist it, we used pulleys to pull it up and hang it on the wall, because it was big and heavy. So it was fun to do.

There were a number of other events that were for children, or events for community groups. We basically took the artistic abilities in our group and we gave them out to the community. We put together events where we knew people could participate and learn and do something creative. We had such creativity in our midst that it was really quite easy to do that and lots of fun for us, too. It was great to put our show on the road, or invite a group into Fiberworks to come and participate in some sort of event that we would cook up for the weekend. It was really quite an interesting way to work as artists.

“Creativity Belongs to Everybody” Workshops

Laky: This activity had a built-in community responsibility, not responsibility; I think there must be a better word. The philosophy we developed was that creativity, in a sense, belongs to everybody. It is part of our culture. Also, that everyone and anyone has a measure of creativity. It was a kind of open door on art, that it seemed we had there. People walked in and it did not matter who they were, what their backgrounds were. It mattered whether they wanted to contribute, or whether they wanted to be creative or to learn. Many individuals did walk in who had tremendous things to offer. They just kind of walked in and said, “Would you be interested in...” “Well, yes we would.” And “Yes, please do,” or “show” or “do a demonstration.” Or, “If you want to put on an event,” if it seemed to fit, well, “jump right in.” There was an openness that was really quite wonderful, coupled with the idea that children, grandparents, your neighbor, anyone and everyone had the potential to be creative and have—not the right to—but I don’t quite have the right language here.

Nathan: Not capacity, maybe?

Laky: Capacity. That acting creatively is an important part of who we are as human beings, and we should do it. Now, some people do it all the time, and are very skilled and make a profession of art and they go in that direction their entire lives. Other people might just stop in for a weekend at Fiberworks and try their hand at something and do something fresh and interesting that feels good to them and then move on. That’s fine. There was a sense of being non-judgmental, that the creative activity had value in and of itself.

Whether a person had a great deal of background or very little did not establish whether the outcome of the creativity would be good or bad. Sometimes we had people come to Fiberworks who had no background. They would come in and do something that was absolutely wonderful and that would influence all the people around them, individuals with no art training. This happened often enough so that we came to see that creativity is an aspect of human beings that can pop up in unexpected places.

And of course there were people who then made a choice about their profession, to go in a creative direction, to spend their whole lives doing visual art. Other people just did it as part of who they were and part of their daily lives. That's fine. At Fiberworks there wasn't a sense of hierarchy about the purpose. If you just did it because you enjoyed it, that was as important as doing it because it was your full-fledged profession and you were going to be exhibiting in museums. I liked that a lot. I like that. It felt very egalitarian, that attitude. It put value where value belonged.

Fund-Raising

Nathan: Now, the people who led these workshops or made people welcome, were these staff members paid or volunteers?

Laky: People were paid, but it was such a small amount that I would say most of what motivated artists was their desire to do teaching and their willingness to get low pay and be involved. We always knew it was low pay. I mean, it was very hard.

Finally when Fiberworks became a nonprofit organization and I geared up for fund-raising, I had to learn all about that. It was very interesting, [laughter] writing proposals. I had to learn a lot very quickly. Chere Mah was very involved. She's so smart and was so good at helping me come up with concepts and how to approach ideas for funding and writing up budgets and so forth. I had to learn how to write a budget. I didn't know how to write a budget. But we did very well with fund-raising. It of course was difficult.

I remember I decided I had to go to New York and fund raise in New York. Now, that was a ridiculous idea. Nobody in New York, I mean, New York? Are you kidding? Who? The Ford Foundation was going to fund us? I don't know. Anyway, I decided I had to go to New York and fund raise, so I made lots of appointments, and we made a huge portfolio of the various Fiberworks artists on individual pages with their activities and their events and photographs. It was a huge format that was very heavy to lug around, but very beautiful. I went on my rounds in New York. And of course, not a penny. Not a penny. What a silly idea. What a waste of time. But somehow I had it in my head, that if you're really doing fund-raising seriously and development properly, you go to New York and you go to the big foundations and you knock on those doors.

Well, we did get more sophisticated. We went to our local foundations and got support from here and there and from the National Endowment for the Arts and the California Arts Council and others. So we did learn and we did do well. We developed a membership and had lots of members and people who actually sent us more than just the minimum membership. We developed lots of services, eventually, for artists, so really it became quite a full-fledged organization.

More on Philosophy, Structure, Exhibitions, and Exciting Ideas ##

Nathan: So you actually helped individuals develop their own marketing, that kind of thing?

Laky: Yes, we had lots of different things going on. Let me backtrack slightly to the exhibitions.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: I already mentioned the Indonesian textiles and Chinese textiles exhibitions. One of the ideas about the exhibition program was that we would be showing as much contemporary work in the exhibition realm as we would do traditional-historical. It was a balanced program. We had exhibitions of contemporary work interspersed with the historical and traditional exhibitions. One of these was really quite wonderful because—well, actually I’m not going to describe any more of these now. I’d like to talk a little bit about the overall structure and how things were organized and some of the key, let’s say, philosophical attitudes that really made it such a special place at the time.

You asked, “How do you organize the teachers and were they paid?” Well, everyone was paid. It was important that this was not just volunteer; this was serious, this was professional, this was a school, this was a center people began to rely upon. It had to be a proper place and it had to pay people, even though we understood that it was difficult to get the level of pay to the point that we thought it should be. I’m not sure we ever got it there. Maybe after my time as director, we did.

So it was structured in that sense, but one of the principles of organizing the program was that we would not allow a preconceived structure of the program to dictate what happened and when. We would set up a program based on the latest, most interesting, most enticing ideas that the artists had to offer. A practical example of this attitude is, we didn’t want to say “beginning weaving happens in the fall, intermediate weaving follows beginning weaving, and advanced weaving follows intermediate weaving.” If somebody had a very exciting idea about something that artist had just developed in weaving and wanted to explore, we found this motivation much more important for setting up a class than a preconceived notion that we had to start the beginning of the year with beginning weaving instruction. We didn’t want to get into that.

We had courses that were easier for people who had no experience, and we had other courses that were maybe for people who had a little more background and wanted to try something more demanding. But it was all motivated by the enthusiasm of the artist/teacher for the subject matter. We didn’t like saying to each other, “Would you please teach X because we have to have it in the program.” We liked saying to each other, “What are we most excited about teaching now, and would we like to teach it next time?”

Later, it seemed that we had to move away from that a little bit, but early on it was very important, and it made for exciting teaching and exciting classes. People were teaching what they were most enthusiastic about, not what they had to teach. It made a huge difference.

There was no paucity of ideas. We always had lots of things that people wanted to teach. They were interesting and fascinating and over a broad range of approaches so that there was never a problem of having a good strong, diverse and interesting program. It didn't just happen. There was so much life and energy in this field at the time. There were lots of subjects, and setting up of programs was easy.

I mean, not easy; I had to get on the phone, I had to write up the descriptions, figure out what materials were needed. It was work, but there was never a feeling of coercing somebody into teaching something that that individual did not want to teach. So the classes were energized by enthusiasm, by the fact that an artist might be teaching a subject that she was just then developing in her own work. It was very exciting, and very immediate, and endlessly fascinating.

People were discovering things. At one point somebody, and I think this might have been Chere Mah, brought in the idea of hand-made paper-making, an easy form of it without the need for major equipment, and so everybody was making paper. It was nuts. [laughter] For a while paper-making took over our lives and Fiberworks. We took that dog and pony show on the road, too. Eventually, we could set up paper-making almost anywhere in the midst of any event. Our youngest student I think was three years old at one of the events we had, and of course some grandparents wandered by who were probably in their eighties and nineties, who also made paper; it was just great. We loved it because it was engaging, surprising, and easy. Then certain artists actually began using paper-making as a sophisticated form of art working for themselves. This emerged out of that early splashing around and blenders chopping up vegetable matter or recycled paper. So the innovation was constant and that fueled a really fascinating program.

We had a core of artists, people, who wanted to be more involved and were always there to count on, so we started having meetings of the artist committee to discuss things, plan and oversee programs. So more structure came in as the place grew, and it did grow very fast. It developed quite a reputation, even an international one.

I'm trying to think of a couple of other things about the basic organization that were important. One was that we felt the best teaching would come out of people teaching what they wanted to teach, not what they had to teach, which I described. And another was that we always wanted the contemporary with the traditional not only in exhibitions, but in classes as well. Another was that we really wanted to have a global reach to our interest. We assumed that was part of our subject matter. Actually Fiberworks actively encouraged travel and collecting and photographing. We started having a wonderful series of lectures, because people who were members, or artists who were involved, went out and traveled and photographed and collected and brought it home to us, the eager audience.

I want to get back to a little bit more of the description of the exhibition program.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: Will Collier, who had been a visiting lecturer at University of California at Berkeley when I was a student—a painter, and artist of various sorts—did photography collages, and drawings, beautiful work. I think we had him teaching something, but he also was a

collector and a very eclectic collector. Much of his collection overlapped the interests of Fiberworks, being textiles area. It included masks and toasters, which somehow seemed to be textiles in some odd way. Old toasters. [laughter] Will not only collected these things, but sometimes his collections would creep into his own art work as his art work would creep into and merge with his collections.

For example, some of his photography was of the toasters. He then would layer these as collages or they would influence his drawings. As he looked at items in his collection he would sometimes start seeing interesting relationships, and he would reorganize his own collection so that you sometimes couldn't tell where his work ended and his collection began. I remember salt and pepper shakers he placed in a wooden box under a translucent sort of diffusion grating, where you couldn't recognize the objects but you could see them. It changed the objects. They were still salt and pepper shakers, but they had somehow been miraculously transformed under this piece of plastic. So we invited Will down to do an exhibition.

Watching the Creative Process

Laky: Now, Will, in his process of collecting and making art work is sometimes slow and takes his time, so it took a couple of weeks for this exhibit to be put up. Will came in every day to the gallery and he reorganized this and combined that and put some of his work in, but then moved things around and changed where parts of the collection were. It was fascinating. We started just gathering at the door to the gallery daily to watch the process.

It was the creative process happening right in front of our eyes, but it was happening in a merger of the historical with the contemporary because his work is very contemporary; it was abstract, it's non-objective. This process was so fascinating. We started talking about the fact that it was the process of putting up the exhibition that was the real gem here. Yet we were going to open the door on a certain date and invite the public in to view a fixed display, whereas this creative process is what we really ought to have been presenting.

So a little later that led to discussions about exhibition as process and to Susan Wick and Deborah Rapoport living in the gallery. They moved in. They opened the doors to any visitors who wanted to come in. They did studio work in the gallery. Every day they typed out what had happened artwise. They posted this up on the walls and they put the examples and samples up that they had been working with. They invited people in for lunch, but it was all part of their creative process. A third artist eventually joined them and they developed a group threesome of doing creative events that were really their creative thinking and process on view and open to the public. They did one at the University Art Museum at Berkeley later on, and they got NEA grants for this work. It was putting the artistic process on view to the public, opening the door to the studio; not with the artist just standing there and explaining what was behind the work she was doing at that moment, but the artist actually being creative in public, doing her work, allowing the public in, allowing for conversation in the midst of the creative process. It was absolutely fascinating.

So another philosophical element came out of this, which was the importance of the creative process, really the crux of all our activity and interests. It's the process of being creative that is probably of greatest value to us human beings. Somehow it became clear that it's the doing that's important. Now, we humans love the products and we become attached to them and we enjoy viewing them and we enjoy relating to them, and talking about them, but the active part is the creative process. And in the process is where wonderful things happen, and where the learning and expansion occur.

We wanted to peel open the process and allow a larger audience in so that the viewing of art was not always detached, so that the viewer could actually step in, into the middle of someone's creative thinking and watch and ask and be a viewer at that closer range.
[tape interruption]

Nathan: So are we going to say a little more about the process and what that requires from the artist, to be willing to be viewed like this?

Laky: The centrally important issue in this is that the artist has the confidence and the comfort to allow strangers in during the creative process and be comfortable and confident taking those risks, trying out ideas, leaving the door open, even though being unsure of the outcome. Usually we do this privately. Most artists work by themselves. Today it's become much more common for artists to work in public: installations, site specific works, public art, community arts projects. Now it's a more common occurrence. We're not so surprised by it today and it's happening more.

I've since done a number of projects working out in the public arena and with groups of people as participants or onlookers. But at that time, this was unusual.

Nathan: How does it feel when you are working and experimenting, as you go along and you know people are standing there watching you? Do you think about them at all when you're working?

Laky: I think that I have become so geared to a participatory audience, teaching, having other people involved, that it's quite comfortable to me now. But I have to answer this truthfully. I'm not sure that I ever open up the process quite as much as Susan Wick and Deborah Rapoport did, in that I will often do my thinking by myself. I'm a little further along with my ideas when the work is being done in public. Well, I'm trying to think. I did a gallery installation at Chico, at the gallery at the university there, in 1993. I believe in that instance, my creative process was open to the students right from the beginning. They were involved, and the entire process was open to anyone who walked in. I was making up things on the spot, so I think I do that, also. It isn't as automatic for me. I learned from my artist friends at Fiberworks.

Fiberworks had a major impact on me, my art, and my life, and I think maybe on the teacher I am today. There was a lot of exchange and learning. One of the things that I got from that experience, that early experience, was to give openly, not to secretly guard my ideas. People did not secretly guard their ideas, they didn't think, "Oh, this is my special way of working, I'm not going to show it to anyone." The moment somebody came up with something that was working and exciting, that artist could hardly wait to do a class or demonstration to show everyone: "Here I just invented something, come look, let me teach you, let me show you." Wonderful spirit in that regard.

There is sometimes a tendency of artists to guard their good secret ideas and have ways of working nobody else can do, but at Fiberworks, it was just the opposite. The moment people figured out some strange way of braiding or a different way of presenting a performance, whatever it was, it was given and out. The feeling was that there were so many ideas following behind that you didn't have to guard your precious inventions or discoveries, that good ideas, creative ideas were limitless and there would be many more to come.

Nathan: You felt in effect, there's always more? What an exciting thing to be doing.

Bay Area Textile Arts: Current Scene; Recent Past

[Interview 6: March 21, 1999] ##

Laky: We're actually recording?

Nathan: We're actually recording, and we are probably ready to go into the Fiberworks years: 1973-1978. When you came to do this, create this big organization, did you have a sense of what the Berkeley and Bay Area fiber arts scene was like?

Laky: That's an interesting question because in fact I think I had a lot of ideas about things. I think I had a real sense of both the field in the larger sense and the potential of the field, and I was terribly excited about it.

I think I had very little actual specific information. I think in some ways I had been so busy doing my undergraduate and then my graduate work and then I went off to India, so in a way, I think I probably had insufficient information. But then on the other hand, it's hard to know what things in life are important. For example, I think I mentioned this earlier, but Pacific Basin Textile Arts existed already. I think it started a year or a year and a half before Fiberworks. Well, I'd never been there. I knew about it, I had heard about it, but I was away when it opened and so I didn't know much. It's possible I would have gotten involved with Pacific Basin had I gone down there and spent some time there, and it's possible I never would have opened Fiberworks, so it's a funny question. It's a good question. It's a kind of psychological question. I hate to admit that I maybe was not very well informed, but I think that was probably the case.

The other area where I realized later that I didn't know very much was about the recent past.

Nathan: In?

Laky: In the textile arts. I had some sort of strange notion that it was all being invented right there before my eyes, that I was in the midst of a movement, we call it a movement you know, northern California-centered, the focal point of all this brilliant creativity in the textile arts. That was because I was aware of Kay Sekimachi, Ed Rossbach, Katherine Westphal, Ragnhild Langlet, et cetera. And it seemed like what they were doing was so wonderful, this must be the center of the world. [laughs]

It was some years later that I became aware of [sighs]—these lapses of brain power are just so distressing. I'll think of her name in a minute.

Nathan: Lillian Elliott?

Laky: No, well, Lillian was one of my teachers at Berkeley. She was, I think, a visiting lecturer then, and so I knew Lillian. And Joanne Brandford, of course, was a visiting lecturer and she was wonderful. She was a real mentor to me for years after she taught there. She taught the textile history class, the second time I think I took it. The first, I almost flunked. [laughter] Yes, here I am in this field and I did so poorly in that class, and it was just terrible. The second one she taught and it was brilliant. It was wonderful and it just turned lights on in my brain.

But I'm thinking of a New York artist—Lenore Tawney.

Nathan: Oh, Lenore Tawney, yes.

Laky: I must have heard about her, maybe I saw something in a magazine, but I didn't know about her contributions. I didn't know anything about her wild tapestries that had holes and slits in them and how excited and upset everybody was when she was doing these things to traditional tapestry in the 1950s. You know, she was really brilliant and she was one of the people who formed the contemporary field. It turned out that she is a close friend of Haku Shah, so I got to know her personally after my return from India.

And there were many others, like Claire Zeisler and so forth. So I was terribly ignorant, and that part of my knowledge was filled in later.

See, you've asked a very good question, Harriet, because this is something I need to think about with our own graduate students. Yet I don't know if I would change my education, going back, looking back. I don't know if I would change it. I feel like I got lots of information, but less about how that contemporary movement had come to be.

I didn't know the people who were behind it and who had been working for years and who had been doing outstanding works, taking risks and trying new things. Today it's a different story. There's much more communication. There are more magazines on the subject. There are web pages, there are many more books, so it's a different situation today.

Critical Mass of Creative People; Little Public Attention

Nathan: (I'm going to stop just for a moment.) [tape interruption] Well, there is something about being in at the creation that gives lots of energy, I would think. There are a lot of different ways of getting into this?

Laky: Well, what happened, it was a juncture. It was an important moment historically because there were a few people here who had such power in their creativity, their work was so captivating and so exciting, that they motivated all of us young people

tremendously. Kay Sekimachi, Trudi Guernonprez (who was teaching at the California College of Arts and Crafts), Ed, his wife Katherine Westphal, Dominic DiMare, and others, not many others, but it was a kind of critical mass of very creative people at exactly the right time. It seemed to be a good place for them to be doing their work.

What was interesting about that time, also, is that nobody else was interested, really. No galleries were, well, some, but very, very few. Art magazines weren't covering textiles. *American Craft Magazine* was called *Craft Horizons* at the time. It was a very, very good magazine. It's still a good magazine, but it was different at that time, quite intellectual and very interesting. [phone rings] There wasn't an "establishment" in the field.

Nathan: Were there enough galleries?

Laky: Very few. Margery Anneberg had her gallery in San Francisco and she did a wonderful job. It was an exquisite gallery and she devoted her attention to textiles old and new. It's that combination, I think, that was so energizing here in the Bay Area, northern California. We embraced the traditional/historical at the same time that we were doing these wildly contemporary, modern, outlandish things. The combination made for very rich activity in this particular part of the visual arts.

The Artist, Both Gregarious and Solitary

Nathan: Is it part of your way of operating, to bring people together?

Laky: Yes.

Nathan: Deliberately so?

Laky: Yes. I have a very, very gregarious part to my personality. I'm an organizer: "Oh, that's a good idea. Let's do it, and I'll call so-and-so," and right away have a meeting, and before you know it, I'm off, bringing people together and doing, it is a part of my personality. It's almost schizophrenic because the other part of my personality is the quiet, individual, all by myself. I can spend absolutely hours and hours and hours uninterrupted, in complete silence, working away on my work. I find the two so strangely different. I like both, I can't give up either one. [laughs]

Nathan: We could call it a well-rounded personality.

Laky: Or what is that polar whatever?

Nathan: Bipolar?

Laky: Yes. [laughter] Two opposite extremes. The organizer, group part of me, the gregarious part, is also one of the important pieces for my teaching. I love being with a group of people who are involved in creative work. I just love it. I feel most of the time as if I'm learning as much as they are. Especially if I can really do a good job with a class, really

get people interested and excited about what they're doing. It's then a wonderful situation for me, so I think that gregarious part is fed constantly. And then of course my subject matter, how I teach, what my ideas are, and what I want to convey to the students comes from that quiet individual time in the studio, so it's a very happy combination in the teaching arena but also for my art work.

Nathan: Well, you seem also to be a very positive teacher in that you're open to lots of different ways of doing things. As you get into Fiberworks, the teaching then becomes a significant part?

Laky: Absolutely. Also, the place for people to gather was very significant. For people to get together and talk and think and play and do and create, that was wonderful. I really loved it, I was so excited by that. Everyone else seemed to be, too. People were very pleased to have a place to go and to interact with one another, to get ideas, to try things, to be creative in an encouraging environment.

One of the things that I found to be very interesting about Fiberworks was that people were willing to be very creative and very personal in public, right there in the Fiberworks studio space, with everyone's nose in their work. It's an interesting phenomenon to me. An example to the contrary, I have now forgotten this person's name, a student in our graduate program a little bit ahead of me.

Nathan: When you say ahead of you, are you talking about your student days now?

Laky: Student days, when I was in graduate school at Berkeley. This person was a year ahead of me. She came up with a very unusual way of treating plastic, some mysterious and wonderful heat process with which she pulled openings across sheets of plastic in a pattern. These were just very exciting things. She would not tell anyone about how she did it.

Nathan: Oh?

Laky: She did not reveal how she did this to anyone. Everyone was dying to know. Other students wanted to try it, it looked so great. I wasn't particularly attracted. It was related more to the print-making part, and I liked that, but that was clearly not my direction. But all the people who were interested in the two-dimensional design aspect of things were electrified by her process. She would not tell a soul.

Now, I don't know where she is. I can not remember her name. Maybe she's not doing creative work anymore, and it's lost and buried in her memory somewhere and nobody's doing this process. Maybe somebody's discovered it, I can't remember exactly what it was. It was something with heat and chemicals and I don't know what. Lost.

I remember the impact of that on me was so great, I just vowed that I would reveal everything I was doing immediately to anyone interested. I was horrified that a person would guard a mere technical bit so strongly. Now I understand it a bit in business. We've got our secret thing that we do and we make 500,000 widgets, the other guy does not know how to make them, so maybe we guard our secrets. And maybe country to country, we've got our bombs and those are our secrets and we don't want anybody else

getting those secrets, there are bad consequences if they do. I could not understand it in the context of art. I could not. It just seemed like a violation, to me.

Fiberworks: Some Key Ingredients

Laky: Why I felt that one had to be open about one's processes, I don't know.

Nathan: Could it have been the influence of Rossbach et al?

Laky: I'm sure it was; maybe my mother and Ed, both. I mean, my mother was always very open, always would show anybody how to do anything. And I think Ed must have been that way, too. He was so interested in innovation. Certainly how he behaved, he brought in what he was thinking about and discovering mid-thought. He brought it right into the classroom. You're probably right. Well, I just found this guardedness so amazing that one of the tenets of Fiberworks was openness: invite people into the process.

Nathan: That was part of your philosophy in organizing?

Laky: Talked about it all the time. Yes, yes. There were a few sort of key pieces, ingredients. That was one of them. I never had to say, "Now, this is a place open to all ideas, and you know, everyone has to participate in revealing their mysterious ways of doing things." It was never doctrinaire like that because in fact the atmosphere, and probably because of the times, because of Ed and so many people involved had studied with him. There was a propensity toward openness anyway, we would just say this was one of the things that we really loved about Fiberworks: that people came together and gave their ideas out and shared and opened and involved others.

Nathan: That's fascinating. What were some of the other key ingredients?

Laky: Part of my role was to make sure that we had programs that worked. If everyone got excited about paper-making, which they did at one point, as I mentioned, we couldn't have only paper-making, [laughs] because we wouldn't have survived. So my role was to make sure there was lots going on about paper-making, but also that there was some sort of diversity in the program and balance.

But usually I would talk to someone and say, "Well, would you be interested in teaching something this time, and what might that be?" Then if it turned out that there was something conflicting because it was similar, then, "How about next time, or could it be different somehow from this part of the program?" So I did have a role of guidance and overview and program planning.

Later we had an artist committee. It was, I don't know, eight to twelve people, something like that. I can't remember exactly how many people. A lot of what we were doing was discussed at our meetings, then I would use that for the planning and the preparation of the coming sessions and for the brochure we mailed out.

I loved that job. It was interesting because administratively I was up to my eyeballs, and I had no background, well, I had a little preparation as I mentioned, not a lot. Suddenly here I was running this big organization and it was growing by leaps and bounds. We could hardly keep up with it. It was very exciting, but it was quite job. It was really hard work. There was a lot that had to be done. Once you've got fifty people in the door, suddenly you have to attend to them and you have to have a program next time when they want to come back. [laughs]

Nathan: Yes. [laughs]

Laky: That was the shocking part, that realization. What I was going to say is that the program planning was often just enormous fun. I'd get on the phone or meet with someone and we'd sit down and start brainstorming, just discussion back and forth. That person would start talking about the work he or she was doing, what they found exciting about it, then I would chime in and say, "Well, we could do this or that with it." Then that artist would inevitably say, "Oh, great, and you know what else?" [laughs] It was a very creative process, the program planning. I think all of us appreciated that and all of us responded to the fact that that's how the program was driven. It was a key piece of how the place was organized and functioned.

Another piece was, as I described it a bit, the historical-traditional combined with the contemporary. We talked about it often, to the point where we could allow the contemporary, modern, exploratory, experimental part to be way out, pushed, pushed it to trying all kinds of crazy things, because at the same time we so appreciated and so loved the historical and the traditional which grounded us. It was a very nice balance. And that definitely came from Ed Rossbach, but also Katherine Westphal. Even though I didn't study with Katherine, I got to know her when I was hired at UC Davis.

But I first got to know Katherine a little bit earlier than that; at one point we had an exhibition of her work in the Fiberworks gallery. Absolutely wonderful. Wonderful. I didn't know her that well at the time, but it just seemed like we should have an exhibition of her work. So we did. The humor, the playfulness, the inventiveness: it was just fabulous.

Nathan: She is incredible.

Laky: Everyone got terribly excited about it. It also brought her into the organization a little bit more, so that she began teaching workshops here and there, she gave a talk here and there, and her participation was absolutely delightful. Her exhibition introduced the notion that you could do serious artwork brimming with humor, and wit. And that's the other word, because wit is a little sharper, dryer. Humor is when you laugh out loud. Katherine had that combination. It was sophisticated, it was witty, it was sharp. At the same time the work was done with great skill and imagination. You could look at some of her drawing of dogs dancing and just laugh out loud. It made a contribution.

Now how did I get off onto that?

Nathan: There were several key points and you were pulling them out. There are about three that you have mentioned.

Laky: Oh, yes. I mentioned Katherine because I know that she used historical references, used traditional textiles often as inspiration. Ed also. Ed would take us to the collection rooms and open these drawers and it was like, "Oh, this treasure." The drawer would start opening and you could hardly stand it until it opened enough to see what was in it. Of course his interest in the pieces is what made it so wonderful as an educational process. It wasn't just seeing these items, but what he saw in them and what he talked about. I know that Katherine has that same interest very strongly and uses it in her artwork. In fact, one of the best workshops, I didn't take it, that was one of the things that was disturbing, I had so much to do administratively that I couldn't take these workshops.

Nathan: What a shame.

Laky: I got it by osmosis, by hanging around. It was nice that the entire square footage of Fiberworks was only 2,000-3,000 square feet, because whatever was going on there, I could kind of soak in out of my peripheral vision. The workshop was called the Bayeux Tapestry and the Bayeux Stitch.

Nathan: How interesting.

Laky: That was just one of them.

Nathan: Of course, the Bayeux work was embroidery, not tapestry?

Laky: It's not a tapestry. And that, I believe, was the exact title of her workshop. It was a wonderful class. People did extraordinary things with those two stitches. As I recall, there was an outline stitch and a filler stitch. Her students used them with great freedom and imagination. There was no prohibition to altering, bringing in from another source, modifying, undoing, changing, there was no prohibition, not even a tinge of it, so that there was a tremendous freedom.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: What we were doing was saying we respect how it should be done. No, we respect how it has been done, admire it, study it, soak it in, but we're perfectly willing to do it differently and that's okay. That I think also comes very much from Ed as well, that it's okay to do things differently than they've been done in the past.

I know that Ed was very exploratory and innovative in his work. I remember his heat-sealed quilt. It was all plastic.

Nathan: Really?

Laky: It's quite a wonderful piece: small red and white plastic rectangles melted together at the edges and that was a quilt, or the reference was a quilt. There was no feeling that work had to adhere to a preconceived way of doing this, a correct way to make a quilt. Meanwhile, we were having a great time digging up old ways of doing things and studying them closely and trying them out ourselves. So the respect was there, but the freedom was there, also, to do anything else in any way, to break all the rules.

Nathan: Exciting.

Laky: It was a very enriching approach. You knew you never would get your hands slapped: “Oh, that’s not the correct way to do it.” Whenever someone talked about the “right” way to do something, it was always presented with this notion of, “Here’s how it’s been done, and here are all the things you might try,” but encouragement to come up with something new and different. This actually has influenced my teaching a lot.

Nathan: How do you think the students found you?

Laky: What do you mean?

Nathan: Came to you, understood—

Laky: At Fiberworks?

Nathan: At Fiberworks, yes.

Laky: The word spread. The word just spread. Well, first of all, I put everyone I knew on the mailing list. I think I mentioned that to you. [laughter]

Outreach to People of Every Age ##

Nathan: There are a few things that you might mention if they interest you. One was what seemed to be an outreach to kids, there were children’s programs. Was that done for a purpose?

Laky: We had a great commitment to outreach, what now is such a common word, outreach.

Nathan: I know.

Laky: Right. Somehow the notion of community, the notion of openness to the community, the notion that we were very happy with people any age, and we often said that led us, I think quite understandably, to these efforts to reach out. Where did that come from? You know, I’ve got to say that could have come also from Tom because through Tom I became aware of programs, projects, people doing things, groups of people organizing to make the world a better place for young and old.

There were the Neighborhood Arts Programs at the time—CETA. It was very important because the federal government hired low-income people: artists. [laughs] Artists are chronically a low-income group. CETA supported them to be useful in the community, a little like the WPA. Artists participated in projects with schools, neighborhood community art centers. Several of them were set up at the time, projects to enhance the city and to teach people. Creativity had a value then. I’m not sure I’d say that now. I know it does, but at that time it was a public/governmental statement that creativity had a value.

I think the CETA artists influenced me because their activities were all around me. Then Tom's involvement with the nonprofit world—I didn't know what a nonprofit was when I started Fiberworks. I know that Tom and I had conversations, even when I was still in graduate school, I think Tom was already involved with the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Coro Foundation.

I also had a wonderful neighbor, now, I think I mentioned this earlier, Dana Sambor.

Nathan: Dana?

Laky: Yes. Sambor—S-A-M-B-O-R? I'm pretty sure that's how to spell it. She ran the Arts and Crafts—ACCI—Arts and Crafts Coop Incorporated. It's on Shattuck Avenue.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: I think I talked about teaching there early on. That was a cooperative, but again, they had classes there for the community. Today, we're again trying to encourage students to do more public service.

Nathan: Exactly. Were you thinking in terms possibly of future artists, or future people who would appreciate art with the children?

Laky: It was a little different, I think, for me. I don't know what some of the other artists would say about this who were at Fiberworks at the time. I knew (because I like to know things for sure, and then of course I'm filled with doubt) but I knew that art had value. I knew it was like air or water: we had to have it, we couldn't survive without it.

I knew it was an important ingredient, so if you have an important ingredient that the world needs, and if it's a terribly exciting time in that ingredient's realm, then you proselytize, you get out on the street corner on your soap box, or you do workshops where you can involve everyone. You know, you sit them right down if they're at all interested and you show them more right away. [laughter] So I think I had this attitude of the true believer: that there was a value to including people in the artistic process, that there was a value to coming up with ways for people to be easily creative, and I was convinced that if people had art in their lives, they were better off.

So it was those kinds of motivations in my head. But it was based on the assumption, I mean, that's what's funny, it's an assumption, "Well, of course art's important."

Kids' Workshops and Household Items, Performance Events

Laky: Chere Mah was very important to some of the outreach that was taking place. The kids' workshops—these events were really quite delightful. Papermaking was introduced as something that could be easily done by anyone interested. Chere of course always comes up with how to do things a quick and simple way, how to give access even to the most complicated methods, so we didn't need the "right" equipment. Chere got a regular kitchen blender and chewed up a bunch of fiber stuff forming paper pulp and

poured the pulp over a screen. A few moments later, using a household iron to speed the drying process, she had a piece of exquisite handmade paper.

Nathan: Now the fiber stuff was—

Laky: Well, I remember banana peels involved at one point. I remember ripping up old newspaper [laughter]—I don't know what else. There was wild experimentation involved right away. But the thing was that we could use these relatively inexpensive kitchen cabinet kinds of items and bring them into the studio to make beautiful paper in minutes..

You could tear up an old paper bag and reform it into your artwork. Or you could boil grass, or onion skins or other vegetal matter, and then grind it up in the blender with lots of water. 100 percent rag paper is of course fiber, so you could even cut up an old cotton shirt into small pieces, reducing it in the blender to fibrous pulp suspended in water—the fibers actually suspend in the water—this is the pulp that then gets reformed into paper. Back-door screening was used for the pulp. It was poured or scooped onto the screen. Handiwipes are then placed over the pulp. Then you pat it dry and iron it with an iron between protective pages. And actually in just a few minutes, you've got a beautiful piece of paper.

Now, that was—

Nathan: Magic?

Laky: It was magical. Handiwipes are great. They stretch on the bias, so you can pat your paper dry with them, and then just pull them diagonally on the bias, which pops them off your paper. They don't get involved with the paper pulp.

As far as I know, it's Chere who figured all these quick and easy steps out using the most common of household items. We were then able to set up long tables of papermaking. We had boxes for the little three-year-olds to stand on, and higher tables for the eighty-five-year-olds to bend over. Age was no barrier.

All we needed was electricity for the irons and a source of water, and we were set. It was assembly-line papermaking. People started at one end of the table with their screen mesh and by the other end of the table they would go to the irons to dry their piece of paper and they'd walk away with a little miracle. For people who never would do another creative artistic thing in their lives they still now understood how paper is made. They had made a piece of paper themselves. It was just a delightful experience. And the public interaction was really thrilling. We always learned something; it was fun and energizing.

Then we also did a couple of performance events where we figured out a big weaving to do that could be done in two hours. For the opening of an exhibition at the Palo Alto Cultural Center, we did a big stuffed paper diagonal plaiting on the spot, during the reception. It was great. We really got into it.

Then we wore vests with the Fiberworks logo on them. [laughter]

Nathan: Promotion?

Laky: Well, it was, yes. We were like a team hired to go do a performance event. That was also the years of “happenings,” right? In a way it fit right into the times. Installation art was becoming more common. We arrived with whatever materials we were going to use and built the sculpture as an exciting, interesting, entertaining, and informative activity right on the spot.

Academic Degrees, Accredited Programs

Nathan: With this wonderful spontaneity and inclusiveness, at some point you began to have connections so that people could get academic degrees. How did that work out?

Laky: That was actually very early on. We’ll have to check the dates. That would be a good date to put in here [see below]. You would think that an organization such as the one I’m describing would need a few years to get on its feet to reach out for things like accredited programs, but we did it fairly early on, [in the fall, 1974]. I remember when we were thinking about having a graduate program. I’ve forgotten who it was, but two or three of us went to talk to Ed [Rossbach] to ask him what he thought. Well, he thought that it was a terrible idea. [laughter]

Nathan: Because he was at UC Berkeley?

Laky: Yes. He thought it was a terrible idea. If I can remember the conversation, I think mainly the gist that remains in my memory is that we had such a wonderful place, it was so exciting and interesting, and so creative and free, why did we want to mess it up? I don’t remember that he mentioned it specifically, but now from my perspective of the university, I think he must have been thinking, “They don’t want all that bureaucratic pressure.”

Nathan: And core-curricular—

Laky: Yes, I am sure he thought, “They’re going to lose something.”

And what do I think? Well, it is interesting to think about it from his perspective, because the free-wheeling we enjoyed, and it did diminish. It did, but then that might have happened anyway. When something becomes an institution, you know, when it’s been there for years, you begin to hear echoes of “We’ve always done it this way.” The restraints come along because that’s how we’ve always done it.

It’s hard to remain a free spirit. It’s hard to remain up in the air. It’s difficult not to want stability. If you never know what’s happening the next moment, that is a difficult way to remain. It is not comfortable for most people. We happened to be thriving on not knowing what was happening next. We had enormous flexibility. But I do think we would have eventually stabilized ourselves anyway. We would have developed our own little bureaucracy.

Nathan: Did the demand come from the people who came in as new students, for this kind of validation that accreditation gives, or was it coming from your own people?

Laky: I think both. It wasn't as if people were coming to us and saying, "Gee, we need a program that's accredited, because I'd like a degree." There were some very, very good artists who were coming up through Fiberworks, and some women who were a little bit older who wanted a graduate degree. Some of them hadn't even completed an undergraduate degree. It's not that that was a big issue as far as Fiberworks was concerned, but it was an issue to them. It was an issue for them personally, somehow.

The people who were the core organizers of the place all had gone through fairly formal education and had undergraduate degrees, had graduate degrees. They felt good about it, felt that if you wanted one, why shouldn't you have one? And if you want to work in this area, why shouldn't you be able to finish your degree and have it in this subject area? And puff, puff, puff, we can do this. That invincible thing again; it's something about being young. You never hesitate, you just do these things.

So we decided we would do this and pursue a graduate degree program. We had a good contact at Lone Mountain College, Susan Clark.

Nathan: Right.

Laky: (At that time she was Susan Robinson.) She worked at Lone Mountain College in the Office of the President.

Also, for Fiberworks, it's always important to think about it in the context of the time. It was the total culture of the time that allowed for this extraordinary thing, a place like Fiberworks with all its programs, to happen. It was the people, it was the time, it was that convergence of things that allowed for us to exist the way we did and create the way we did.

Alternative education—do you remember that title?

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Lone Mountain College was really wonderful in that regard. Lone Mountain College at the time was doing things differently, opening up the traditions of education, changing whom they were addressing and how, bringing in the community. They were very busy with alternative education with new issues and ideas.

Nathan: Was this primarily for women, or were there men also?

Laky: There were men also. That was one of the changes they had made, I think, just prior to that time. It was coeducational, it was experimental, it was very interesting and alternative. So the college was open to the idea of working with this arts organization in Berkeley. We spent a lot of time very carefully putting together what we felt would be a good graduate program. We also, simultaneously, got the undergraduate program put in place. We figured out a way for people to take our courses and get credit on both levels.

Now one of the reasons we were able to do that was all of us [organizers] had our graduate degrees, you see.

Nathan: You can't get away from that?

Laky: Yes, that gave us a certain validity in the system to promote these ideas and to promote the idea of getting credit for courses that we taught. And see, I understand the dilemma. Why should this little piece of paper say you are okay to teach a class, and you, who do not have this piece of paper, you are not okay to teach a class? But when you get into systems, we need these markers to be able to recognize adequate preparation of something.

What we were experiencing at Fiberworks often was somebody walking in the door without that piece of paper, without formal background, who could, nonetheless, do something brilliant. So we tried to always remain open. We were on the other hand using our education and our backgrounds and our degrees to present our proposed program and to make a connection to an accredited college. It was a question of access, providing intensive formalized training with the opportunity for validation. Our accredited studies were actually very good. A number of people went through these degree programs and did well and built careers upon that background.

Nathan: And what was it called—degree in fiber arts?

Laky: Yes, just M.F.A. program. Lone Mountain College probably referred to it simply as the Masters Program at Fiberworks.

Nathan: And then there was JFK University. Is that something important?

Laky: That was after my time. What happened was Lone Mountain College closed. Times changed, and the open society and alternative education and so forth didn't survive into the eighties. I forget exactly when it was, but I think it was in the early eighties and I was already up at UC Davis at that point.

Now, JFK, John F. Kennedy University, is actually a very interesting place because it has taken some of those alternative education models and has made a successful program and maintained some of that. They appeal to all kinds of different people, but also to people who are a little older and working. They've got some very good programs and they've been surviving for quite a while.

Now, it's not surprising to me that Fiberworks eventually closed. It lasted a good fifteen years, which I think is just astounding. Times change, and that's one of the things to keep in mind: this is not the sixties and the seventies, this is a different time. Our society did go through a period where, for instance, the National Endowment for the Arts got cut back and all kinds of other things happened to reduce support for something like Fiberworks. There's another element also: societal attitudes and interests and ideas changed as well, so it's not surprising.

Nathan: So it was the right thing at the right time when you established it?

- Laky: It was the right thing at the right time and I think it energized lots of people and gave them lots of interesting ideas and support and encouragement and helped lots of people build good solid artistic careers. It was totally worth it and very inspiring.
- Nathan: Would you want to talk any more about some of the efforts at pulling together, funding the Bazaars, the silent auctions?
- Laky: Yes, that would be interesting. Could we just take a break?
- Nathan: Sure. [tape interruption] Okay, we're on again. And the National Endowment for the Arts got cut back. You were saying that was part of it?
- Laky: Well, that was a little later.

The Board, Fund Raising, Art Events, Art Couture

- Nathan: Were there the exciting events? I have some of the documents on Bazaars, and silent auctions; you did a lot of things to keep going.
- Laky: One of the early events that I loved was called Art Couture. [laughter] When we finally did get organized and realized this was a nonprofit organization and that it was an educational institution, and that it was community-oriented and so forth, we put together quite a wonderful board of trustees.
- Nathan: Gee, it would be fine to talk about that, too.
- Laky: Yes, and the board meetings were as much of a creative process as anything else at Fiberworks. [laughs] I felt that they had to be. You know, that's what this place was about, creativity, so it was great fun, and the board members were excellent.
- We had the Art Couture event at Patricia and David Straus's home in Berkeley. That was the earliest fund raising event and it was a beautiful occasion. Everyone got involved figuring it out. It was a fashion show, because there were so many artists doing art to wear, beautiful things, wonderful creative things. In addition, we had a kind of silent auction where people donated this and that. In fact, I bought a wonderful aboriginal mask which I still have. The fashion show, very elegant, was in the garden. A group of artists was in charge of the food, and others were in charge of the tables, and others the decorations. It was a wonderful, elegant event, one of the early moments of really showcasing art to wear in northern California.
- Nathan: Ah, yes.
- Laky: And you know that there are many wonderful artists who were and are working in that realm, so it was a great event and really quite extraordinary.

The house was perfect for it. This little grass-roots, community arts group somehow put on a glamorous event.

The Bazaars were also an important piece of fund raising for us. It's interesting to reflect now that these events were always about art. They were art events, they were supposed to make money, they were probably more about art but we made some money from them. They actually became key pieces in our budget because the budget was so small. We decided to do the Bazaar Thanksgiving weekend. It turned out to be a good weekend in lots of ways because after Thanksgiving on Thursday, and spending all day Friday with the family, pretty soon you had to get out of the house and go do something. [laughter]

Nathan: Close to Christmas, was that part of it?

Laky: Well, Thanksgiving was good for that because it came before the holidays and so people were starting to think about gifts and things like that. That worked. I somehow remember that the date changed later on, probably for good reason, but it worked out pretty well in the beginning.

Nathan: At the Bazaar were there things people made, or were they things that were of interest they brought in?

Laky: They were things of interest from other countries brought in by people who traveled. Of course these were very exciting because often we had never seen them before. Things from Ecuador that we had never seen before and things from Indonesia. Remember, I mentioned the Indonesian exhibition was our first tradition-historical exhibition in the gallery, so it was outrageous that one could go to our Bazaar and buy a beautiful textile from Indonesia, from India, from Africa, from Japan, really wonderful.

Dick and Beany Wezelman, who you know, are such wonderful collectors, they travel all over Africa, and they were a key booth in the Bazaar. The Bazaar was great, quite lively.

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Nathan: Did you want to say anything about any of the members of the board of directors early or later? What kind of a mix did you want on the board?

Laky: Harriet, the funny part is that it was just like the mailing list. It was friends and neighbors, you know? [laughter]

Nathan: That's great.

Laky: But what was nice about it was—well, speaking of mix, right from the beginning again, I told you about the context of the time.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: It was reflected in our board. I must say we were very interested in diversity and in bringing people in from other cultural backgrounds right off. It was very much a part of what we wanted.

Nathan: Were you able to attract people of various cultures?

Laky: [pause] Yes, it was a diverse group, but I can't say it was as mixed as I would have liked it to be, but it was a good board and good friends who put a lot of energy into this crazy idea that their friend had started. But later on, after the first group of board members, we then tried to reach out a little bit more into the community and bring people on the board whom we didn't know particularly but somebody knew and thought might be good. But the first round was friends or friends of friends.

As Fiberworks opened, Tom was the national director of Coro Foundation, a public affairs leadership training program. And Coro, actually—let me go back a little bit to when we were talking about comprehending what a nonprofit organization is and the issue of community outreach. Coro Foundation must have played a role in my education, and I don't know if I could have done this without Tom. I really learned a lot about nonprofit organizations and community involvement from him and Coro and through the people I met associated with Tom. Several of them were fellows in that program. Susan Clark (then Robinson), Christina Orth, and Andy Grimstad, who joined Fiberworks' board, were fellows. Also Germaine Ward Covington, an African American fellow, who now works for the mayor of Seattle. David Yamakawa—I can no longer remember how he became a member of the early board. There were other wonderful people as well.

Patricia Straus was the first board chair, she was pursuing her Ph.D. in psychology at the time, a wonderful resource for me. [laughs] I twisted her arm; we learned together. She was a great partner. Fran Strauss came to us through Tom also. He was on the board of the American Civil Liberties Union and Fran came from there. David Sibbet, who was head of San Francisco Coro, and Michael Doyle were also early board members. David Sibbet was developing his cartoon style of recording meetings, one of the things going on then. Michael Doyle was a partner of David Straus's in a venture called Interaction Associates. They were facilitators, making meetings work, and developing something called "explicit group memory" that you've probably heard of since then. They also invented "the win-win solution." Their office was next to Tom's in San Francisco.

[added during editing: Now that I think about it, my dear husband formed the early Fiberworks board. I certainly could not have found such a knowledgeable group of people about how organizations function from among my artist friends.]

The group memory was a big piece of paper on the wall and you write down things people say. That way it's all a part of the group's product, everyone's involved with the process and with agreeing upon things on this big piece of paper. Then you have a record. And David Sibbet's drawings were great. He was the one up there drawing away. As we spoke, he would illustrate and keep track of what was said. It was quite a wonderful thing.

The board played a significant and critical role and all seemed to enjoy it tremendously. We always had a brunch or lunch or something with each meeting. The food became a creative process for a board as well.

Nathan: Sure.

Laky: I think it all worked very well. It was inspiring. We had good discussions.

Among the artists, Chere Mah was a very important part of Fiberworks and its beginning and its liveliness. She contributed tremendously. She was also a member of the board.

A little later, Yoshiko Wada showed up. Yoshiko went to school and got her graduate degree in Colorado before she came out here, but it hadn't been that long since she left Japan. It was quite a contribution to suddenly start including her in what we were doing. I think I may have mentioned that the Shibori Society evolved out of her activities at Fiberworks.

Nathan: And she did lead wonderful travel tours.

Laky: Yes, you went on one of them.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: That's right.

Yoshiko Wada, a Workshop, and the Shibori Society

Nathan: [tape interruption] We were talking about Yoshiko Wada.

Laky: And the Shibori Society.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Let me just tell you a little piece of history around this.

Nathan: Good.

Laky: I was just getting to know Yoshiko. I knew she was here, hearing about her, pretty exciting. Other people also thought it was exciting to have the possibility of having someone at Fiberworks who knew these Japanese methods of dyeing and tie-dyeing directly. We were contemplating having her do a workshop. A prominent textile artist heard about this and called me up and said, "Well, you know, this is not a good idea for Fiberworks because she can't speak English so well and people can't understand her and it would not be successful. I've taken a workshop with her and it wasn't easy to understand her." So I took a deep breath and just made the decision we were going to try it anyway. [laughter]

It's interesting to me to have such an event happen and that kind of advice given in California, because California has so many immigrants from all over. I think part of it, also, was that there was a time when I couldn't speak English that well either, and being an immigrant maybe I felt some sensitivity. Also, how great the risk?

Well, if we didn't have people enrolled, that was a big risk because we had no margin in the budget, ever. It was always tight. It was always a big thing about paying the

teachers and paying the rent. It was not easy, but it seemed like something we should try.

Yoshiko turned out to be an excellent teacher with lots of information and inspiration. And eventually the students who worked with her (more and more of them) formed this Shibori--Shibori meaning tie-dye in Japanese--formed the Shibori Society which went on and on. It became an entity of its own. It had lots of members and had developed a life of its own. So it was good to reach out a little bit that way to somebody who was relatively new to the country.

Nathan: Exactly, and this was very early in people's knowing anything about the Japanese techniques, wasn't it?

Laky: Oh, none of us had ever seen any. Occasionally in the design department collection at UC Berkeley there had been a piece of this or that, but otherwise this was all new. Yoshiko and two others wrote a wonderful book about Shibori later.

So what is interesting to keep in mind is when Fiberworks started, in those first couple of years, there was really nothing, very little, very, very little, very few books, very little information. We didn't have ethnic textiles all over the place as became the case a few years later. It was just starting then.

Nathan: Yes, right.

Laky: And now of course we've all been exposed to so much that it seems difficult to think of a time when we weren't surrounded by this richness of things from elsewhere, but at that time it was very rare. So it was quite a contribution to have someone like Yoshiko in our midst.

More on Fiberworks Gallery, and a Free-Wheeling Time

Nathan: Well, you were in at the creation in lots of ways. Then you also put on exhibitions within the actual structure of Fiberworks?

Laky: That, from the very beginning, seemed important to me. Fortunately there was a room that could be designated as Gallery, a very nice room. It was important to have a place to look at things, just to see real examples, and to see artwork, and to see the work people were producing.

It actually was quite a successful gallery, not a selling successful gallery, [laughs] but successful in that it really put on some wonderful exhibitions. Lots of people came to see them. It had an impact on artists' work, on their thinking, on just cultural enrichment of the community in general.

I think we've spent some time talking about the gallery earlier, so I won't go over that. And I mentioned that balance between contemporary and historical to which we were committed and that we carried out in the gallery's programs.

Nathan: Of course that must have been of great value to the artists because it must be hard to find galleries that will show their things?

Laky: At the time it was important. We mentioned Margery Anneberg's gallery, there weren't other galleries. Later there was the Place-Allrich Gallery. Mary Jean Place and Louise Allrich became partners, had a gallery, and they showed contemporary textile works, but there were very few other venues.

In fact, one of the reasons why I think it was such a lively field was nobody was watching and nobody sold anything, it wasn't a big deal. You could do whatever you wanted, nobody was in competition with anyone else. It was happening in the cracks between things, and somehow I feel that situation gave everyone a great sense of freedom.

Later when there were more galleries and more competition and more exhibitions and more professionalism in the field, et cetera, we lost some of that easy, free-wheeling time when you just did it because you loved it, not because you were going to exhibit in a gallery, or not because you were going to sell it to a collector, and not because a museum was interested. A little bit of that was going on, but not much. It was a big deal when Lia Cook was accepted into the Lausanne Biennial and made her large black and white weaving. Everybody went to see it in progress in her studio and knew it was getting shipped to Switzerland--how great.

Building an Institution, Services for Artists, BALA

Nathan: So at Fiberworks there were skills banks, slide packets, some of the services you offered to people?

Laky: Oh, we were building an institution at a rapid rate. We did have something called Services to Artists. It had a lot of different forms. We did have a slide file, slide bank. We thought people could come for study purposes or select art for a building or whatever. Some people did come to us and ask us for help putting their educational programs together when they wanted to hire an artist to teach this or that. [added during editing: For example, I had initiated teaching contemporary art textiles at Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada and later put together a program for them. As I recall, Nance O'Banion and Susan Druding went to Banff to teach it.] Part of the Artists Services also was information.

With Bay Area Lawyers for the Arts, we organized what might have been the very earliest workshops for artists on how to run a business: taxes, and business licenses and contracts and things like that. It was really terrific. It gave BALA an outlet to start trying such classes and it was great information for artists.

Now the more of this kind of stuff we learned, and the more we got involved in degree-granting programs, the more we lost our innocence, so things did change, but it was important information nonetheless. People needed to figure out ways to handle what

they were doing to survive in business, manage their affairs, put together a reasonable contract if they were doing a commission, all these things.

And then Bay Area Lawyers for the Arts had a very good library. They had referral services if somebody needed a lawyer. It has now become California Lawyers for the Arts. But also, having this kind of information now is a pretty commonplace thing for creative people, some business information and how to handle yourself in a business-like professional manner. But at the time, there was no information like this anywhere. Nobody was talking about it. People just sort of stumbled around trying to keep records, deal with tax issues, so this was really very beneficial. It actually fits into the artists services area, so that's how it popped into my head.

Nathan: I'm very glad we got that.

Special Workshops and Alternative Education

Laky: I notice, just thumbing through a couple of the Fiberworks brochures, that there were, for instance, special workshops on conservation of textiles. We got slides from the Smithsonian Institution on conservation and provided a workshop based on them. There were a number of subjects like that that we felt were important and that supported the field and the artists.

There was another program we did which was part of Artists Services but it was called something a little different than that, where people who did not want to get a degree could come in and put together a professional program for themselves. These individualized programs combined some of our classes with private instruction with some of our artists.

Nathan: It was a non-degree program?

Laky: Yes, and I liked that a lot, too, because that was more in the spirit of alternative education, where you would open the doors of a serious professional preparation for people who were not going to be undergraduates or graduates or in a degree program, but who needed to fill in a particular piece of information or a particular experience in their backgrounds. I like that. I like the flexibility of it. We had some people actually come do such individual study, so it was a good little program. If you think of it, we had so many experts in so many areas coming in and out of Fiberworks all the time that we actually did have access and could put together great programs of study. It was a little hard to figure out costing and what somebody could or should pay to make it work for the center, because it was one-on-one instruction often. That was maybe the weak part of it, you know, the economic issue was always the weak part. If we had just had unlimited funding, we could have done such wonderful things. [laughs]

Nathan: Well, you did wonderful things without unlimited funding.

Laky: Actually, that's one of the things I did love about it. Oh, a friend later on made a film about me she called "A Banquet Out of Crumbs," and I love that about Fiberworks, that

chewing gum and string approach. We made tools and made do and did produce wonders out of just whatever was lying around. In fact, I did like the idea that technique and tools were secondary to ideas. That was another basic issue kind of statement I think I can make that seems appropriate to describing Fiberworks at that time.

Nathan: It's kind of amazing. I gather that you had various sorts of guest lecturers or people who came to present a workshop or a piece of work?

Laky: Yes. As we moved along, we started reaching out to an artist from some other part of the country who might be coming through town. Sometimes we did get a little funding together to bring somebody out. We started reaching beyond our noses and having a sense of activity in other parts of the country.

International Textile Arts Conference: Fiberworks Symposium I

Laky: Then in 1977, or maybe it was 1978, we had an international conference.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: International Textile Arts Conference. More than 500 people signed up for this thing. Wendy Kashiwa was the director of the event and it was just absolutely astounding that she, without that kind of prior experience, could rise to the occasion and organize a major, major event. People from eight different countries came, as I remember.

Nathan: Fabulous.

Laky: It was the biggest event in the field, I think that decade, maybe ever. It was wonderful.

Nathan: Yes. What came out of the conference, do you think?

Laky: I don't know specifically if I could say this or that came out of it. No new organization formed out of it, but the communication, meeting people from elsewhere, it gave us all a sense of a greater part to this field out there. It was wonderful to be in communication with colleagues in other schools, in other cities, doing other kinds of work, people in Europe. Having extended the network was very valuable.

Nathan: Well, you were certainly ambitious.

Laky: Yes, I think it was that we had a wonderful group of people, artists, board, and interested members. When we got ideas there were enough of us around the table saying, "Great, let's do it."

We had no idea it would become such a big event. We had no idea. 100, 150, maybe that we could have imagined, that big. The more registrations that poured in, the more astounded we were. It pointed out the need for that kind of gathering for communication, for getting people together. It was very inspiring, too. The talks were excellent. It was a very successful event.

Nathan: Were there other such gatherings later, not necessarily--

Laky: Not that big, and there wasn't a Fiberworks Symposium II; there was only that one.

Nathan: That was certainly a good one. I think you've mentioned some of the names, we did the academic credit. Now what were your relations with other similar groups? I'm thinking of Pacific Basin, for example. Their function was somewhat different?

Laky: They did seem to be different. It's hard for me to really describe what that difference was. I felt it was a good situation to have two of these places even though they were similar. That I thought just made it better for everyone. But of course (even though I abhor this notion), we were in competition with each other. You know, I have to say that, because it was true.

I don't know why I didn't like the competition. I think I like the big happy family kind of approach to life, that everyone works together and somehow there's room for everyone. So I think that competition was just a little bit against my nature. I think I also felt, in hindsight, a little bit strange about opening the second place and becoming the competition, since I didn't like that aspect of our relationship. I was the one who had done it.

We didn't do programs together, but I do believe that we enhanced each other. Lots of the people, the students and the artists, went back and forth, so I think it did add to the liveliness of the time and the field.

But it would have been nice if we could have actually gotten to the point of doing things together. Maybe financially, since all the margins were so narrow, it wasn't even possible to contemplate that. You probably have to be a little more comfortable, not on a shoestring, to be able to do that. Although, maybe if we had gotten together, we could have done more.

Nathan: Of course, how does one know?

Laky: How do you know?

Nathan: And I did think I saw some names that went back and forth.

Laky: Lillian Elliott actually did things at Fiberworks and then she did an artist-in-residency at Pacific Basin working on a project of over-twisting yarns in weaving: crepe.

Nathan: Collapse?

Laky: Yes, it was fascinating and very interesting work. I remember going to see what she was doing and going to a talk she presented there.

Nathan: Let's see: Dennis Morinaka we've talked about.

Laky: Oh, Dennis Morinaka--now, Harriet, I think we did do this early on. As I mentioned, I tried to do Fiberworks as a business, as a private entrepreneurial effort, not knowing what I was doing in the beginning. It was very hard, and it wasn't working, even

though I gave a big and good story to the banker who supported me. My projections didn't quite come out right, so at one point it was a real struggle financially, and Dennis said he would be my partner in it and he would put in some money.

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Nathan: [tests tape] [laughter]

Laky: Well, they must think we're laughing all the time.

Nathan: There's nothing wrong with that.

Laky: Oh, shoot, you have got to turn that off because I've got to get my head pulled back together again.

Nathan: Sure. [tape interruption]

Food, Creativity, and Leadership

Laky: Now I'm functioning again. A vignette that I thought would be enlightening, because to me it's a fascinating bit of the past: I always think that food is conducive, good food, is conducive to good creative thinking and activity. If you have a meeting, I tend to always say, "Well, why don't we--[laughs] have some food?" I love the personnel committee I'm on now at UC Davis because everybody brings food. [laughs] My kind of people. At our personnel meetings we always have all sorts of interesting and delicious nibbles while doing an incredibly difficult task.

Dennis made me think of this because one evening at Fiberworks Dennis was there and a few artists, sort of close friends, got together for, I think we had a cracked crab dinner. We had a fabulous feast in Fiberworks, because we had big round spool tables that were great. We could sit around this big round table and talk. So oh, I don't know when it was, maybe at the juncture of becoming a nonprofit organization. The gathering was to discuss what Fiberworks needed and how we were going to move forward. So we had this wonderful meal.

We were all sitting there talking. We decided to tape record the whole conversation. I don't know, the recordings are somewhere. (As I recall, Winder Baker may have them.) It doesn't matter too much. One of the interesting bits of conversation was that people started saying to me that I wasn't being enough of a leader. It was very interesting because I worked so hard to not be out in front; to kind of get things moving and figure things out so that other people could perform.

I always tried to be quiet in the background and not directive and demanding, but sort of massaging things into place behind the scene. [laughs] One person started this conversation and then everyone chimed in about how, "No, Gyöngy, it's time for you to understand your role. You are the head of this institution: you need to take a leadership role. You need to be a little more forceful, you need to direct. You make decisions

anyway; you're always working on things and trying to get things to happen, you need to recognize that."

What was interesting to me was that it had a little bit to do with the feminist movement also. "Look, accept the fact that you are in this role and you're good at it, and you should do it. People are responding, now do it. Don't be hiding back there."

It did have an impact on me though not right away, I just didn't know how to do that. I'd always been the person wanting to get things to happen, but wanting to leave lots of room for everyone else. I still appreciate that about myself, but it was overboard and I recognized that my friends around the table were correct. It took me a while to be able to do what they suggested and not feel as if I was behaving in a way that I didn't want to behave or being too domineering or too directive.

I think the issue for me personally was how to be in a leadership role where I could provide leadership and provide a place for people to be, you know, provide the space for people to be active, and also to participate. I know that that early crab dinner conversation eventually influenced who I was as an administrator when I was chair of the Department of Art at Davis. I used that advice along the way when I finally figured out what it meant to me in terms of being in a leadership role and what that balance was.

I know it's still slightly uncomfortable for me to be in that role because I would still tend to say, "Well, what do we think, and how will we do this," and sit back and wait until the "we" came up with something. [laughter] But I realized along the way that there were times when I needed to just act, and I needed to get out in front a little bit and pull people along, or lay the way for things to happen. As I say, it's still not totally compatible with who I feel I am in terms of my childhood and how I learned to behave early on. I can always feel when I kind of turn on the mode of, "Okay, now, you're going to step up and you're going to be a little more overt about directing things, and now you're going to take the leadership role." I can always feel it because I have to nudge myself a little bit to take that step even now.

It's very interesting to me that out of this crab dinner to discuss the future of Fiberworks came something which for me personally was a very important piece of building who I am today.

Nathan: Of course, what you learned to do also had this risky aspect because you are asserting yourself?

Laky: Yes, and once you stick your neck out, it's out. Maybe in a kind of summation, I should just say that Fiberworks represented for me and, I think, for a number of people a very rich and supportive environment for being really creative, trying ideas when you knew no one would immediately squash them. Very lively, the interchange amongst the people, the ideas flying back and forth and around, the level of creativity, the openness about creativity. It was extraordinary. In the supportive atmosphere of Fiberworks things came about: pieces, works of art, yes, but also influences on people's lives, moments, times, events, experiences that encouraged learning and change. I think it continued this way even later, in the latter part of the fifteen years, but in the beginning first few years, that's what I experienced first hand. It was really quite a wonderful place for people to be creative whether hanging out there for a long time or coming in

for a day, it didn't matter. I know early Fiberworks made a great contribution to people's lives and to the community, and to the field.

Nathan: That's wonderful. All right. Well, let's pause right there. [tape interruption]

Laky: Going on--

Nathan: Yes, more things to say?

Laky: This issue of my taking an active leadership role, stepping out in front, at the time, we needed it. Fiberworks was working well, but we needed a little bit more and we needed a little bit more from me. So it was my group saying to me, "Okay, Gyöngy, you know, we like your attitude and it's very nice and it's very egalitarian, and it's very sixties, but we need a little more from you right now, and we think the place will function better."

Nathan: How smart of them to analyze it, really.

Laky: Yes, yes. Isn't that astounding, that you'd have a group of colleagues and friends who could do that?

Nathan: And they trusted you not to go away mad. [laughter]

Laky: It was very rare for anyone to go away mad. There was such an open attitude and open environment that you could say all kinds of things because it was usually said in a spirit of an additive. And if somebody's feathers got ruffled, there was usually a quick way to unruffle and move on, so it worked pretty well. I think the high level of open, honest communication created this situation.

Nathan: Right. Great. [tape interruption] All right, these are more good thoughts.

Hazards in Stabilizing an Institution

Laky: You just mentioned, Harriet, that it was the right time, the moment for this to happen. And I believe that's true. I don't think Fiberworks could have happened at any other moment. One of the things that I liked as a philosophical underlay was the idea that this was also a time open to change, we could close up, or we could do something different if we wanted to, I thought. You know, I always talked about that, I loved the notion of such complete freedom to change, to reinvent ourselves, or to become a different kind of organization.

But actually that was one of my notions that people around me did not like so well. Once they started loving Fiberworks and doing things there that they liked, they wanted an institution. Once the institution starts having meaning for people and they're using it, for the leader, for the director, to say, "Well, gee, tomorrow might become an entirely different thing, [laughs] maybe we'll all be playing guitars tomorrow," it was hard on people. They didn't want to hear about change.

At first I didn't realize this. Early on in our interviews I was talking about how the stabilization process of an institution was occurring. People wanted to know it would be there tomorrow. So even though I loved the idea that it could go on or it could close or we could do something else, or if a new idea came along that was better than this idea, that we could move with it. There were many people saying, however, "Oh, no, no, no. I like what's here. I like it and it's doing things for me, and I'm doing things for other people and I'm doing my work and I want this. I want this institution. I want this institution stabilized and here so I can count on it."

It's interesting, isn't it?

Nathan: Very.

Laky: The difference there I understand. I understand it. I still tend to be the kind of person who says, "Whoa, tomorrow let's do something entirely different," but I understand the other point of view and need. I understand the need for that assurance that something one relies upon can be counted upon to be there, can have a lasting life.

Nathan: Well, maybe that's the difference between an institution and an artist who has to be quickly able to try something else? It's sort of inevitable?

Laky: Maybe that is it. In me I always have this contrast of the group activity and the group good and my life as an individual. I do recognize that it's a group good to have something that works and keeps going. [laughs] But you're right, it's the artist in me who is so attracted to the next thing. What's coming? I want to know. I want to participate and I want to be able to change and do the new thing and try it. It's hard. It's very hard. As human beings we become institutions to ourselves. [laughter]

Nathan: Right.

Laky: So it's very hard to hit upon a new thing and change your life totally, but I like the spirit of such a possibility. I like the motivation that it gives me. I like that being a force that moves me forward, the openness to change, anticipation.

[Interview 7: May 14, 1999] ##

Nathan: You just said a term that I hadn't heard before--Slav vague?

Laky: Slav vague--meaning wave. It's the wave of Slavs. S-L-A-V.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Sort of appropriate to think about that these days.

Nathan: Right.

More on International Textile Symposium, Personalities, and Naming a Field

Laky: This just popped into my head because I was thinking about the history of a field, or a history of a movement. When you're right in the middle of it, things come along that you pick up, that you hear, or people you meet influence your thinking and your attitudes as they are developing. "Slav vague" popped into my head when I was wondering how much I had already described the International Textile Symposium that Fiberworks did.

I had heard the term coined, I believe, by Sheila Hicks. Sheila Hicks is a person who is a very exuberant textile artist to this day. But she also likes coming up with phrases and languages, she likes describing. In fact, her contribution to the symposium was to propose a new name for the field and the name that she proposed was Substantialism, which I thought was so interesting.

I have a part of me that also likes to come up with language and talk endlessly until I can figure something out, giving things new names, making up new words. My mother used to make up words, actually. Maybe that's part of my interest. My favorite word of my mother's was disastrophe; it was a combination of catastrophe and disaster.
[laughs]

Nathan: Yes, we should use it.

Laky: She was such a creative person and with her burgeoning English, she made up these words and they worked just fine.

So Sheila Hicks proposed Substantialism as the new way to describe the field. One of the reasons it's hard to describe the field is that it encompasses so many things: clothing, fences, bridges, weavings, ribbons, performance, printing, dyeing, hair, shoelaces, tree trunks--[laughs] Now if you take that as a description of the field, it's very difficult to work with the language. I don't know if you can remember, but we once were trying to think of the right title for the oral history series.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Is it fiber arts, or is it textile arts?

Nathan: Yes, fiber.

Laky: I remember I was trying to make the case for textile arts, because it's harder to understand what is meant. [laughs] And if you couldn't quite understand it, there seemed to be a lot of room in there. [laughter] But anyway, Sheila came up with this new label, and she might have been right.

It didn't catch on, take off from there, but I remember I thought a lot about what my proposal would be. Flexible art? FlexArt? You know, what -ism is in the realm, following examples like Op-art, hard edge, and so forth. How to speak about a field? In that process, I did realize that such a discussion is a very interesting piece of it all. It's needed for historical preservation and for communication for groups beyond the

small group of makers and teachers and so forth. They can grunt at each other, show each other something, and all understand. A lot of understanding happens just by looking and by doing. But if you want to communicate beyond that, you need language and that's why people are always coming up with new language and new combinations of words or borrowing words from other countries to express new ideas. I love that process, but it is difficult.

I think in what I call the textile arts, it never quite got there. Somehow in painting and traditional fine arts, it's been a little easier for people to say, "Oh, this whole endeavor is Av-[avant-garde] Art, or Pop Art," or whatever it is. It was easier to come up with labels and put them on the work. I think maybe one of the reasons it was harder in this field is that it is so complex and so broad. It's historical and contemporary. It reaches into fine arts traditions, but it also reaches into all sorts of other areas and so we couldn't capsulize it easily. In Sheila's effort to give a capsulized name, title, "Substantialism" is pretty good, because what is it? What does it mean? You can't quite define it. That works for me. If you can't define it, there's lots of room and so her proposal brought about an interesting process from my point of view.

One of the other things that I had heard early on was the phrase, "Slav vague." And because I speak French I knew what "vague" was, as you do, it's a wave. From what I understand, because I never discussed it directly with Sheila, it was her capsulization of the fact that there were some very strong artists coming from Poland and Czechoslovakia, the Slavic region. Jagoda Buic--

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Magdalena Abakanowicz.

Nathan: The one with the eyes like an eagle--oh, Abakanowicz? Is that the one you said?

Laky: Yes, that's Magdalena Abakanowicz. A-B-A-K-A-N-O-W-I-C-Z. We can check that, but I'm pretty sure that's it.

Nathan: Yes. That is interesting.

Laky: There were several artists, Neda Al-Hilali also. There was a tone of competitiveness in the label, Slav vague. These artists were powerful and doing some very interesting work and there were several from that part of the world, so--[laughter] I thought it was just so funny, being a young person in this field. Of course, sitting here in California, we all were wondering, "Well, what is this Slav vague exactly?" We pieced it together and figured it out as we got to know artists from other areas.

Fiberworks International Symposium brought people together from various foreign countries and a lot of people from the U.S. It was a time to hear different points of view and to see the different personalities interacting and together in one room. I think there were 500 or 600 people in attendance.

Nathan: This was the symposium?

Laky: Yes, I think from seven or eight different countries.

Nathan: Were they invited?

Laky: Yes, we tried to reach out for speakers, but also what happened was people began to be interested in the conference and they were asking to come, so it just grew and grew. It was really quite amazing. We just hit the moment right to do something like this. People were very eager to talk with one another. The field was in a very exciting and imaginative time.

There's just one other piece that I would like to describe because, again, it's part of my memory that I treasure and enjoy. Sheila Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz at that point were for many of us, and particularly young artists, two of the key people in the field. Their work was quite spectacular, they were getting enormous recognition very quickly. When we looked at the role models or the movers and shakers of the field, these two women were right out there.

Nathan: Was Sheila Hicks the one who was doing the desert sort of things? I seem to remember her that way.

Laky: She did a number of different things. One was a carpet project in Saudi Arabia. Then she did large bound works, very bright, sort of gridlike, and wrapped/bound materials. They were sort of noodle-like constructions that were big and powerful. And then Magdalena was also doing things that were sort of big and powerful. Sheila Hicks was wearing all white the whole time, crisp beautiful white shirts and pants. I mean, she just looked spectacular, and she's a tall and large woman.

Magdalena is also very dramatic looking and a very strong personality, she was wearing all black all the time. It was like seeing two knights jousting. [laughs] I mean, it was really, really interesting. Their personalities were quite different, their art work was quite different, and they came as black and white. [laughs] That's my visual memory.

Nathan: So you had younger artists as well as these established people?

Laky: Yes, yes and various presentations and panels and exhibitions, and so it was a very rich experience.

I remember we lived in Berkeley. We had a very big back yard, and some friends, Howard and Nancy Jewell, wonderful people, had this very large barbecue spit. Howard knew how to prepare lambs and stuff them with garlic using syringes of an oil and garlic mixture. He was our master chef cranking his spit; it was quite a rig with the sizzling lambs. We had a wonderful party. It must have been around 150 or so people in our yard.

That also was an important part of the symposium because people could talk with each other casually and comfortably. Many had never met but knew about each other, or didn't know each other--from different parts of the world, from different schools, different kinds of work. It was really very inspirational. Lots and lots of fun.

Fiberworks Split in Philosophy, and Agony of Fund Raising

Laky: That was, let's see, I can't remember exactly when, it must have been 1977 because then I left Fiberworks soon after that, really over a split in philosophy. It's interesting to think about that today. The split was that many of us could feel the momentum slowing in the sense of the unending agony of fund raising to keep the doors open.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: You know what I'm talking about.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Because lots and lots of good ideas in creative places don't have, this is my favorite current language, income stream. [laughs] There's no such thing. No matter how many people signed up for the workshops and classes, there was no way that we wanted to charge the amounts that would make it possible to run the place, make a stream.

We had the graduate program and tuition. It was through Lone Mountain College at first and then John F. Kennedy University, fully accredited and so forth, but tuition wasn't going to pay the rent easily, and pay all the artists involved.

There were various money-making schemes, but the fund raising was an ongoing, never-ending, enormously pressured activity.

Toward the end of the seventies, funding became even more difficult to get. And there was change in society. I think we were finalizing our affair with the sixties at the end of the seventies. Those who wanted to learn how to raise their own sheep and spin their own wool had done so. So it seemed a time for change.

I and several other artists were open to change: change the place totally, do something absolutely different: close the doors, open something else. Let's just think of something else and do something else and move on. I think I mentioned this earlier: there were other people for whom the institution had become valuable and important and they needed the stability in it to continue as it was, or pretty much as it was.

It actually did continue until 1987 and I think that was a good thing, but it was not for me.

Also I had become very consumed by the problem of getting rid of the founder. [laughter] I'd seen it in other organizations and I could feel it in me. It was so much my baby, this thing I'd given so much time and attention to, that no matter how much I wanted to step back, it would not be possible for me.

I remember our discussion about leadership issues and people wanting me to step forward more. I was pretty forceful. I was strong in my opinions. I could see how it should go, and what direction to take and what to do next. I always had another idea, you know, ready to sling forward. But I realized that we had to move beyond that first person, you know, to get rid of the founder, not get rid of me, but to move me aside. I

had actually been trying to do that for a year or so. We did hire a new director and that helped, but I'd been really trying to step aside somehow for quite a while.

Now it was really hard to step aside, but I think finally I realized that there was a split, it was just about an even split. At the time we had two co-directors, one voted, one didn't, and that tipped the balance. It was sort of unfortunate that the vote occurred that way. Still, in the big picture, it did offer a choice and a different way to go for me. It was helpful in terms of propelling me to step aside and say to myself, "Okay, this place should run the way it wants to run, the way people here, who are engaged in it, want it to run." That's the point at which I decided, "Well, I'm going to go out and do something else."



IX UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS, FACULTY

Laky: Teaching was very important to me and I LOVED it. So I began to look for a teaching job. By the way, looking for a job is one of the most unpleasant and difficult activities in the whole world.

Nathan: It's as bad as asking for money?

Laky: It's right up there. [laughter] You are putting yourself out there. You know you're a good person, you know you're capable, but there you are competing with so many others for that one little position that's sitting there. And so I looked here and I looked there: there are not and were not many teaching positions in my field. There were in general more then because of the high interest in the population at large around this subject area, but still not that many college or university-level teaching positions.

I was not interested in grade school or high school. I like sixth through eighth graders a lot. I've had a number of kids of that age group visit the studio. I work with them for a day and it's lots of fun. I like that age group a lot, but at the time I was looking for college level, university-level, teaching.

The position came open at UC Davis and that seemed just right, also because Davis had such a strong interest in the textile arts, in fiber arts. Katherine Westphal was there and as a result it was a very, very appealing situation. Evidently they thought I'd be a good person for them, so even though there were many other candidates, I became the lead candidate and I was delighted, very pleased.

Associate Professor Step One; or Acting Associate Professor

Nathan: At what level did you enter the university?

Laky: Oh, that was interesting, my introduction to university-ese. [laughs] Because of all my background teaching, because I had created a graduate program, because I had created

an undergraduate program, both fully accredited with courses and advisors and teaching and students and so forth, I had quite a bit of experience.

I was under the impression that I was being hired at the lowest level of a fully tenured step. In other words, not as an assistant professor, but as an associate professor, but as an associate professor, step one. That would be tenured, and that would be fine. It seemed, all round, from what people I spoke with at the university thought and what I thought, that that was commensurate with my background.

The interesting thing that happened was that my appointment was moving through like molasses, as the university often does. We've gotten a little bit better since, but then it was true molasses, very thick and slow. It was getting close to fall. It was time to start teaching. My classes had been chosen and I was to start, but my contract hadn't been completed. Suddenly out of some deep corner somewhere popped a contract which described me as an "acting" associate professor.

Nathan: Oh, boy.

Laky: It was a shock. I noticed it and I didn't understand. Now I understand it because now, being on the personnel committee, I've looked at other cases for which the acting title is used and I now finally understand it. It is used for a person with a lot of experience but not a lot of teaching experience. So it was inappropriately applied to me at the time.

Also what was inappropriate about it was that nobody had mentioned it until I was right there on the doorstep. In fact, I think I didn't even sign final papers until classes had already been in effect for a week or two, which is not all that uncommon at the university. It happens less now, but that was the university not doing its job very well and being a little bit sleazy and sleight-of-hand.

Dossier for Tenure

Laky: At that point I was not about to throw a fit, raise a fuss, or in any way endanger my being hired, so you can see the position it put me in. It turned out fine, but it did mean that that first year was a year of tremendous pressure because I had to turn right around and prepare my dossier for being reviewed for tenure. The biggest review one can have, the most important step in terms of the tenure process, was to be put together and presented at the end of my first year. So it was just a colossal bit of pressure and work to get it all pulled together while teaching my first classes. So that was my introduction. Nonetheless, I loved the students, loved the program, I was very happy to be there.

Nathan: Did you have anyone to consult with on this gigantic project, your dossier?

Laky: [added during editing: This was one of the most difficult years of my life. My husband Tom's support, encouragement, and keen sense of process and people sustained and helped guide me through it.] Being hired? [laughs] The interesting thing I discovered was that my colleagues there were not very sophisticated in the ways of the university at that time. I even think today some people just aren't interested or they don't pay

attention and so they don't know enough about the inner workings of the university. I think sometimes we're (the design program) not treated as well as we should be, could be, because we just don't know enough about the system.

It turned out I knew a little bit more about preparing dossiers than the people who were hiring me and working with me, and so I would ask things like, "Well, shouldn't I write a statement about my past experience and what I've done with teaching?" And of course it turned out to be important to add it.

It was just a small faculty group at the time, they hadn't hired very many people, they weren't, they just didn't know the system that well. From my experience with the programs at Fiberworks and with dealing with the university in San Francisco, I just knew a little more about it than some of the other faculty. So we did pull it together. That hiring packet and dossier then became the foundation of my tenure dossier.

During the year I found out a lot more about what the dossier should contain and how it should look. I did look at a couple of other faculty dossiers, so I gathered up as much information as I could and embellished: big pictures and good captions. [laughs] So I think I put something rather decent together and it didn't seem to be a problem.

Nathan: Was this the Department of Art?

Laky: No, it's the Department of Environmental Design.

Nathan: Were they in an expansion mode at all besides you?

Laky: A little bit. Not to a great extent but a few years later we were given one more position and it was in printed and dyed textiles, and that was great.

Katherine retired. Katherine retired the year after I arrived, so we did get another position and then a few years later we got one more position, so that was pretty good. But I wouldn't call it a mode of expansion; we grew but not a great deal. So now we have, let's see, [pause] eight or nine faculty. Nine faculty, I think. We might be getting another position, so that's a good sized group. It's not a big group, but it's a good sized group. Adequate, let's say.

Way back somewhere in the late fifties, early sixties, UC Davis was still heavily agricultural. A piece of—I think it was then called home economics—went to the new College of Letters and Sciences to form an art department. And there was a little bit of design left in the College of Agriculture, which just grew on its own; without water, without food, the plant grew. [laughs] It was just this little program with a couple of people, Katherine being one of them, so you can understand why it became a vibrant place and it just grew. And that then became the design program.

From Applied Behavioral Sciences to Environmental Design

Laky: The design program, when I arrived, was a product of the sixties in that it was lumped into a department called Applied Behavioral Sciences. Applied Behavioral Sciences had in it Asian American studies, Native American studies, human development, child development, community development. It was this amalgam of groups and subjects that the university had a hard time understanding. [laughter] I think it worked for a while, but then after I got there; I'm always an agitator, I'm always thinking of how to redesign everything around me. There was interest among my faculty to have our own department, and so I actually got that going.

I wrote a proposal for a department that would include landscape architecture and design, which seemed to be a fairly reasonable combination, both being visual fields, design fields. It seemed good. I convened an ad hoc committee we put together of three or four faculty. I remember I had a rubber stamp of a Wright Brothers airplane, and I stamped the title page all over with this little red first airplane [laughs] with a note saying, "It might fly." [laughter] That proposal grew and the drafts were read by all of us and tweaked here and there. It got passed around and then through the various campus committees and eventually the president's approval.

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Laky: So it was about twelve maybe thirteen years ago that the Department of Environmental Design formed, split off from the Applied Behavioral Sciences. It became its own entity, which was really quite nice for us. We liked it.

Of course there have been tricky moments getting along. You know, the two groups, because it's two different groups with different ideas about things and different needs: landscape and design. So we had our moments of intrigue and battle, [laughs] but generally speaking, it has worked out very well. I think all of the faculty would probably say they were pleased with the move. One would hope that it would be possible to gather people in big disparate communities, but it is hard to do. You have different kinds of needs for space, for materials, for how you organize your classes. People who have need for lecture rooms don't quite understand the need for large open spaces with nothing in them but tables. You know, differences like that.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: But it did work out well for us.

University's Minimal Support for Visual Arts

Laky: Over all I am critical of the university in general for its minimal support of the visual arts. Specifically, I am critical of both UC Davis and UC Berkeley for not recognizing more what they have in terms of visual arts and not being more supportive and really helping them to flourish. Northern California is an area jam-packed with creative

people, I'd say creativity in the various forms: writers, small press publishing, poets, dancers, the media gulch, even.

I think that maybe the climate and terrain is inspiring and enhancing of the quality of life so people who respond to that, who are creative people, tend to congregate in northern California. The university does not seem to recognize that one of our major subjects, one of our major economic entities, one of our major population groups, one of our major activity areas, one of our major missions and goals should be the encouragement of, the study of, and the support of the arts.

We don't do a good job in the visual arts. I think sometimes we do a slightly better job in music or theater, but only slightly better job, and it's because of the entertainment factor, so you can entertain the scientists and engineers. That somehow is comprehended, but the idea of basic research in the arts, we just have missed it. We just don't understand it at the university.

So that's an aside, but other than that, we felt comfortable having our own department. I think it also made possible the eventual creation of graduate programming. Now Harriet, did I already discuss the graduate program? I think maybe I did.

Graduate Program in Textile Arts and Costume Design

Nathan: Perhaps, but let's hear more. [tape interruption] So you were going to tell me a little about the graduate program, how it evolved, or how it was made possible.

Laky: We talked about it for several years. We even tried to write something up. One of the impediments was that the design program, though small, is very diverse. It has furniture design, it has interior architecture, and interior design, it has presentation and exhibition design, it has costume and clothing, wearable art design, and then it has various aspects of textiles. Now it also has some computer graphics.

And so for such a little program, it was broad-ranging, is still a broad-ranging program. Every time I tried to write a graduate program, the variety just became a problem. It was very difficult to write it up because of the diverse ways in which people carried out their different aspects of design.

For example, there's a strong external entity in interior design. There's something like the AIA—the American Institute of Architects and—what is it? ASID, I guess it is—American Society of Interior Design, something like that. So it is an entity with whom one has to engage. We never were accredited by it, our interior design part. But ASID still set standards and made demands for certain kinds of classes, space, et cetera. So that is very hard to organize into a graduate program where there are other subject areas with no such entity and no such external demands. That's just one example of the problems I encountered in developing an overall graduate program in design.

But there are various differences that made it quite difficult to describe things like: how would you select students, from where would they come, what would their backgrounds

need to be, for example? So finally at some point we decided to drop the effort. I then began pushing as hard as I could at the time to just write a graduate program for the textile and costume area. Let's not try to do everything in one lump because it's just not working, and let's get on with this.

So I wrote some rough drafts and we started looking at them, and then eventually I got people to sit down to meetings. Marching here and there and whenever the administration told me I had to go get more information or letters from outside people, I just dug into it and then showed it to my colleagues. We just took it step by step and got over each hurdle.

Finally then in '94, I think, it was approved. Then in '95 in the fall we had our first group of graduate students. I think we had five students then. They were really wonderful.

It was lots of fun and also difficult, but it was an important step, I think. It's a good little program. I say little program because it's only about let's say six to nine people at any one time out of a first-year group and a second-year group—it's a two-year program. So it's not huge, but it's good. It's a good size.

Nathan: I remember seeing an absolutely stunning announcement of this in all kinds of colors, it was just exciting.

The Students' Filter, Celebrating Differences

Laky: It was very exciting. I do feel that we have had and do have some exceptional people coming into the program and going through it. I think there are some aspects to the program that make it really very interesting and a very good program. One I stumbled on the other day as I was musing to myself that we are usually four or five core faculty (five when no one is on sabbatical leave): we could not be more different from one another. This was coming into my head while talking with a couple of the students who were basically complaining that in a conversation with one faculty member that they would be told one thing, and in a conversation with another faculty member they would be told perhaps the exact opposite thing. [laughter] "Pursue this work, this is great and exciting," and another faculty member might say, "Don't pursue this work, this is a dead end for you."

So the students were saying to me, "Now how do I cope with this?" I said, "Well, you have to use your own filter. You have to listen to all of this. It's all coming from decent sources. These faculty members may be very, very different from one another, but they're professionals in the field. They've been active and they're each very good in their own different ways. They each have something valuable to offer and to say. The rest has to go through you. You have to sort through the various responses and get your own reality out of it. You have to find your own way, and that's better," I said to the students.

Then I started saying it to my colleagues and friends, “I much prefer this situation, which is hard on the student, but the result of it is better, where there is no track to follow. Because some schools have a look and a style and if you don’t fit into it, too bad, but they try to get all their students to work in a certain way; and we don’t because we can’t agree on a single way. We all do different things so there is no one way that comes out of our group.”

We get along, I’d say reasonably well, so it’s not that our differences come out of conflict. Our differences just come out of different points of view and different ways of doing work. So that’s harder on the student, but I much prefer it to a place where you say, “Oh, yes, I recognize that work, that person must have gone to such and so university.” I think that’s a problem. Our situation is difficult but the end result is that we get somebody with that individual’s own personality and character built out of the experience of being forced to be an independent thinker.

Nathan: This links with what we were talking about before, to learn to think independently in the visual arts?

Laky: Yes, yes.

Nathan: And an artist is an independent thinker, presumably?

Laky: That would be the goal, I think: learn from everyone around you, but somehow sort through it and think for yourself. This is a real strength in our graduate program.

There is that bigger question of how do you do such a thing for yourself when you’re not in a program, when you’re not getting feedback and criticism anytime you want it, or even when you don’t? How do you become an individual, different from all those around you, and still learn from all those around you? Because I think that’s what the process of developing as an artist is, soaking in from all those around us and sorting through it for our own way.

Impetus from Graduate Students

Laky: I see an exhibition and it has an impact on me. When I travel, it has an impact on me. The reason I love to teach is that my students’ work has an impact on me. Sometimes I can see very directly how I’ve been influenced by my students. Sometimes I can even describe it. I can even say, “See this piece, what I’m doing here? Such and such student did X, Y, and Z and I noticed it and liked it, and two years later some aspect of it popped up in my work.” And I love that. It means I can be a student and a teacher at the same time, which is a terrific situation. I have to make sure that I make the class interesting enough for the students so that they are inspired and do work that then in turn inspires me. [laughs]

Nathan: I wondered where your students come from. You were showing so much confidence in them when you say, “Be open to everything but choose what you want.” That is a vote of confidence, don’t you think?

Laky: Yes. It is calling upon them to make judgments, to evaluate, and to somehow figure out what it is that they want to do, what each student wants to do with his or her work.

This is very difficult. We had our graduate reviews and a student said, “Well, I did this series of work because I thought I was supposed to explore different methods.” And all of us, when we heard the words “supposed to”—all of us—I could see all of us sort of stiffen and five sets of eyebrows shot to the ceiling in actual worry that this student thought there was something she was supposed to do, whereas the “supposed to” has to come from inside the student: “I am so interested in doing this or that. I’m now going to go explore techniques because I need it for what I want to do with my work.” That’s what we want.

We don’t want to say to a student, “Now you’re supposed to do this today and you’re supposed to do this tomorrow and you’re supposed to do this next week,” in the sense of directing their interest and the direction of their work. It has to come from them.

One of the things that happens in graduate study, maybe not in all subjects but certainly in this one from my point of view, is that we are helping people turn the tables. Undergraduate-wise I go in and I say to my students, “Here are a set of things I want you to do and here are the kinds of projects I want you to create.”

I try to make it come from them as much as I can, but I give them all kinds of guidelines and I have no list in my head of what experiences I think will enrich their abilities and their creativity, so I am giving them the impetus and close direction to do work. Or I’m giving them major encouragement and pushing them in certain directions.

In graduate work, on the other hand, that push and the impetus has to come from the student. The urge to do work has to come from the student, and the faculty is stepping aside more and more saying, “We will make commentary about what you’re doing and how you’re deciding to do it and what directions you’re taking.” So instead of coming up with an approach for effort and impact, we’re stepping aside. The motivation is supposed to start coming from the student now and we are only supportive and watchful from the sidelines. The feedback process and the criticism process is very important, so it’s a little more active than I’m making it sound, but it is trying to make the creative effort, the initial purpose of creating work, comes from the student’s internal motivation rather than from the faculty’s direction.

Nathan: Are there any students who simply cannot produce it?

Laky: Occasionally there are. Occasionally there are people who are so dependent on the outside to tell them what they should be doing that they can’t take over and motivate themselves. Such students may in fact be quite skilled and do some wonderful work, but be unable to find the inspiration from within themselves and the motivation from within themselves to generate independent work. They’re just not going to make it.

They won’t be able to sustain themselves, because when you’re through school you don’t have anybody standing there telling you, “Now this is the next piece you should do, Gyöngy.” There’s nobody telling me what kind of work to do; I wish somebody would, now and then. [laughs] You have to somehow find that urge and that motivation from within yourself.

Now, this is getting back to the question of how to become independent as a creative person, because some people then finish their studies and get out in the world and look to other artists in the field, or to trends, or whatever it is to guide their work. The same person who says, "Now what shall I do next?" and is going to a faculty member with such a question is going to do that also (maybe non-verbally) when that person is out and trying to function as a professional.

If you look too hard at what others are doing to figure out where you should go, then the work won't be as individualistic as it will be if the source is from within. Even though sometimes such externally derived work is visually effective, it's just not going to have the impact on the field that work has when the ideas come from within and allow that individual personality to be put forward. It's a critical, critical piece of the creative process.

Nathan: Do the students influence each other, do you think?

Laky: Oh, they do. I think it's important who you're sitting next to, left and right. Sometimes it doesn't matter so much, but I find when the mix is diverse, when the people are very different, when the work is different, it enriches everyone in the field. They do inspire each other and sometimes they actually get ideas from each other which they use quite directly but differently, and that's fine. I think most of the influences are hard to perceive but are there, they just add into the mix of influences. The more the various students interact with one another the better their work gets. I tell them this but I think they also figure it out pretty quickly.

Nathan: The use of the term "diversity" of course made me think of affirmative action. If there's more that you can or want to say about the actual teaching experience with students, carry on with whatever calls you.

Laky: I must have talked about this already because it's actually something I believe in profoundly. The greater the mix and differences, the richer we all will be, the better off we will be, the more we will know, the more we will develop. So I'm all for it. I like affirmative action a lot. I know it's gotten a bad name lately, but I like the whole label, to act affirmatively where we know there's been a problem. So it's a good thing. Can we stop for a minute?

Art Students in a Big, Diverse University

Nathan: Sure. [tape interruption] Perhaps you have some more things to say about the graduate program?

Laky: There is one other thing. I think it is a particularly good program because of its location in a university such as UC Davis, a big university with lots of different subject areas, lots of different people, lots of expertise. It was designed to be a program encouraging students to take advantage of that situation.

Now, this requires the individual student to be motivated to take advantage of it, however. There they are in the midst of this big place. If their interests are in the direction of, let's say, some anthropological issues, they can go to anthropology and find some brilliant, wonderful people to work with. If they want to work with a physicist because they're interested somehow in things getting cold and hot, or I don't know what, they might be able to find someone right on campus who's doing an interesting related study.

One of the people I once talked with on the phone was so fascinating to me, a woman who studied the deformation of leaves. Now what the deformation of leaves is is the shapes of leaves as they emerge. And right away that brought into my head this notion about—

Nathan: About the body? That kind of deformation?

Laky: Well, deformation is just the language that the scientists use for the development of a form. What she apparently was studying was the shapes that leaves are in as they emerge and grow. Now for me, that right away put some images in my head of what those shapes might be. I found it just wonderful to even hear that simple description of what this woman, this professor, was studying. She was describing sculptural forms. That to me is what is very special and wonderful about this MFA program. It is right there in the midst of this big flourishing university, with all these different people discussing and studying all these different things at a high level of engagement. So if you ask me what I prefer, for our program to be in an art school or in the midst of a museum or some other context, that may be good, but I think the university environment is better. I just think it makes for a much stronger educational experience and it makes the work potentially richer, more interesting, and more profound.

Nathan: Have you had any experience of students who have actually ventured out and found advisors in different areas? Does that happen?

Laky: Yes, some. A little bit here and there. One was in the area of Native American studies, actually a young man who had been with us as an undergraduate also creative and brilliant, who was as European American as could be. Yet he felt a very deep attachment to native cultures. So he reached out and he spent some time working in that area. It was very enriching.

When I was chairing the art department for a couple of years, there was another student who did a lot of mechanically moving sculptures. I mentioned hot and cold; one work included frost forming on a coil, and then the coil would heat up and the frost would turn to liquid that would drip down, and then that water would be available to develop frost on the next cycle. It was a very interesting and also beautiful sculpture. It turned out after a while that he needed to find a physicist, so he worked with Professor Chang, a woman in the physics department, who was very beneficial to his development.

Then there have been people in the computer graphics area who found people in the computer sciences to work with, so some of that reaching out has occurred. I would like to see more.

The other place that such educational expansion happens is just students taking seminars in other departments or programs. Maybe it was just a seminar or an elective course and they don't end up working with that professor as an advisor, still there is an influence from another subject area. I think it's very enriching.

Nathan: Do people from other disciplines come and venture into your area?

Laky: No, not yet. Not that I know of. We might experience that as the program is around a little bit longer. We might. So far the program is very tailored to our kind of students and to people working in these particular ways, so it's a little hard for someone in English to come by and decide to write in the midst of people printing textiles, but it might happen. It might happen. I think it would be interesting. On the undergraduate level it does occur.

I think maybe we'll stop there.

More on UC and Visual Arts

[Interview 8: June 14, 1999] ##

Nathan: You were saying perhaps this is the time to say more about UC Davis?

Laky: I think I did mention my love-hate relationship with my dear institution. [laughter]

There are things about it that are just absolutely fantastic, and things about which I'm very critical. For instance, earlier I mentioned that the University of California as a whole needs to do much more about the visual arts in general. When I said that, I was speaking from the point of view of being a student who had received undergraduate and graduate degrees in the visual arts from UC Berkeley. I know that institution very well and since I live in the Bay Area I keep tabs on it. For the last twenty years plus, being on the faculty at UC Davis, I'm very close to that institution as well. And neither one, nor any part of the UC system, has done a good job of being engaged in the visual arts.

Here and there a little bit, for example, somehow UC Davis allowed the art department to flourish in the sixties and seventies, and they hired some good people with lots of energy. It became a world-renowned program. But over all we're not doing a good job, especially if you think of the cultural richness and resources in terms of the arts, in northern California.

If you consider the mission of the University of California to serve the people of California, then there has been a selection of what aspects and what subjects to serve. There has been an exclusion of visual arts, or if a token inclusion, only token, and not really with the notion of making sure that we have the top program in fine arts at UC Berkeley, the top program in studio art at UC Davis, et cetera.

Now, UC Davis got quite close to that, but currently the UC Davis program has seven or eight full-time faculty: the lowest level probably in twenty years, the lowest level of

budget probably in the last, I don't know, ten, fifteen years. So that's what I mean by we're not doing our job; yes, the University of California is not doing its job in terms of visual arts.

So that is just a little background about my love-hate relationship. But at the same time, the love part is that I love teaching there. It is a very good place for me to be. It's a wonderful job. It pays a good salary, good benefits. I really recognize how fortunate I am to be in an institution like that, one that gets a lot of good students. So I sit there with my collection of twenty or twenty-five students, who are all very bright and very creative, and hand-picked individuals from the California schools. It's terrific to work with them. Of course some are stronger and some are weaker, but over all they're a great bunch of students.

Student Support, Pressure, and Competition

Laky: UC Davis, I would say, also, is very student-oriented. There are a lot of programs to help them, to counsel them, to make sure they succeed. There's a lot of hands-on advising, supporting, encouraging that is good because there is very high pressure to perform, even in the visual arts. I'm sure this was true at Berkeley when I was there and still true.

The students feel it immediately. They talk about it, they suffer through it. I'm not exactly sure where that comes from, except that you do have some very, very smart people collected together and it's very competitive. Not everyone in the class will get an A, and even if you have all A-quality students in a class, what it tends to do is raise the bar. It's very hard to say, "Gee, I happen to have seventeen A students. This is very unusual, but I will go ahead and give them all A's." Instead, I think what faculty tend to do is raise the bar: "Well, who in this group is doing the best work in the class? Well, these six are doing the best work in the class," and suddenly you get a group of A students who must now be differentiated.

I think this is human nature. It probably also is just a characteristic of the beast. If there are very bright students, very capable students, it just raises the standards in totality.

Nathan: In addition to the competition that you mentioned, did the students become stimulated by other able students? Is there a benefit?

Laky: Yes, they do. There's definitely a benefit. How I know that is by comparing one group to another group. You probably know this: somehow there's always a group dynamic, or a group character. Each set of students is different from every other. You can see that when you have a group of very energetic students. For instance, my drawing class in the fall, they were all there, they were all working hard, they were talking to each other about their drawings, they were spending extra time. It got, not unpleasantly so, but it got very competitive. They each were trying harder and harder, so there was a definite benefit. The work in that particular group was at a very high level throughout, even though there were some weaker, some stronger. But the energy of the group raised the activity of everyone in the group.

For example, in my last class this spring, I really liked everyone in the class: very interesting people, good backgrounds, smart. Maybe it was this particular spring, something in the air, I don't know what, but they generally had a hard time. Several of them didn't get to class, or came late, or had to leave early, or had an appointment or something that interfered often. Two or three of them had personal things happen to them all the way from a dog getting hurt and going to the hospital, to family problems, to depression.

Though they were very creative and very capable, the amount of work accomplished last spring and the level of the work was a little lower, just generally, than usual. The terrific ones in the class somehow could not pull themselves away from the general flavor of a difficult quarter. They were interested, they were very excited about the subject matter; it wasn't that. It was not being able to put the time and attention in. So the nature of the group from quarter to quarter can vary quite a bit.

But what the cohort is doing is very, very important. So yes, the competition probably in the long run adds something valuable. It also has a difficult side, which is the stress that it places on the students. Early in the year when I said to my colleagues that I had a particularly wonderful group of students in my drawing class, my colleagues were saying, "I've got some terrific students too," so it could be that if you go through a year of really terrific students, by the time you get to the spring, they are tired because they've been pushing so hard earlier in the year.

Over all, I think the students we get are very good. There have been some interesting changes over the years. I might have even mentioned this earlier. In the early Reagan years students were more conservative and much more interested in money-making. A little later, toward the early nineties, late eighties, early nineties, many of my students were the children of the people of the sixties, and many of them actually were replicating some of the philosophical ideas of the sixties.

They were a very different and interesting bunch. They were here in contemporary society, but they'd been raised by people who had "dropped out, tuned in, turned on," raised their own vegetables, named their children Sunshine, [laughter] and so they, many of them, I noticed, did have different values than the earlier group, who were much more materialist, I would say, and concerned about, you know, how much money they were going to be making.

The children of the children of the sixties, for instance, were much more concerned about environmental issues. Many more of them were vegetarians, et cetera. It is fascinating from a teaching point of view to engage with this segment of society: young people becoming adults and becoming professionals in their fields, representing a piece of what's going on in the whole society.

Changes in Student Attitudes Subtly Altering Teaching

Nathan: Do you teach differently once you have sized up the character of a class between one class and another?

Laky: Oh, that's such a good question. Let me think about that a little bit.

I do find myself altering my teaching approach in more or less subtle ways. My particular method of teaching subject areas is constantly developing and changing, but it's got a theme and track. I do find that I alter my teaching subtly depending on the students, depending on what I feel they need. I also find I have to know about them a little bit so I can tune in and make sure that I figure out how to motivate them.

Nathan: Ah.

Laky: So that does sometimes mean I have to learn how to speak their language and translate my ideas into forms that fit what their notions are about the world. But that is a pretty subtle change; it might just even be by the examples I use or how I frame a particular project. I might frame it more in the context of what I think might have some meaning for them. It's the same project, but it's just slightly changed in terms of how I represent it or the kinds of things I would require them to think about.

An example of that would be—let me see if I can do an example because what we're talking about is quite subtle, it's not a major shift. Oh, these people are interested in money, well, I'll talk about jobs; it's not like that. [pause]

If I sense that a group is very heavily leaning toward worries about ecological concerns, worries about the environment, I might say, "In this project, half of the materials you use should be garnered from industry and half of the materials you use should be gathered from natural places and natural resources. So, don't go to the market and buy corn husks, but go out in a field. Be sure to check with the owner of the field. Harvest some blades of grass, or some leaves that are particularly associated with the kind of thing you'd like to make. Use dried leaves, twigs, those little seed pods that fall off of eucalyptus trees, or whatever it is, and combine it with industrially produced materials."

Now, for another group where I think they get kind of turned off with the nature stuff, I might not do that and I can still accomplish the same thing in terms of issues around the making of things, an object that is both beautiful and useful. I have some projects like that, a project that deals with issues, architectural issues, for example.

But I have a lot of choice about how I present. I always start my classes with a lengthy conversation where each person in the room talks about his or her background and interests. There are several reasons for doing this, and I usually tell them all the reasons. I give them a lot of information about the introduction process as they see me taking notes about their backgrounds and what they're saying.

One of the reasons is, of course, so they get to know each other. Another reason is so I know something about them and can begin tailoring my thinking and class ideas to them, so that what I plan works better. Then there's another reason and that is that it will start a conversation in the class, it will be the beginning of interaction. I tell them that I like to run classes as if they are studio workshops with people together working openly on ideas and projects. They have to be very comfortable with the physical situation and with the people around them, before they're willing to really stick their necks out in that circumstance, so we begin the familiarization process right away. That process then allows me to find out a lot about each individual as well.

In fact, what I love about teaching is its conversation, its back and forth. I learn and I listen carefully and I watch what they're doing, and then I try to figure things out so I can move them ahead a little bit and give them some things to think about that will challenge them and pressure them a little bit and make them develop some new skills beyond where they were.

Occasionally it is hard for them. Occasionally I know what I'm asking them to do is difficult. They don't know how to go about the work, they haven't done it before, they don't know how to handle the tools. Then I'm asking them to think of a concept and carry it out with these methods that they've never tried. I push them quite a bit. It's amazing how well they do. They actually rise to the occasion more often than not. [laughter] And it comforts and delights me.

Nathan: I was wondering, too, where do they come from, both on this continent and other continents?

Laky: Many are from northern California and often from smaller towns and communities. Some are from other countries. Most of the students from other countries right now are from Asian countries. I'm not exactly sure why. We could do some guessing about people who have the wherewithal and want their children to get a good education so they feel they have to send them to America, but this has been happening for a long time.

Think of the world leaders who have been educated in one of the universities or colleges in the U.S. There are many of them and they are from Europe as well as other places. But I'd say in my classes, Korea, Vietnam—now some of them are fairly recent immigrants, but some of them are actually from Taiwan and their families have sent them for an education to UC. So that's a few of them each quarter, two or three, maybe, which is quite a bit out of a class of twenty to twenty-five.

And it is pretty much every quarter, so there are quite a number of foreign students. Last spring I had two students with a Native American background. One of them I had worked with before. The other thing surprising to me was that they mentioned their background. I know I've had some before, but they haven't mentioned it. I just happened to know that about them. I felt good that these two felt comfortable enough to say out loud in a class, "Well, I'm from a tiny little minority, " because that's essentially what they're saying.

I'm hoping also that it means that there is more of a sense of well-being and confidence amongst Native American students. They form a very small part of our population on campus, so they must have a sense of being a minority. I thought that was good.

The rest are the American mix—European Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic/Latino/Chicano(as)—the mix, and it's a pretty good mix in design. We're getting more African American students as well, and that's nice to see, though still they are only a handful. My impression is that there are more Chicano/Latino students than African American. But that population too is not large.

So I don't know—here it is in the age following Proposition 209, and 187, and other anti-other votes, and add in what the Regents did to move away from affirmative action.

I know our numbers of students from underrepresented minority groups are down overall. I think our numbers in design are holding steady or increasing. Actually I'm very pleased about that. I think we (design) might seem like a comfortable place. We probably appear open. I don't know, I think somehow we're doing a good job not only attracting, but keeping students.

I know that many students think design is an easy major. In actuality design is very difficult and very demanding and very time-consuming. Some of our students are absolutely amazed once they start taking courses. They did not understand that it would be so demanding. Also difficult is that we say to students, "Okay, be creative, be original." There you are, you're on the spot. You have to be creative and original. This is not easy to do. [laughter] Many people think, "Oh, gee, in design it's just playing around, having a good time, doing creative things." Not so. It takes a while sometimes for the new students to even open up enough to try things, to try new ideas. It's not an easy curriculum. They must develop judgment and the confidence to rely upon their decisions right away.

Nathan: You're talking about an undergraduate curriculum now?

Laky: Yes.

Design's Multiple Connections with the World

Nathan: How much leeway is there for students who are in your program to take classes in other disciplines or fields?

Laky: Quite a bit. I don't know exactly how many units currently, I don't have that in my head, but we actually have I think three or four, maybe five, courses they can take in other subjects. We encourage this because design has such a broad connection to the world.

Nathan: Sure.

Laky: It is part psychology, part engineering, part plant science, part architecture, part history, and I could go on and on, so we do think it's a good idea for our students to have broad reach of education as well. It just makes them better students. It enriches them. The good old liberal arts education is a terrific background for design. I think for art, too, but particularly for design.

My role in this design program is one I like very much. I straddle art and design. It's been a very interesting situation for me. In my textile area, not so much in the drawing, but in the textile area, I teach from the point of view of connecting what students are doing to architectural concepts and practices, both old and new, and to other areas as much as I can. So at one and the same time I can talk about sculpture or lighting design and it fits right into my classes. This is wonderful for me because I can have a broad reach and I can pull ideas from lots of different places. I can talk about art and sculpture

at the same time that I know I'm giving a good background to students who want to practice design. [tape interruption]

Nathan: All right. Get the idea down while you're thinking of it, now.

Laky: An example of this I have an upper division course that's called Textile Structures. I would say it's basically a sculpture class, however, some of the things I talk about are tension structures. Now a tension structure is either a taut line, or fabric under tension, so a tent is a tension structure. [laughs] I talk about some of Buckminster Fuller's ideas about geodesic domes, which are really upside down baskets, and I talk about his ideas about tensegrity. Actually I think he got them from—he borrowed—

Nathan: What is tensegrity?

Laky: Tension, egrity.

Nathan: T-E-N—

Laky: S-

Nathan: E-G-R-I-T-Y?

Laky: Yes. Yes, I think that's right. Heavily borrowed. Apparently somebody else, an artist by the name of Kenneth Snelson, came up with this idea first, but Fuller popularized it, let's say, as a concept for architecture. It is a combination of cables under tension and struts.

Now struts in my personal artistic language are twigs, sticks, skewers, coffee stirrers, whatever similar I can find. They are textile-like rigid and semi-rigid materials. So I can take a concept like tensegrity, which is a very interesting architectural concept, and I can present it to my students and say, "Make a sculpture."

Then later we talk about the fact that this kind of structure has tremendous flexibility, tremendous strength, is very, very lightweight. You can have a small pile of struts and a small ball of string and make a very big structure out of it, because one is incorporating space within the openwork structure. I can talk to them about trellises and ask them to make a piece of sculpture.

Nathan: Is it trellises like you grow your—

Laky: Your vine roses on? Right. Then in discussing it, we can talk about the use of a trellis and that of accordion pleats, and that you can, again, have a smaller piece of architecture that opens up into a larger piece of architecture. It is used in gardens, but it can also be used in dozens of different ways.

So that's the way in which I like to move back and forth into different realms: into pure fine arts studio work, into architecture, into design, into play structures, into lighting fixtures, etcetera.

One of my most favorite projects currently is lighting design. If I would say to my students, "Design me a lamp," I would get a horrible version of what you can buy in a lamp store, because they would be busy reaching out for things they've seen before to guide them to make this object. "The teacher has asked for a lamp, I've got to go look at some lamps, and I've got to make a lamp." As a result I would get something pretty much like a desk lamp or a hanging ceiling lamp much as we've all seen before. I would be bored, I would be upset, they wouldn't have accomplished very much, we wouldn't be changing the world. They would lose interest quickly.

So instead I say, "Please make me a large," and I force them to work large, a large "sculptural form that has a skeletal structure and has a membrane on it, a membrane covering. The membrane can be transparent, but more likely it would be nice to have something opaque or translucent that allows light to alter or to pass through it. And I want you to present this form with a light source in it." I get the wildest, most wonderful things. But also very beautiful forms.

One person made a standing, very angular, rectilinear figure. It was six feet high and it had three lights coming down in it. It was gorgeous. I would love it to light up my living room.

So I trick them. [laughter] That's an example of my teaching style and what I mean by what I'm able to do at the university. I like being able to move that flexibly through subject matter, to draw upon different aspects of our lives around us, and to very definitely include art as a concept in design, because it's absolutely essential to it.

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Nathan: Oh, that's very exciting as an assignment, and I would think terrifying. [laughs] [tape interruption] We were just starting to talk about how much time does your student have to produce the project?

Laky: For that particular project I believe I gave them two and a half weeks. I also ask for a mid-way report which is a way to get them working on it earlier. There's a tendency, which is probably universal, to do things last minute. It doesn't work too well in design and art, and so I do what I can to get them to start thinking early on, to experiment, to get their materials together and so on.

Benefits of Discussion, Work in Class

Nathan: Do they discuss their ideas with you?

Laky: Yes, and the more they do that, and the more I manage to get them to do work in class, the better the work is. They see each other's work and they get ideas from each other. I can also see what they're doing and give them suggestions about how they're approaching the project. It's very interesting. Sometimes I just say a little something like, "Well, if you would connect these reeds this way and tie it with this other material, it could work better."

Nathan: I see.

Laky: Sometimes just a little thing like that, then off they go and they start working that way, and it works. I just watch them, I give them pointers; coach them, essentially, coach them about their approach.

One student was making a very large wire figure. She wanted it to be doing a posture that's sort of a yoga position, pulling the legs up over and back down by the ears. The upper part of the body was way too flat, so it didn't convey a body. Yes, our shoulders and arms are flat on the ground when we're trying to do such a posture, but our muscles have form, so if you make it too flat it's counter to what you're trying to portray. In that case I just said, "Looks a little flat here. You know, the shoulders seem a little—." When she finally finished, it was wonderful. She had formed the arms and the shoulders a little, the hands and the forearms came up a bit off the floor surface—wonderful.

So sometimes it takes just a little hint or a little comment, a little criticism along the way, a little suggestion of how to make something tighter or stronger. There needs to be a great deal of engagement, faculty with student.

Then also, I'm absolutely convinced that if they work around each other, their work increases in quality. So that's why in the workshop studio situation I make them come to class. I say, "A big portion of your grade is based on what I see happening in class and how I see you developing." And it works quite well. I can see it work. That's what's fun for me.

Nathan: Wonderfully interesting.

Laky: Then of course the diverse group of people adds to the class. As I was mentioning before, they are from all over. It's a mix. It's a different class I'm looking at now than a few years back, than, let's say, ten, fifteen years ago. Our design students are more mixed and California's students in general are more mixed.

Nathan: Yes.

Davis, Affirmative Action Activities

Laky: We now have a majority minority I think in all the public schools, K-12. I think that's very common, and I think some of our incoming freshmen classes in the last couple of years have been that. It is a reflection of our changing population.

I have had another part to my life at the university in which I participated a lot in affirmative action activities. I was more active in past years than in the present, although the concern and commitment are equally strong for me now.

Nathan: And what form did that take?

Laky: Good question, because I was just thinking as I was slowing down, thinking what do I call this now that the regents and Ward Connerly—Ward Connerly of all people—have forced us to move away from these really very effective programs. I was listening to, this is an aside, I was listening Dr. David Satcher, who was the surgeon general for a while.

I was listening to him on the radio, on National Public Radio. I loved it. At one point he just made a flat out statement how good affirmative action was, and how well it worked, and too bad that we are moving away from it. He even gave some examples of how well it worked.

Actually I was on the affirmative action committee at UC Davis for about six years starting in 1985. That was a few years back, so it was, I think it was sort of mid-eighties to early nineties, something like that. I was on the committee for a couple of years, or maybe three years, and then I chaired the committee.

By the time I chaired the committee, I had learned a lot. I had heard many of my colleagues talk about what it was like to be black and a part of that faculty or on the staff, or a researcher. The committee always had mixed representation drawing from faculty, staff, and researchers. We had a good ethnic mix on those committees always. I'd also heard from a lot of women, what it was like to be a member of the faculty or working at the university.

We worked with data concerning women quite readily because there are data, there's lots of it. It's devastating. Any reasonable human being looking at that data would have to say we discriminate against women.

Nathan: In all categories?

Laky: Pretty much everywhere, except in very low level staff kinds of jobs there are more women. You can see that effect in the categories of faculty. For example, at high levels of full professor, there are few women, and then as you go down the ladder, you'll find more women, and you'll find more women in the non-tenure track, non-ladder-rank faculty hiring areas of visiting temporary lecturers. By the time I became chair, it was clear to me that though we did not want to do it, we were discriminating and we were practicing from a prejudicial point of view. We were not hiring as we would even like to think we were.

So in my very carefully prepared annual report—

Nathan: This was a report to the president or to the regents?

Laky: To the Academic Senate. This is an Academic Senate committee at UC Davis. I'm sorry, I should have mentioned that.

Nathan: That's fine.

Laky: So the annual report we did together: I basically developed a draft and then the committee members looked at it and worked on it, and then I developed a more nearly final draft and then we looked at it again and so on until we were satisfied.

Nathan: How large were the committees?

Laky: I want to say, six, seven people, maybe eight.

Nathan: Were they the same all the way through?

Laky: All the way through the year?

Nathan: Yes, or through the several years.

Laky: No, actually one only. Now this I did not like, and I wanted to change it, but in my years of being on the committee I did not get to changing it. It remains a one-year appointment. I think a one-year appointment is really a bad idea. You just get started in one year, which is one of the reasons why I remained on the committee. They were each one-year appointments, but I myself continued and a couple of my colleagues continued. I wanted to change it to a two-year appointment.

The person who got me into this, or actually didn't get me into this, but got me hooked on it, is Martha West. She's a labor lawyer on the law school faculty and brilliant, quite a wonderful person. She was on the committee the first year I was on the committee, and I learned a tremendous amount from her. Because of her field, she knew how to handle data, she knew what it meant, she knew where to look for it, and she trained me, basically. Then after my training, [laughs] I took on the chair role and so I was in a much better position to understand what we were doing, rates of hiring, what a pool was, using the data.

One of my criticisms of the university is that it holds the data very close to its chest. We do not like revealing our data. It's like revealing underclothes or something. We do not like to do this, so every year it's very hard to get the data from the administration. It should be computerized and available. I should be able to push a button and get it anytime, especially if I'm on a committee, or even if I'm not. They're worried, "Well, some of the appointments aren't finished and, you know, we need to make sure the data are correct" and so forth.

Well, of course it should be correct, but just put a little symbol there that says this appointment is not yet finished, or this person now has not been granted tenure and is leaving, so don't count this person. I think we can do that with our computers in this day and age, and I think it would be more healthy for us if we made the data more readily available. But even to this Academic Senate committee it was always difficult to get the data. Very frustrating. However, we did get the data, and we did look at it.

Nathan: Now this is just for Davis, or was it for other campuses as well?

Laky: Just for Davis, my campus. In a nut shell, when you look at the hiring of women, here's what indicates that we have a problem:

We produce female Ph.D. recipients, people who finish their Ph.D.s, and we have been over the last several years at the rate of 30 to 45 percent. And I'd say there is a range, because even ten years ago it was probably down around the lower thirties, or ten or fifteen years ago. So it slowly creeps up, but it's in the forties now. Now, that's not

every subject because of course in physics, we may not produce very many. And maybe electrical engineering, I don't know how many women Ph.D.s there are, but surely few. In psychology, however, 60 percent or more each year are women. [added during editing: Over all, more than 40 percent of all Ph.D.s have been granted to women for the past eight to ten years.]

There is a variety of numbers of women over subjects and that is sometimes brought out as a very strong argument to explain the lack of female hires: "Well, we can't hire women in this subject because there just aren't any. There aren't any in the pool."

If you take a whole range, however, we are giving Ph.D.s to a very high number of women; we are not hiring women at that rate, at all, way below. So what? Are we saying that they're good enough for us to grant them their Ph.D., but they're not good enough for us to hire? You know, when you see a discrepancy like that in the data, it right away is indicating that there are problems. I'm giving you a simple version right now.

Nathan: Right. I have a question. You're not suggesting that the university should hire its own Ph.D. graduates?

Laky: No, no, no.

Nathan: I just wanted to make that clear.

Laky: No. I'm using our example, but the data I mentioned for women receiving Ph.D.s is national and in many, many subjects a majority of the undergraduate and graduate students are female. In some subjects this has been the case for a long time. For example, in art, in English, in anthropology, I think, there are a number of subject areas. In law it's been moving up more gradually, but it now is at a much higher level. All across the country, there are more women receiving Ph.D.s. We are treating women better, I think, in terms of encouraging them all the way through to their terminal degrees and granting them. It's crept up. It's still not 51 percent of the society, or whatever women number—52 percent of the population—but it's getting much closer.

Our hiring practices are still way behind, so that's where I say you can see the differential.

I'll just insert a note here which I found interesting as well as disturbing. This was told to me by someone who had been high up in the administration in the College of Agriculture. I did not have this information corroborated by anyone, so I can only say that my source was a fairly high level (dean's level) administrator. Evidently around the sixties to the late seventies some time, UC Davis gave preferential treatment to males in the application process to allow them to become students because women were beginning to outnumber men, qualifying and applying in higher numbers than males (I was told by this source). We were bringing more women into the College of Agriculture than men as students, and our hierarchy was worried about this, so they behaved affirmatively for the male students they wanted to have enrolled in greater numbers. They did their own little affirmative action project, giving men an advantage or extra points or however they did it, I don't know how they did it, so that our college student population wouldn't be lopsided with too many women and not enough men.

That wasn't so long ago. I was hired in 1978. It was very interesting for me to hear this. I have to say, I have not checked the records for facts, I have not had this corroborated by other high level administrators, so this guy could have just been saying this for fun, but it was told to me in a serious conversation when I was asking some questions about hiring practices and enrollments of students; so I tended to believe him. If there's any possibility this is true, it's a fairly interesting bit of history.

[added during editing: It is my impression that we continue to give men preferential treatment in numerous ways and in a myriad of circumstances. This is why we are hiring them for faculty positions at percentages way beyond their availability in the applicant pools.]

I wanted to have some impact on the hiring of women, of course, but for some reason, I have always been very, very interested in equal treatment for people of ethnic backgrounds and diverse skin colors. I feel that women have a long way to go. I think we're still struggling, I think we're, I don't think; I know we're being paid less than men on the dollar. What is it, 78 cents on the dollar now? We're inching up there. I do, however, believe that it is easier for women. It's getting better. We go forward a little bit, we slide back, I think we're in a slide back time, have been for a while, but the gains have been notable along the way just the same. The gains have hardly been notable for people of other ethnic backgrounds and the problems in hiring them as faculty are much greater.

For example, I couldn't use data. There's not enough to count, so trying to use data doesn't get you very far. You can't say 50 percent of the group, because you're only talking about 2 percent. And so one can make a very strong point saying there are only two people who have received Ph.D.s in physics this year who are African Americans. That is a striking thing to say. It is a terrible thing to admit, and it's a horrible circumstance, but can I force UC Davis to go out and try to hire one of the two? It would be very hard. We'll be in major competition for that individual, and what if that person wants to live in Florida and not in California? Therefore, our administrators tend to say it's an impossible task. "We can't do this. It's so hard. You see how hard it is? There are only two of them." The pool is not large enough for all of us to compete and succeed.

So it's a bigger problem. I feel it needs more work. Therefore, I feel we have to have affirmative action. There's no other way than to be very conscientious, work with a pipeline, make sure our ethnic students are treated properly from preschool all the way through their Ph.D.s, and then we can hire them. We have to get really busy about that as a society. We're just not doing enough to make sure that the opportunities are equal. We're doing a bit, but we're not doing enough. It's not effective enough. We're not getting the job done. We know what to do, but we're not doing it.

With women I think there is enough activity, there are enough powerful women pushing around, especially white women who have climbed in greater numbers to higher positions; we're working on it. I wish it would be a better circumstance today, but there is activity and there are things to do.

In the area of people from ethnic minorities, it's just much, much more difficult, which is why we have to have a program and have to do it on purpose. That to me is what

affirmative action means. It means acting affirmatively. So I don't know how we're going to compensate for not having affirmative action programs. [added during editing: UC is required by federal law not to discriminate in hiring. To comply we need to engage in affirmative action to raise the number of underrepresented minority faculty, but our administrators are acting as if the law no longer applies.]

I always liked reform. Don't throw things out; reform them. If you don't like details, how they're working, clean it up, make it better, reform it. You'd probably have to reform it ten times or every other year. Why can't we just make our methods better instead of tossing them out? Now we've tossed affirmative action out, and it's very difficult to figure out a way to reach out to people. How do we encourage our faculty to hire more diversely without insulting them or without making them hire somebody they don't want? You know, it's just much more difficult now.

So when I became chair of the UC Davis Academic Senate committee on affirmative action, writing our annual narrative and our report of our activities, I realized that I just had to say in a very gentle way that our practices, here and there, looked like they were motivated by racism.

Nathan: Looked like what?

Laky: Racism.

Nathan: Racism.

Laky: Well, this word had never been in an annual report. [laughter] I said it nicely. I can't remember the sentence, but I said it very nicely. I sort of said, "One might,"—I might have even done it this carefully: "One might be apt to possibly think that perhaps—" [laughs] I tried to be so careful, but I felt the need to actually say that this is what is happening, whether we realize it or not, or whether we do it purposefully or not. When you look at it, this is unfortunately what it looks like. Racism.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: So that created a big row. In fact, I don't know some of what went on, but apparently some people tried to stop the report from being submitted, but it was submitted and it was quoted and it made a small storm. I did not think it would be such a big deal, really. I realized it was a big deal afterwards, even though I knew at the time that it would be a bit of a tricky word to use, and that I should use it carefully. My committee felt fine about it because we had all looked at the same material, we had all been working on the same problems. It was clear that this was the word to use. So that was kind of fun. It created a little ruckus. I like to create a little fuss now and then. [laughter] I think it's healthy for us to feel uncomfortable, especially when we need to face a shortcoming.

Nathan: Oh, exactly.

Laky: Here we are, this important institution, the University of California. You know, we form the status quo. We have that position in society. We're very respected. We need to shake ourselves now and then and try to do a better job. We need to be self critical and we need to face how we're functioning. I just don't think we're doing what we could in

this area, particularly in hiring faculty. Those are the people who stand up in front of our young people and talk to them and teach them. It's a tremendously important role and it's a tremendously important place. We must and can do better. I think in aspects of industry some of commercial America is doing better than the universities are.

Systemwide Affirmative Action Committee, and Tape-Recorded Interviews

Laky: Because I chaired the UC Davis committee, I was automatically a member of the systemwide committee. I met with individuals from all the affirmative action committees from all the nine campuses and that became even more interesting. Then I actually chaired that systemwide committee the following year, in 1990-1991, so I jumped into the lion's mouth.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: It was quite an education.

I really had fun with it. When I was a member of the committee, it was the second year that the committee had decided to do campus visits, which was a very interesting thing to do. The whole committee would show up on a campus and say, "We want to review what's going on in terms of diversifying this campus and its faculty."

Well, it did shock the campuses and of course no campus wanted to be looked at. When I became chair, some people on the committee said, "Well, shouldn't we go to Davis now?" I said, "Oh, please no." [laughter] I'm from Davis, so there was this feeling, "No, not my campus."

Yes, the year I was chair we went to UC San Diego. Actually I don't know if the systemwide committee continued the campus reviews because I don't think they ever came to Davis, so it may be that somebody stopped them from doing these campus visits altogether. They were very controversial.

For a visit we spent the entire day at the campus. We asked to meet with the chancellor, the deans of colleges, chairs of programs, especially deans and chairs where the hiring practices had resulted in very few women and very few minorities. We met with the women's caucus committees, and faculty who wanted to talk with us. We had a very elaborate all-day schedule set up ahead of time.

What was interesting to me was that we taped our meetings, always, and then they were transcribed and turned into minutes. We always said to whoever came to sit down, "We tape these meetings. Is that all right with you? Are you comfortable with that?" Et cetera. And then our secretary or staff person would just turn on the tape recorder and off we'd go.

People said some very amazing things, even though they knew that they were being tape-recorded. I'm not going to mention any names, also because I can't remember them; I'd have to look up my notes on the report, but one person actually said that they

had tried hiring (the reference was about African American faculty). They tried hiring some; but those the faculty hired weren't very comfortable because there were so few of them, and therefore it didn't work. He and the other faculty didn't think the new faculty should be uncomfortable. This person actually said this on the tape recorder. I couldn't believe it. I was so astonished.

But I also liked hearing it, because this person was being truthful and said that he would like to hire more minorities, but they're uncomfortable. They like to be with their own kind. It's uncomfortable for them in his department. They shouldn't be uncomfortable, so it's better not to hire them.

Nathan: They didn't suggest what they might do to make people feel more comfortable?

Laky: We did have a little discussion about that. I think after he said this he probably realized that he had said something which was not too smart to say. We did, as I recall, start talking about how to make people feel more comfortable, et cetera, but as I recall, he became a little defensive, actually, quite defensive, and the conversation did not go too much further and not in a constructive direction. Maybe that's one thing I regret slightly, except I don't know that we could have changed his opinion about hiring. I really doubt that we could. But I am sorry that those kinds of conversations can't turn into how to successfully hire and retain black faculty members. He clearly had tried it; wasn't going to try it again. That was basically what he was saying.

I also think when we have the potential for some good people in the candidate applicant pool, we need to reach out and we need to find them. We need to educate our faculty to hire them. We need to work with our administration to keep a watch over it. We need to do this. There's lots of work to be done.

In 1997-1998, our hiring of women dropped from in the low 30s, to just under 15-16 percent.¹ It could have been a quirk. It could have been an off year, it could have been just a weird thing that happened, but it makes me very anxious and it makes me want to look at the data this fall, see who's coming in the door, because maybe we have to reapply ourselves in some major way.

That's my ongoing service area and commitment, and I've really been very involved in it, not in the last five to six years, but I feel like I'm getting ready to maybe do something again.

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Nathan: Well, this is really interesting stuff you've got here. [tape interruption]

Laky: At this point I'd like to backtrack just a little bit.

1. [Added during editing: In the next hiring year, 1998-1999, hiring of women was nearly as low again. What is most troubling is that this drop in hiring women is coinciding with the greatest hiring surge in the history of UC. In the next ten to twelve years we will hire more than 7,500 ladder-rank (tenure track) faculty. At present there are a total of 6,4000 ladder-rank faculty at UC.]

Nathan: Sure.

Laky: And then I want to include a couple of other stories about my experiences at UC Davis.

Nathan: Yes.

Feeling Capable, Finding Who Is Really in Charge

Laky: When I grew up a little more and when I finally went to UC Berkeley, I had the feeling that the world was changing and that I could become anything I wanted to become. I had a wonderful sense of doors opening, that I could walk through any number of them. That I was capable, that I was getting a good education, that I as a woman was capable of anything my brothers were capable of doing. I really felt that that was the nature of my world.

There are a couple of strange things about this. One is that my Father was a very domineering and difficult man, and very hard for me to get along with. He and I fought constantly. Even though growing up with a man like that was very difficult, I spent a lot of time crying and a lot of time angry, today I wonder if it didn't make me stronger that I had to get up every day and put my boxing gloves on if I was going to engage my father. [laughs]

Some of it was also mental. He would say things to me that were very upsetting. He would criticize me, so I had to fight him on that level. It's possible that that's what ultimately gave me some inner strength. At the time I thought he was destroying me, but I think it might have helped develop some skills with which I coped at the university in what I would still describe as an old boys' system. Even though it's changed quite a bit, it still is that: confronting authority in the embodiment of the white male figure, which was what my father was. I also I know he loved me, I loved him, but it was constant battling. Not a happy form of love.

Somehow, in spite of that (I think it might have been my mother's strength and positive character and her unflagging support of me that played a role as well), by the time I got to the university in Berkeley, I was feeling quite powerful. I was feeling like an equal. That's how I began my adult life.

I know this because I can think back to what I felt like and what I thought I could accomplish, and what I thought I could do. I felt very strong. This continued in part as a kind of audacity, too, I guess. [laughs] I don't know how else I would describe it. Going to India, traveling by myself, probably was a stupid idea, but I felt capable. I thought I could make decisions, I thought I could handle my situation, I thought I could figure out how to get from here to there and do it. I went to places where women don't have much stature, Afghanistan and other areas, and somehow I felt competent and confident. I came back and shortly thereafter founded and began Fiberworks, and I became an administrator and an artist and I still felt that I could do such things, that I was anyone's equal.

Nathan: Good.

Laky: I knew there were smarter people than I am and people doing bigger jobs than I was doing and so forth, but I thought if anybody could start something like Fiberworks, I could start something like that, why not? I can do this. So I felt very comfortable in my position in society and my ability to be active. I felt very happy about being hired at the university, and I continued a little bit of that feeling of self-worth and sense of equality until slowly I realized that it was not so.

At UC Davis slowly I realized just through interactions at meetings, I can't even give you very many details, but it became clear who was running the show, and it was not my kind, [laughs] and it was not going to be me. It was interesting how pervasive and slow and quiet that realization was. I became more and more, I don't want to use the word angry because I'm not really an angry person. I don't function out of a base of anger, that isn't my approach to life. I'm just too busy and interested in doing what I do, but I did get angry with this realization of inequality. Often I got angry for very specific reasons, because of how I was treated, and I also felt a measure of discouragement.

Nathan: Even though you were on tenure track?

Laky: Even though.

"Take Your Daughter to Work Day," and Girls' After-School Academy

Laky: Now the shadow side is that I began to notice. All people are not equal on that campus. After a few years, that was why, I think, I got interested in affirmative action and I became so active. It wasn't even overt in my own mind, it just happened. I became very devoted to working on that little piece, and I still feel that it's very important whom we hire. It became my little niche. I could be working on curriculum more also, and all sorts of other things, but I am very interested in equality in hiring.

That's one of the reasons why in my tiny way, I take these young girls to campus for "Take Your Daughter to Work Day." I have done that since the first year the program started. I have borrowed several daughters from widely diverse backgrounds over the years. In 1999 I decided I'd get involved with a wonderful organization in San Francisco called GASA.

Nathan: GASA?

Laky: GASA—G-A-S-A—Girls' After-School Academy. They work with young, mostly African American girls, just the ages of "take your daughters," the nine- to fifteen-year-old range. They do a wonderful job tutoring girls after school. They also teach them life skills and about their health and how to not become pregnant when you don't want to, or too early in one's life, and how to grow vegetables. They do lots of different things, and they do help these young girls scholastically, which is so important. So I thought, "Well, let me just work with this group and we'll take a bus load of girls up to UC Davis

and I'll arrange sponsors for them, and everybody can borrow a daughter for the day from this collection."

Nathan: How many were there?

Laky: There were forty or forty-two. [laughter] Well, you know, we started out with twenty-five, I think. Then they said, "Well, thirty-one girls want to go." Could I say no to six more little girls? I couldn't say no to six more little girls and there was room on the bus, so okay, thirty-one. Then I talked to them a little later. They said, "You know, there are seven more little girls who want to go." [laughter] I thought, "Oh, my God, you know, we've got to really get organized here because now we're up to what is it, thirty-eight?" And by the time they arrived they were forty or forty-two, so it was a colossal organizing job for me. I didn't realize how big.

I got in touch with all my friends on the faculty and staff I knew and found some graduate students and other faculty members, and they were just wonderful. They came out of the woodwork and they all agreed to take on girls. I had a group of six go with law school students to the law school half the day and sit in on classes, and then some went to the administration; they met the chancellor and they saw what it was like to be on the administrative staff. Others went to computer science and others to the medical school to look at cadavers. That generated some excitement.

One of the interesting things was that fourteen or fifteen of them, as I recall, asked to go to the medical school because they wanted to study medicine in the future. And several wanted to study law, and several wanted to study I think it was botany, and some wanted veterinary science. They had some sense of these major subject areas that they wanted to look into in case they might go to school at Davis.

In the morning, the bus arrived, spilled out the girls to their waiting sponsors and disappeared. That first hour the director of the GASA and I thought that this was a disaster about to happen any minute—forty, forty-one, or forty-two little girls and their sponsors had disappeared all over campus. The director asked me things like, "Where are they eating lunch?" and I said, "Well, I don't know specifically. They're not eating lunch together."

"Well, who are they eating lunch with?"

"Well, they're eating lunch with whoever happens to be the sponsor."

Each girl had an itinerary I had typed up for her, each sponsor had a copy of the itinerary, I had the Women's Center on campus as a backup in case anybody got lost. Any lost girl could show someone the phone number she had on her itinerary or the names of those at the Women's Center and reconnect through them.

Nathan: Did you give them a box lunch?

Laky: No, each sponsor took the borrowed daughter to lunch. And then a few of them were graduate students who were taking them and hosting them and I paid for the lunch in those cases.

Tom and I contributed to the bus. That was one of our major philanthropic events of the year, but it turned out that all my nights awake all night doing these itineraries were worth it. The itineraries worked. They all showed up at the right places, and everybody went on the tours of botany and the med school and others. It all worked, so it was fine. When I said goodbye on the bus, several of these young girls said to me, “Oh, I want to come to school at Davis.” And several of my sponsors are continuing their connection with them, so—

Nathan: What a great outcome.

Laky: It almost killed me, and we’d moved into our new home the weekend before. [laughter] It was so crazy and so much work at such a difficult time but I’m devoted to this. I wish I could do more on the grade school, grammar school, high school level and maybe I’ll figure out some ways in the future. I know that my campus is also looking into trying to do more with K-12 students.

And Tien, I think, was a real leader, Berkeley Chancellor Chang-Lin Tien, in terms of bringing that into the University of California when he made his big plunge into outreach into K-12. Everybody started echoing him, so he really contributed in that way.

Learning about Research Appointments

Laky: I just wanted to describe now an experience I had quite early on that was very difficult and that plays into my love-hate relationship with UC and my slow understanding of the inequality in our society after having started out my life on such a positive note. Early on, being a newish member of the faculty in the College of Agriculture, I out found about my responsibilities to teach, and in curriculum planning and all sorts of things like that that are usual and normal. A few years into being a faculty member, however, I heard in various meetings I attended about research appointments.

As a campus of the University of California, UC Davis is a land-grant institution. Davis is connected to federal funding for agricultural research programs. There is an organization which is federal. Its Experiment Station projects.

Nathan: Experiment?

Laky: Experiment Station, it’s called, and it’s a program whereby the faculty in a land-grant institution functioning with heavy engagement in agriculture, forestry, et cetera, are funded by the federal government to do research in projects that support our agriculture and our use of the environment. I found out that almost all the faculty in the College of Agriculture have such appointments.

They’re wonderful appointments. Instead of being nine-month academic appointments with the summer off, these are eleven-month appointments. For some people that’s maybe seen as a drawback, but Experiment Station faculty are paid for the extra

months, and get a little bit of research money. For some scientists it's a great deal of money from this federal source to fund research projects.

Nathan: Now do I understand this is in addition to your departmental appointment?

Laky: Yes.

Nathan: This is a bonus sort of activity?

Laky: Yes. It has created tension on our campus and I think in other segments of the UC system in that the letters and science faculty do not have such appointments, do not have the extra income, and do not have the lowered teaching level, reduced number of courses, and do not have the extra support for research.

I think that inequity is a problem, but at the time I wasn't even aware that this was not happening in other parts of the campus, other colleges. I was only aware that in my college where I was hired, no one ever told me about it, no one ever offered me such a position.

I felt I had a contribution to make, but I was not part of this structure. It was clearly a better support system, but what worried me the most was that I heard it said in these various meetings, "Well, you don't stand a chance of advancing in this system if you don't have one of these appointments," a research appointment. I thought to myself, "I'm a very capable person, I'm dedicated, I'm doing good work, I've been hired by this institution, I should be treated in the same way as others, and I should have the same opportunity to advance that my colleagues have."

So one of the ways that this came into our consciousness in my program, the design program, is that when asking for a new faculty position one day, some discussion of the kind of position it would be came up. Would it include research? Research appointments also came into our consciousness because we became a department with landscape architecture. The landscape architecture faculty had these split research appointments and the extra support; I decided I had to have one, that I had a right to have one.

Also I wanted to excel in this system. I wanted to advance and I wanted to do as good a job as I could and be a faculty member like all the others in my college, so I began to request such a position. It was about two years later, and three broken crowns later [laughs] that I received a research appointment. It was such a tense and unpleasant two years dealing with the administration that I began to grit my teeth a lot and I cracked my gold crowns. [laughs]

So it was a big bill in dentistry and a very agonizing time. I don't know who, I'm just going to generalize, the administration, I've got some guesses about who the individuals could have been at the time, who did not like this idea of a design faculty member having such an appointment. The administration officials made it as difficult as they could possibly make it. They stretched out the procedure as long as they could possibly stretch it out.

I kept every note, every letter, copies of everything. I collated them chronologically. It grew into a couple of inches of paperwork. I made notations of every phone conversation I had. I organized it with an annotated chronology where I summarized each letter, each statement, each announcement, each phone call, each cover letter, each report, everything, so that I could quickly look up on my summary the dates of what had happened when and who said what regarding my request. That way, when a question came up I could go back to the document and I could read it in full.

Several of my letters to the administration were, in quotes, “lost”. When this happened like three times, it was clear that losing letters was a tactic. I mean, our college administration is pretty good, our bureaucracy is pretty good. We lose things now and then, but we don’t lose things that often.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: So it was just a horrendous thing to attempt.

Nathan: One would think it would be routine.

Laky: One would think. They did not want to give me this appointment, but they finally did. Now we have several in our department, and it is fine. And my faculty colleagues and I in design have done a lot of work over the past few years to educate the college to treat us properly, and to understand what our role is in the world. Fortunately I was interested in working with orchard prunings. That’s what I was working with. It fit the research project guidelines. And I believe I have made a contribution and an important one in the realm of both agriculture and art.

That was one of my memorable experiences in terms of establishing equal opportunity for myself. That was the worst one, I would say. That was the worst one, but then there were some minor ones that were similar to that. When I recognized that I was being treated differently and inferiorly, I would try to do something about it, or make sure that we, as a design faculty, or I as a woman, got treated properly. That’s how I built my sense of unhappiness about the state of women’s equality, in general, and for me specifically.

I do need to add a note about the fact that I’m also very fortunate that I did advance through the system very regularly and very nicely and very smoothly. I did get encouragement, I did get support.

Only once, I think it was 1993, in my process and progress up the ladder was I badly treated and I hate to say this—by a couple of my closest colleagues. For some reason, and I don’t even know the reason to this day, they just decided to work against me. It was very disillusioning and very difficult especially since I had been working very hard in the department and had been putting in a major effort to write the graduate program. It was just after both my father and my brother died within about a two-year period. I continued doing all the various things I had to do. I did a good job at everything, my teaching ratings remained high, my art work and everything else, but it was a time of great sorrow in general and then to have this happen was very painful. It wasn’t based on any factual weakness in what I had accomplished for the period, and so I appealed and succeeded in turning it around and did receive an advancement. That process, again,

not quite as bad as the lengthy two-year process of getting my appointment changed to include research, but it was agonizing.

One of the associate deans in the college also tried to hold me back with a letter denying my appeal. (My appeal was first denied and then it was approved.) He denied my appeal by saying that I hadn't done any teaching or activity on the graduate level. That was his main criticism for not granting the appeal. That was a very fortunate mistake he made because I had just finished writing, and had just finished getting approval for, a graduate program that was starting the following fall. [laughs]

Nathan: He hadn't done his homework.

Laky: He hadn't done his homework and so too bad for him. It was nice to be able to turn it around. That was the only time that I had any difficulty moving up the ladder.

I don't know if you're familiar with the system, but it's I think the same as at UC Berkeley. At the assistant level, pre-tenure faculty are reviewed every two years. They have to submit everything they've done in that two-year period to be reviewed and then they get to move up a step and receive more pay. Two years later it happens again. At the end of six or seven years they are then reviewed for tenure. At the associate level, again, it's two-year increments. Each two years, a full review of what's been accomplished in that two-year period: teaching, service to the community, campus service, and professional participation in your field, your research, your creative works, recognition from the field.

Nathan: Publications?

Laky: And publications, et cetera. Then on the full professor level, it's every three years.

Nathan: I see.

Laky: So it's a regular kind of thing that happens. It was just one of those three-year steps in the full professor review where this negative process occurred and as I say, the appeal eventually was successful, so it was all okay in the end. Otherwise, here I am at Professor VI, which makes me feel very, very happy.

Nathan: It should.

Laky: I have been very fortunate. My husband Tom jokes often and says the university is the modern day Medici. Well, in a way it is. It allows scholars and scientists and artists and writers to have a job which accepts their creative work or their scientific work, their research, as an important part of their activities. That is the Medici part, because it said to me, "Part of what you do here is teach, and part of what you do is service and so forth, but an important part of what you do is your creative research."

Nathan: Exactly.

Laky: And for that, I am very grateful, and I feel very fortunate. It's been so beneficial for me. So I have complaints, but I have to say about this experience that it is also very good.

Department of Art Chair in Difficult Times

[Interview 9: June 16, 1999] ##

Nathan: This afternoon what would you like to talk about?

Laky: Perhaps it would be good to finish with one of the other major experiences I had at the university in terms of activities and administrative duties. In early 1995, I was, what word would I use, sort of coerced, cajoled, encouraged, urged, kind of drafted to become chair of the Department of Art at UC Davis because the department had been going through a rather difficult time.

There are lots of pieces to the history of why art got to the point of being in such a difficult circumstance with no current faculty member capable of chairing, or let's say willing to chair the program. I don't think I want to go into all those pieces of history because, in a way, they're somebody else's story. And they're not that central to things I'd like to say, but just suffice it to describe the situation as one where no one was a clear choice to run the department. The dean was running the department, acting as chair.

Nathan: Was this the dean of environmental design?

Laky: No, although I'm glad you asked that question. We have an unusual structure at UC Davis. The Department of Environmental Design, in which the design program exists and in which now the graduate program MFA degree in textile arts and costume design exists, is in the College of Agriculture today. This is a historical thing. Art grew out of a small design and home economics type program that was going on in the College of Agriculture in the 1960s.

I think one or two of those faculty in the mid-fifties I think it was, or early sixties, were included with a couple of other people for that early Department of Art. The College of Letters and Sciences was very small then. It was just that kind of quirk of historical events that divided it into art and design. Katherine was there.

Nathan: Oh, Katherine Westphal?

Laky: Early on, in design. And Helge Olson was there then.

Nathan: What was the first name?

Laky: Helge—H-E-L-G-E.

Nathan: Helge Olson.

Laky: Whose main focus was furniture design.

As I've heard it described, at that time no one expected these two people to build a design program, but more and more students were interested and so the thing grew.

[laughs] You know, it just kind of grew, and you can understand, with Katherine, it grew.

So there we were in spring 1995 with the dean of the college acting as chair of the department. A few months earlier a colleague of mine who is a sculptor in the art department, actually, a couple of the art department faculty approached me and asked if I would consider chairing the department. I thought that was kind of interesting to contemplate, but absolutely not. [laughter] It was funny. The two of them, at two different times, talked to me to feel out whether I might be interested. Each of them, before I even opened my mouth said, "Of course, you'd be crazy to do this and I'm sure you wouldn't want to." [laughs] And I said, "Well, you're right." So you know, over the years the Department of Art grew as well, and flourished, really. It became a very, very strong art program, in the top five in the country, and I think the only one in the top ten that was within a public university. The rating was actually when I took over the chair, that was the status: a very strong program. Robert Arneson, Wayne Thiebaud, Manuel Neri, a number of people who became very well known artists, painters, and sculptors.

But then in early 1995 I was asked again, I was asked a little more seriously as several of the faculty had gotten together about approaching me. Would I consider this because they thought that I might be a person who could really pull them through this very bad time.

Nathan: What was bad about the time?

Laky: The bad time was that the administration removed the former chair around an internal row among the faculty. It also included the graduate students and some undergrads. I don't even know, I mean, I know lots of the details, but even when one knows many, many details, one may still not know the story.

Nathan: I see.

Laky: So that's why I'm just saying, yes, it was a bad time. There were so many versions to the story, so many facts and so many pieces of rumor that it would take quite a while to explain. In short, I think the former chair somehow handled a situation with a faculty member in a manner that set the faculty to fighting among themselves. Apparently some of the graduate students were upset about how a seminar had been handled. The situation just kind of snowballed from that. Then the administration I think handled poorly the sorting out of this circumstance, calming down the faculty and the students, and coming up with a way to move forward. They essentially pushed the chair out, when I think it could have been handled more sensitively.

Now people sometimes misjudge a circumstance and don't handle it in the best way. That happens, and may have happened with the administration's handling of this case. It was not my history with the department. I could take a fresh view. I believed it was best to just move ahead.

Nathan: I see.

Laky: I was asked to come in because since that had occurred they didn't have anyone to chair the department. None of the current faculty would or could. Now they could and the

would have to do with a rather extensive internal struggle amongst the faculty. [added during editing: There are two faculty members in particular in art studio who are very divisive, vocal, and disruptive, but do very little of the actual work of the program. They just continually made matters worse. They constantly fomented internal battles. This kind of behavior is unfortunately not uncommon in academe.]

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: And I'm finding out daily how common it is. My own department had its version of a major battle between two groups of faculty members, so this does happen. When it occurs, and in a circumstance where the chair position is involved, then it becomes very difficult because there's so much day-to-day detail just managing the department, that doesn't get done. And even if a dean, as in the case of art, steps in as an acting chair, that person really can't be there every day, managing the business of the department.

So this had been going on a little while and art needed a chair, but they were not in a position to ask for a new outside position and have a national search or an international search because they were so busy battling with one another that the administration would not at such a moment release a new position. So, they needed leadership and the only place to get it would be internally from campus. Internally in terms of the department was not appropriate at that time, so who's going to do it? And who has some background in art and who could do this?

I'm sure there are a number of people on campus who could do the job, but I think the issue for many of the faculty was someone who knew the art world and could maintain the department and could maybe help move the department forward at a critical time. [added during editing: To complicate matters, a former art faculty member took a high-level administrative position and tried to micro-manage behind the scenes. He was a partisan, so added to the turmoil.]

More Budget Cuts, VERIP, Threat to Art Studio Program

Laky: In the early nineties, the University of California went through major budget cuts, a series of them with California's depressed economy. This was devastating and some aspects of the university have not recovered.

I'm rather worried about art, though they have just been given two new positions at long last. The art studio program was, because of the budget cuts, cut way, way back. Sometimes it is difficult to recover such a big setback. The strength of the department is built slowly over the years. When suddenly big chunks are lost, it is very difficult to build back up again because it requires that slow, careful, incremental process of developing a reputation. So that's what I'm worried about today. In 1995, one of the ways the university and my campus, but all campuses in the system, coped with the budget cuts was to offer tremendously dazzling deals to older faculty to retire early.

Nathan: Oh, this is the VERIP program?

Laky: The VERIP. The very veruptious VERIP.

Nathan: Right.

Laky: Let me see, I'm not sure if I can give you what those letters mean, but I think it is Voluntary Early Retirement Incentive Program.

My understanding is that the retirement plan and our pension plans are so well funded and have done so well over the years that we have big pots of money with which we can do incentive programs and make a very good retirement deal for someone. That was the only area of the university that had money and had the wherewithal to combat the budget cutting that was going on with the tremendously weakened California economy at that time.

The way UC Davis handled budget cutting was if faculty retired, or died, or left, or took VERIP, a large chunk of the budget for that department or program would be removed with the departure of each faculty member.

That sounds like maybe it would work, because you also get an augmentation in budget with every new faculty member. However, the program that I left in order to be able to go to the art department and become chair of design, had one retirement. I think at the time it was something around \$20,000 to \$25,000 that would be removed from the operating budget for each faculty member departing. I'm not sure if that was the same amount in all colleges, but it was somewhere around that amount. So one person retired in Design. We somehow swallowed and tightened belts and did all sorts of things and managed.

The Department of Art had several retirements. I think it was four or five. The budget cuts absolutely devastated the budget. The faculty members are gone but the program and students remain. The first year I was there the cuts came in and some of the cuts I received were retroactive because the department had not managed to do them the year before, so they piled up a bit. I did have to just swallow hard and let a staff person go and cut back where I could and close things down. It was really very painful and awful.

The dean of the college at the time said repeatedly, and hired me saying, "Gyöngy, come aboard. We'll do great things together. Don't worry, we're redoing the formulas and you'll be okay, I promise you." So the first year I worked on good faith and made all the cuts.

The staff in the Department of Art are absolutely wonderful, wonderful people: very hardworking and very sweet. They've been there quite a while and were great to work with. It was a very challenging job. I'm just telling you the budget part, but I'll fill in a little bit all the various things going on. It was quite a horrendous job, very demanding. Well, let me finish the budget part.

So the second year of my chairship, another big budget blow was coming. I tried all sorts of ways to say to the college administration, "This can't happen. We can't do it. This budget cut will destroy too much of the program." But nobody was listening to me. I mean, they would listen but not hear, not register the implications.

One of the overriding things that was going on, that I think the administration also mishandled, was that they were pointing to the department and saying, "Well, the faculty are battling, therefore we won't help you." Now I don't think it was quite that clearly stated in anyone's mind or anywhere on paper, but that's essentially the story that was given constantly from this corner and that: "You get the faculty under control, and we'll see what we can do."

They brought in a person who was working like mad and getting a lot of things done, and this was the wrong thing to say to me. But I was still in there working very hard, even though this was the tone and the attitude I constantly got from the administration. Meanwhile, I had gotten the faculty back to a working relationship.

Also, faculty do fight, and they sometimes continue to fight. That does not mean that a good program shouldn't be continued and it does not mean that you do not want to support certain subjects in your college or on your campus. You look for ways to ride out the faculty storms, and not destroy your programs in the process.

So when the second major budget crunch hit the second year, I realized that if I did not close down big parts of the department, and if I did not want to fire any more staff, we had \$10,000 left to run the program for the year. I felt neither of those two options for cuts were tenable because it would have been so destructive to the program.

Our phone bill, because we have a lot of high-tech equipment and some phone lines are connected to security systems, was \$7,000 a year at that time. The faculty have no phones in their offices, but we have a few in the main office. Subtract that from the \$10,000 and you've got \$3,000 left. One model for one life drawing class is \$1,500. We have many more than one drawing class per year, but let's say we have two and we need a model for those classes. That's your \$3,000. We're down to zero, and how could we manage this situation?

The cuts came from above and then above that and then above that. The cuts got passed down and passed down. One program could have one retirement and only a minimal budget cut and another program could have five retirements and massive budget cuts. There was no effort to equalize that situation or to stabilize the department that was going to be cut drastically. It was untenable. So that was the budget situation and I'll come back to that in a minute.

Starting the NO Series

Laky: It might sound peculiar to say this, but I knew the situation of chairing art would be difficult. I began chairing it in the spring of '95. I'd been talking and working with the dean for several weeks before I actually stepped into the role on April 1. April Fool's Day. I thought that was just so appropriate. [laughter] Also, I started my NO series of works at that time--the NO.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: In fact, it was very strange to me. I had been planning to do a “no,” an N and an O, NO, for quite some time, about two or three years, and I just hadn’t gotten to it. But I did the week after I started my appointment as chair. I think this was at the end of the first week in April; somehow I felt compelled to start these “NO” pieces. I started both of them, the two that I did in the following year. [laughs] I thought what kind of interesting psychology is this, that I have to make a “NO,” when I’ve just said this massive “Yes”?

But it was, and this will sound strange, it was also lots of fun to be in such a difficult administrative position. I liked the challenge. It was not my mess, it was not my history, it was somebody else’s. I could step in, roll up my sleeves and see what I could do about it. I love problem solving. I just found it kind of, not even perversely fun, it wasn’t perverse, but it was surprising that I was having a good time. It was very stimulating to step in and try to figure out how to help.

Nathan: For this, a word on the NO series, could you just say of what material the NO was constructed? It was big, chunky pieces of wood, wasn’t it?

Laky: Yes. You’re exactly right, it was chunky pieces of wood, but not too big, finger sizes.

The N was an N that I found in the newspaper. It is one of the most simple Ns. There are all sorts of type styles, so I had a huge choice. I chose one that was a very rectilinear. Everyone sees these Ns daily: a point at the top left and a point at the bottom right, making a sort of triangular shape, and the leg down on the left squares off pretty wide. The leg on the right goes up and squares off, so it’s a simple shape: equidistant legs and diagonal cross bar.

Then when that’s put into a three-dimensional form, read from four sides, it becomes an absolutely fascinating geometric form. The slant of the N diagonal is repeated four times. It became such a complex form, that I had to actually make a cardboard mock-up, which I usually don’t do. I usually don’t work with a maquette. I sometimes work with some sketches, but only rarely have I actually constructed in another material and smaller scale the object that I wanted to make. I had to do this in order to understand the form. It’s a good thing I did because it turned out in construction it was very easy to paint oneself into a corner, so to speak, with that form. I had to make sure I maintained access to the inner areas, working outward in all directions. I made it equilateral: fourteen inches high, fourteen inches wide, fourteen inches deep.

The O is a globe. It’s a solid ball with holes through it, the hole of the O. The overall theme of the NO has to do with environmental issues, and we can talk about that a little bit maybe later on, but the O has always represented the earth to me and the N represents more the human element. The word divides up that way. The N is architecture of milled wood and the O represents the natural world.

The chunks of wood making the N were all store-bought, milled lumber; they were all pine molding, very simple molding which I cut into short two- to four-inch lengths with angled cuts and carefully sanded. I made little chunky pieces, but they have smooth and manufactured surfaces.

The O was composed of short chunky twigs, pieces of branch approximately one-half to one inch in diameter and two to four inches in length. Walnut and almond is what I used for the globe. The N was such an interesting geometric shape that when I looked at the O, I needed something more than just an O that would read from two sides. A globe, a ball with holes in two directions would read from four sides, so that was easy. I decided to make a hole down from the top through it also, so that the holes through the ball--through the solid sphere--are really like a three directional cross, two crossing and one coming down from the top, going all the way through to the bottom. This then made the sphere, the globe, a very interesting geometric shape as well, with adequate complexity of internal, external shape, to hold its own next to the N.

The small pieces were all doweled. Holes were drilled and small wooden dowels inserted to hold these puzzle-like short pieces in place. I built from the inside out, so the letters are solid shapes. Every piece that was put in place was doweled in place. Each letter is very solid and rather heavy.

So it was very complicated. It was so complicated that I think it absolutely won over my mind when I was working in the studio. It was probably therapy, in fact. The whole thing seemed kind of psychological to me that I would have to do these NOs just at that moment in my career, but I found them fascinating and I really enjoyed doing them. I think they were so captivating because they were so complex in form and construction.

The other NO which I started about the same time is much smaller. It's half that size. It's seven by seven by seven, the same typography, the same font, let's say, the same type style, very simple.

The N I made out of telephone wire in a three-dimensional grid. Each square of the grid was about half inch by half inch. It's like three-dimensional chess. It goes out to the sides and deep. The N was a cube, essentially, reading from all four sides. And again, the globe-sphere was the same structure, basically, but it was made out of telephone wire that was mashed, very, very dense, mashed together and stitched through layer upon layer. I even hammered it several times over the entire sphere surface as I worked to make it more dense. It was just very, very solid by the time I finished. The letters each were seven inches high, deep, and wide.

There again, it was environmental issues about connections. The grid was really about wiring, wiring and interconnecting the world. The globe was about the cacophony of communication, essentially. Communication never happens in an organized way, so one letter was very orderly and structured, and one was disorderly. In a sense, the O was a major scribble. The piece is representative of opposing forces.

Sometimes when I describe what's in my head, I like it better without the words. [laughter] I like it better when the pieces are viewed and the person viewing can supply whatever sense of understanding comes to mind or what the works represent.

Nathan: I see. You're still the chair of the Department of Art while this is going on?

Laky: Yes, and in fact, it took I think several months to complete these two pieces, because I didn't have much time to do studio work. I say that; however, I did manage to do quite a bit of studio work while I was chair, as it turned out. I was surprised myself. It was a

little less than a year (in January) that I had been chair of the Department of Art and at that point I had a one-person exhibition with the gallery in Connecticut of mostly new work. I had managed to do enough work for that exhibition somehow while carrying on my administrative duties and also teaching. Both of the NOs were in that exhibition, so I guess it took me just under a year to do them. It felt like it was more than that, but I guess it was probably about eight or nine months.

Nathan: And was this Brown/Grotta?

Laky: Brown/Grotta Gallery, yes, in Wilton, Connecticut. The NOs--it's interesting you asked me about the NOs. They're like the physical embodiment of my work as chair. I've never thought of that, but just describing them to you now, juxtaposing time and work. [added during editing: Perhaps even more peculiar is that immediately after stepping down as chair, I began a YES piece. It is larger and very prickly. So it is a dangerous "yes"--studded with nails--but ultimately fuzzy and even comical.]

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Nathan: We were talking about the NO pieces, one letter wire, one wood. You were saying that it was reflecting this new job.

Departmental Issues and Environmental Safety

Laky: I wanted to just say a few things about the kinds of issues and the kinds of situations that were part of chairing the department. I think probably some of these things are or would be the same chairing any department, but some of them were very specific to the Department of Art and rather interesting.

For example, not too much had been done about environmental safety issues. Being the mid-nineties, we knew a lot about chemicals and their hazards, but the art community in general has been a little slow picking up on this and the Department of Art had not, for whatever reasons, gotten to that. One of the first ways I realized, well, there are two ways in which I realized this was a major problem and needed immediate attention. One was that we had some rather hefty fines from the state environmental health and safety folks. The college was rather irritated and upset with the department because, of course, along with the big budget cuts, we got these massive fines. I don't know what they were, \$10,000 per incident, or \$12,000 and we had two or three of them. Ugh.

Nathan: Was it contaminating water?

Laky: Well, here's how we got cited: if the inspectors came through and found a chemical that is not labeled sitting on a table, that's a fine, that resulted in a citation. If they went into the photo lab, and found that we were not recycling or containing our chemicals in the way we're supposed to, that's a fine. Et cetera, et cetera.

So here we have I don't know how many hundreds of students passing through our classes per quarter in the Department of Art, and they are splashing their chemicals, and

they are painting like mad, and they've got turpentine, and they've got oil paint, and they've got varnish, and they're spraying stuff out in the back court. They are having a ball and they're doing their work and it's great and they're creative, but they are all over the place and their chemicals are all over the place with them. That's what an art school typically was and still often is. Environmental consciousness is bringing about change slowly.

The second major way I realized that this situation had to be dealt with immediately was that twice in the weeks following my arrival as chair, the Nelson Gallery staff came screaming out of their offices very unhappy and agitated. They said that they could not breathe in their offices, the fumes were so terrible, and indeed, in the main office we smelled them, too.

Here's what would happen: the shop and the outdoor sculpture yard also are part of the same building. Students used to go out in the yard, take their spray cans of whatever it was, and spray. And of course the air intake for the building was nearby and ground level, so every time a student went out to spray a drawing with fixative or a sculpture with some sort of varnish or sealant, or paint, the air intake would pull in the fumes right into the building, especially into the first floor with the gallery and offices.

This was really startling, so suddenly I had to become very, very well-informed and very well-versed in all the issues around the chemistry of art: the dangers of the fumes, what paints are made of, what alternatives there are, alternatives for chemicals in the dark room and printmaking studio.

In photography, for example, stop bath is a dangerous thing to work with. Perhaps if it's handled properly and there's the right ventilation and containers and so forth, it might be okay to use, but we had to come up with ways to eliminate it. In addition, we had students splashing chemicals around and there were no eye washing stations.

We had flammable rags, we had all sorts of potentially dangerous things. A little bit of work had been done, for instance: containers for the rags were in each studio. But you'd open them up and you'd find empty coffee cups, paper towels, and a pencil or whatever, [laughs] very few rags.

There had been a little bit of an effort to try to deal with some of these things, but I had to get up to speed very quickly, so I got in touch with an associate dean whose expertise was chemistry. He helped me get lots of information. I went over to a staff member in chemistry who basically took me under his wing. It was like a crash course. I had to get this pulled together in as quick a time as I could.

I started talking to the buildings people about ventilation. It turned out that our ventilation was something like 15 to maybe 40 percent of what it should be. It was only functioning at a minimal level. We had to then start talking to them about fixing this. They had to put in proper ventilation. Ventilation hadn't been dealt with in that building since it was built many years ago. Our use of chemicals had changed a lot and our knowledge about what we were doing had definitely taken a major leap forward. We built a big wall around the air intake and we told students they could not use any spray of any kind that sent particulates or fumes into the air. In fact, we told them they couldn't spray their drawings with fixative anywhere in or around the building.

They also used to do this fixative work in the hallways. It was great. It was so convenient. You just took your drawing in the hall and you sprayed it. [laughter]

So then I came up with a list of guiding principles for students to adhere to when they were in the studios. For example, one item was that any liquid in a studio had to have a label. It had to have the date, what was inside the container, it had to have a lid, et cetera. Then, how to discard turpentine: we had special containers to put it in and the lid had to be firmly placed on top of the containers when this was done. The small store-bought or coffee can container from which it was emptied had to be dried and then it too could be discarded, et cetera, et cetera.

The students were given these guidelines at the beginning of every class and the faculty had to go over all the items listed. Also on the list were books available and phone numbers to call for more information. What I realized was that we were also teaching our students to live healthy lives as artists and so it was really a very important part of what went on in the studio class. We asked each one to sign a paper stating that the guidelines were handed out and explanations given.

Nathan: How did the students respond to this?

Laky: Very well. They did not feel like we were doing some bureaucratic horror to them. They actually, I think, appreciated it. They took notes and, you know, some of them would talk to me afterwards about--"Oh, tell me more," or, "How I do I do this or how would I handle that? What can I substitute for this spray if I don't want to use that?" More and more information was coming out. Some of the faculty were really quite wonderful about helping me and putting their own lists together and finding substitutes for things like linseed oil and turpentine.

Some of the oil paints are really deadly. They're basically metals, heavy metals, and some lead-based. Lots of the companies are reformulating paint now, so we're making progress, but there's still a lot of work to do.

Now this is not my field at all. I use verathane or some varnish now and then, but very rarely, and I'm careful it isn't somewhere dangerous. I don't paint, you know, and I don't do any printmaking, so I was learning on all fronts in this regard.

The building's physical plant people did hop to it and were good. I didn't get everything I wanted. I wanted more fume hoods and things. We got some. We got eye washes put in. We did do quite a bit. As I say, we built a wall, a high wall around the air intake.

I wanted to purchase a spray booth, with the proper ventilation so that students could continue to use that kind of technology, but money was an issue, no money anywhere, so we couldn't do the spray booth. But I did do all the research, I had the company picked out, I knew what would work, where we might install it and so forth, but it was going to be \$30,000 or \$40,000 and we just couldn't do it. So that was one area of disappointment.

I learned a great deal. It was fascinating. It worked out very well. I think those systems are all still in place. The students are being informed, the faculty are taking responsibility. I know that all this is continuing.

I feel I was able to make, not the complete contribution I wanted to make, because there were metal storage cabinets and things that we never got that we needed, but we got a good start on a healthier art practice situation.

The Missing Ceramic Kilns

Laky: I also stepped in at a time when in the previous year the very large ceramic kilns that Robert Arneson used had been taken out; they were going to be replaced by new kilns. It was a project which went awry. And again, lots of detail and history about who had mismanaged, but it's not necessary to go into that here. Just it went awry. The company hired to bring in the new kilns was actually the same company that had put in the original kilns: these very, very large kilns for ceramic pieces. I think the company was sold along the way. I think that's maybe what had happened, and the company defaulted in the middle of this project somehow, so the kilns never got built and they never got put in, but the money was spent.

We had some tiny--for a program like ours, we had these few, I don't know, four or five small kilns that the students had to use. We had an internationally known ceramic arts program with no kilns, essentially. So again, well, let's see, roll up my sleeves. Fascinating, because again, I had to find out all kinds of things about kilns and ceramics and clay, how to use it and what would be best, and the companies and BTUs (British Thermal Units) of and the electricity required, how much it would cost.

The roof of TB-9, the renowned clay studio, was leaking because the kilns had been taken out and the holes were still there. [laughs] There was a mountain of problems. The technical assistant in the studio knew some details and the staff knew things, and so we pieced the information together. We leaned heavily on the college and, good for the college even though they were cutting our budget beyond survival, they somehow found one-time funds to replace the big kilns. We actually managed to purchase them and they were on their way to installation when I stepped down as chair in early '97 I think it was.

Introducing the Department to Endowment Fund Raising

Laky: Now there is a second situation with the clay studio, the ceramics studio, which was a very important piece to put in place. As I mentioned earlier, several faculty had retired and then of course Robert Arneson died. We did not have a faculty member in the ceramics area, a very important part of the program. There had been an effort to start up an endowment fund for an Arneson Professorship. I think I put you on the mailing list. You probably got my solicitations. [laughs]

The endowment fund was nowhere near its first \$100,000 when I came in and, again, everyone was rather distraught about it not moving along more quickly and easily. There was, however, no fund-raising activity that had ever been done in the department. The faculty didn't understand that departments fund raise in this day and age. No one prior to me really had much experience in fund raising. A little bit, the former chair, I think, had been involved in getting this endowment started. Instead of finding a source of money: a chunk around which to build the endowment, this was a bake sale, this was bit by bit. Sometimes, as you know, a family gives an endowed chair or endowed professorship, or it will be a corporation that does, or a couple of individuals. Not in this case. We pieced it together. It was a difficult task. Occasionally we got larger chunks of money--\$5,000 or \$10,000. I don't know what the biggest amounts were, but much of the money came in little \$1,000 or \$500 or \$100 or smaller amounts.

We put on an event. Roy DeForest was wonderful. He contributed a print that we sold multiples [and a book of his work in which he put an instantaneous original drawing as people purchased it and waited for his autograph]. Wayne Thiebaud had a book that he autographed, and we had a small bronze bust by Arneson that was made in multiples and sold. We had a fund-raising exhibition and sale and so forth, and on and on, but it was piecemeal. It was a lot of very hard work, but somehow or other the fund crept up there.

Nathan: Now when you say endowment, does that mean that only the interest can be utilized?

Laky: Yes.

Nathan: You don't go into the body of the endowment?

Laky: Yes, that is what an endowment is. It basically puts together a pot of money which then earns interest and the money made is spent for whatever purpose the chair or professorship is designated. My understanding is that every \$100,000 produces around \$5,000 a year of spendable income from the endowment.

So I do believe that the Robert Arneson Endowment finally crept up to \$300,000-plus. I think it got that high. That was when I stepped down as chair and it was still going on, but it had gotten close enough by that point so that we were permitted to hire the faculty member for that position. As I left, that was announced to us, and that made me very happy.

It was very interesting to face introducing a fund-raising program to a department. Now we didn't get as far as I would have liked, but we did have quite a bit of activity and a fair amount of success. I think we could have gone further. There were so many problems in the department to solve, so many situations to fix, so many really urgent problems that it was difficult to put myself in the mode of being creative and inventive in doing new things. The fund raising was really a newish activity for the department. The department at that time had no mailing list.

Nathan: That's amazing.

Cutting Staff, Proposing Mergers: Overloads

Laky: I was trying somehow to get a mailing list going on. I had to do things like that, new projects, very carefully. The staff was so overstretched and so overworked. One of the things that the university did during the budget cutbacks, about which I am not proud, was to cut staff. There was some effort to cut the work back also, but mostly what happened was the work got pushed onto the staff who remained at a reprehensible level.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: I was really very unhappy about that. I had a very clear sense of the impact of that strategy. Maybe it wasn't an overt strategy, but I fought the administration for not hearing the cries of the people at the lowest rungs of our whole house of cards. The staff in each department are tremendously important. They are the life blood of each of our programs. They do their jobs day in and day out.

When I arrived in art, we were asked to try to come up with a plan to join dramatic art, music, dance, and the Department of Art (art history and art studio). I thought that this needed to be addressed immediately. As I was being hired, the dean and I talked about this subject endlessly, that the merger was coming in the near future, that we needed to try to figure it out, so I got some meetings started right away with all of us, all those groups. We had the chairs and key staff people at most meetings, and then later we included more of the staff. We had meetings once a week or once every two weeks.

Nathan: Who would run the meeting?

Laky: We didn't really chair them. It was a small enough group--about six to eight people.

Nathan: I see.

Laky: It was relatively easy to discuss our items of business, where a combined office would be located, how we would use our various spaces, how we would use our combined budget, et cetera.

Where we ran into a major problem was that everyone's budgets had been cut back to such a degree that we didn't have the wherewithal to form a new configuration. For example, if the Department of Art staff merged with the proposed composite administration, we wouldn't have people overseeing the studios. This was because our office staff members were the people who were called upon when there was a problem in a studio. Sometimes they had to take care of a water leak, or whatever it might be. Everyone, it seemed to me, had been stretched to the absolute maximum and art office staff were providing these non-office services in addition to their administrative duties.

One of the women from one of the other departments actually broke down crying at a meeting. For months she had been working weekends as well as regular work weeks with extra long days, not going home until seven, coming in Saturdays and Sundays. As we talked about more work, which is what this plan would require, she just broke down, telling us her story of how she'd been working for all these months. Now, I felt that work situation couldn't continue and certainly could not be made worse.

We were not given any extra help to accomplish this merger, so there was no way we could figure out how to do it. We would have needed some extra help for the first year or so. Later we would achieve the efficiency of moving together. But to launch it would require more work; you could not ask all these overburdened people to do this extra work. We worked on plans for many months, but because of this problem our efforts went nowhere.

This is an illustration of what happened at the time of all those budget cuts and why it was such a difficult time. Most people wouldn't have that kind of inside view of the impact of cuts. They would just hear "budget cuts," but they wouldn't really have a sense of what it meant to the staff.

Email Mailing List, Newsletter

Laky: So to then turn to my sweet staff and say, "Now, could we make ourselves a mailing list? Would you just type up these 500 names?" [laughs] It was hard to ask for more effort from overworked people, so things moved slowly.

And a newsletter, art didn't have a newsletter. I created the first electronic newsletter. Whenever I had a few minutes and our faculty had done something spectacular or had gotten an award or students had an exhibition, et cetera, I would just whip out a little email to this list that I'd put together. It included the deans and the chancellor and our in-house administrative newspaper on campus, and our student newspaper, and various faculty in various departments who I felt should know about art. The list also included all our graduate students and our undergraduate leadership. So that was my little email mailing list and I would just whisk out a very brief email newsletter every now and then to try to bolster the department's campus reputation, which had suffered. I did try to do an end of the year letter, but even that was difficult. Mailing out a few hundred pieces of mail, for a staff that can not take on one more thing, was very hard.

The things I have described were a good beginning and we made a great effort to solve problems and revitalize the department. Some of these actually were able to be continued and some really didn't get off the ground.

Shortly after I arrived in '95, we were required to put together a five-year academic plan. [laughter] I was a brand-new chair coming in the door.

Nathan: This is for the Department of Art?

Laky: For the Department of Art, two majors: art studio and art history. Art history had a program director. I worked closely with him and the art studio faculty. We did get something put together with faculty position requests and so forth. Although it didn't have much impact because at the time the campus was not in a position to be granting positions to us anyway.

Nathan: When you had done all you could do in the Department of Art, did I understand that you then went to design?

Laky: Yes, I went back to design in the Department of Environmental Design. Just a little more detail.

Nathan: Sure.

Too Little, Too Late

Laky: A couple more things that were part of the situation in art are that we had a faculty member who had gone into administrative work full time leaving the photography program without a permanent faculty member. That was as bad a situation as the ceramic vacancy. And we had a third vacancy really in that we did not have a faculty member whose primary role was print-making.

So we had three areas without faculty that I considered to be three major holes in the program. And the only advance we made on that was to get the Arneson Endowment campaign to a level where the administration released the ceramic sculpture position.

Then there were many, many other things. In addition to everything else, curriculum planning was needed.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: In terms of numbers--600, 700 students--the art studio program is a big operation, just a bit smaller student body than the entire San Francisco Art Institute.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Those are not all majors and graduate students in art studio. At any one time there are about fifteen graduate students in addition to undergraduate majors, but there are many, many other students from other subject areas and other majors on campus who take these classes, which is a wonderful thing.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: I was very supportive of that, but we didn't really increase the population of students in the time I was there. We had to, in fact, decrease it because we were over-enrolled and understaffed in terms of visiting temporary faculty. In my second year the dean of the college in my area (there were actually three deans in the college with the new plan). The dean of the humanities, arts, and culture section stepped down and a new dean replaced him. This new dean came in just after the second round of major budget cutting had been sent to me. I realized at that point I could not work with that diminished budget.

When the new dean came in, I thought, well--and I knew her somewhat, not very well--I would just see what happens for the next two or three months and if it doesn't work, maybe I'd have to step down. I knew I could not preside over this department going down, not even descending a few inches. I would build, but I wouldn't stand by and

have it diminish. So I decided that that was just how I felt. I didn't want to be a caretaker during its demise. I just wanted to do my best.

##

Nathan: So you came to a realization?

Laky: I was invited to meet with the new dean. She was meeting with all the chairs. At that moment, I decided to actually hand her my resignation as I described the dire situation to her. I felt, after thinking about it quite a while, that it was unfair to work with her for two or three months and then turn around and say, "You know, I can't do this. Good-bye." She would surely feel that it was her fault somehow, but it wasn't; it was the situation prior to her stepping into the dean's role that became impossible for me. I made the judgment that it would be best to tell her about the situation right off, give her the choice of putting in another person, working with another chair, depending on how she wanted to handle the budget cuts.

It was very clear to me that there was no way I could continue and also no way that I could say to the administration, "This is okay." It was not okay. It was not okay, and I had to make that known. Desperation, really. So I told her what the problems were, I told her the monies that were needed, I told her that we were short on staff, I told her that therefore we could not cut any more staff, I told her we couldn't close the art library because it would be so detrimental to the program. I told her about the faculty vacancies and what was happening with the program. I also told her what we had accomplished and where we were. I told her that I felt there was no more cutting that I could do under the circumstances without severely damaging one of the top art studio programs in the nation.

The dean said to me that she knew I was working hard and doing a good job. She asked me to wait a few days before making my decision. She would work on it and get right back to me. I said, "Fine. Thank you. You know, it's the hardest job of my life, but it is very interesting and I'm willing to go on with it if I get a little help." So she said, "Well, let me work on it."

So, fine. She called me about two days later and said that the provost had promised new staff positions, a budget and faculty replacements. Of course, I'd have to put together a committee and do some planning about these new, ladder-rank faculty positions.

I said, "Not a problem. I can put it together. We'll have a plan."

Well, I was set to go. It was great, I was really very pleased. So [pause] I had also maybe learned something along the way. I said to her that I would like this written down. She said, "Fine."

There ensued about three, two to four months, I can't remember exactly how long, of letters and drafts back and forth and lists of what we needed. She asked me to write down everything that I told her and justify the needs and the amounts and the various positions.

"Great."

Okay, I got busy. We sent descriptions back and forth, and back and forth, and finally we had our final meeting when it would be written down, agreed to, and signed.
[laughs]

What we had been told we would be given was not there. Some staff support was there, a temporary budget, a small one, was there, but no faculty positions. She said she could tell by just looking at me that I was horrified. I started to say, "Well, you know, I'll think about--"--and in the middle of my sentence, I realized there was no way. I knew what the answer was, so I said to her, "Well, I just think I can't do it." And she said, "Yes, I know. It's too little, too late, isn't it?" And I said, "Yes, it is."

A professor from psychology stepped in and is chairing the program now for the department and it seems to be working. As a result of my stepping down, there was an augmentation of the budget, and there was a staff position given. So there was gain, even though it wasn't at the level that I could have accepted. The faculty was now down to the lowest it's been in years, so it wasn't a good situation. That's why earlier on in our talks I said I was a little angry with the University of California for its behavior around the visual arts. This is part of the background.

Nathan: Sure.

Consequences, Pro and Con

Laky: So my experience being chair was a very rewarding one. It was extremely challenging and I know that in certain ways and in certain arenas, I did a really good job. There were all kinds of things I couldn't accomplish. I couldn't turn the administration around to get the funding and faculty necessary to maintain art's reputation and quality. That was on the negative part of the ledger sheet, but I learned a great deal, and I solved a great many crisis-level problems.

I experienced parts of my capabilities that I had never tested before even with Fiberworks in my background and all the other things I had organized, developed, and managed. One area that I found most interesting for me personally learning-wise was the psychology of it all: how to get people to do things and how to work with them, and how to get them to work with me.

I'll give you just one little example. I met with a faculty member one morning whom I liked tremendously, very intelligent, very smart, also very difficult to work with. She wanted, I don't know, she wanted this and that change with her classes, something about the schedule or how to split the classes or join them or layer them, and basically I just said, "No." I mean, not quite that abruptly, but basically it was that.

A little later in the day I was thinking to myself, "How could I have said yes? How can I figure out a way that this works for me and for her? How can I--" And I felt my brain shifting. I made myself sit down and think through a way that it could possibly work a little bit for her and a little bit for the program so it wasn't too disruptive. "What was it exactly that she was after? Could I figure it out? Could we move in that direction?" It

was as if I could feel things shifting in my head, physically. By about one or two o'clock I realized that I could have a conversation with her which might move us in a positive direction, so I got in touch with her. We sat down a little later in the afternoon and we had a second conversation. We actually made some progress and managed to find ways of doing some of what she wanted and still not disrupt the entire program. [laughs] It was fascinating.

I learned how to hold back a little: don't send the letter the day you write it, read it the next morning. You know, things like that that are just interesting bits of behavior. It was very good for me to be in a role where I had to temper my usual behavior, where I had to really use my behavior for the best outcome I could. It was psychologically very interesting.

Psychologically it was also very interesting what the various personalities were like among the faculty. In the chair role you face individuals and you work with the individual faculty members very directly, one after another after another, but it is astounding how different people are and how they behave and what they want, and how they express themselves. It was like going to school again to study a completely new subject. It was like going back to school but studying psychology instead of art. Very interesting.

Nathan: You know the saying about, "Give me a place to stand and a lever and I can move the world." Well, you found a different lever, and it was almost physical?

Laky: Yes, it was really intriguing to me to try to find those parts of me that would work best with the individuals and in the immediate situations. It called upon all these other parts of me that I didn't even know that well. I knew I had some of the skills, but I didn't know I could ask certain things of myself in terms of my own behavior, to listen better, to be more moderate, to be more accepting, to also be firm but kind and thoughtful.

Nathan: Wonderful.

Laky: I have such abilities. Those are all part of me, but this job demanded that I use them at a very high level. So that's why I say it was fun: it was problem-solving and major puzzles every day, and new personalities, odd and unexpected things happening with those personalities, even fights occasionally. [laughs]

Someone said to me, "Oh, your meetings aren't that bad. I remember the days when one faculty member slugged another during a faculty meeting." [laughter] I didn't even know who, I didn't want to know, but no one hit anyone at any of my meetings. [laughter]

Nathan: Oh, that's like forced growth. It's amazing that you could do all those things.

Laky: Yes, it was quite an experience.

Nathan: So then you reverted to design?

Laky: I actually went through to the end of the spring quarter teaching in the Department of Art. Then I had a year's sabbatical leave I had accrued along the way, so that gave me a

rest and rejuvenation. Then I went back to the Department of Environmental Design after my leave and took on the graduate advisor position, and I'm now ensconced back in my original home. So it was a very interesting foray out into another place on campus.

I actually think it's quite refreshing for faculty members to take themselves out of their home departments from time to time. I've been at UC Davis now twenty years. It was very refreshing to step into another department and work there for a while. The problems there were not part of my history, I had no quarrels and no preconceptions. Some whom I knew amongst the faculty in art, I knew only as acquaintances; they weren't close friends so I didn't have to worry about being perceived as partisan.

Nathan: Were you at all concerned about having an artist heading the department?

Laky: You mean, following me?

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: Yes, I am concerned. I am somewhat concerned, though I have a sense that he's doing a decent job even though he is not an artist.

Nathan: Good.

Laky: So that adventure in administration was a quite an interesting episode and experience in my life.

Committee on Academic Personnel

Laky: Now that I'm back on campus, I've been asked to be on the campus Committee on Academic Personnel, known as CAP.

CAP is the Academic Senate's committee for personnel merit review (salary raises for faculty). It is the final faculty review for advancement and is advisory to the chancellor. We work closely with the vice provost for academic personnel and, again, it's a major educational experience to be a member of this committee. I'm learning a great deal.

I had some background regarding the personnel process gathered over the years and from chairing the art department. (I also chaired design for a very short while as a replacement chair back quite a number of years ago.) Given these bits of administrative experience and that I served on numerous ad hoc personnel committees for review at the department and campuswide levels, I understand how the system functions and what it does. I know many of the specifics of personnel review and the merit process, so I think I'm able to contribute. I'm also learning tremendously in terms of how faculty members get reviewed. We review new appointments as they move up the ladder to tenure, promotions from associate professor to full. We review all the chairs, all the directors, all the administrative faculty members, and we review the top levels of the full professor ranks. Fascinating.

Nathan: Exactly.

Laky: Yes, and so I'm learning about hiring practices and how people get promoted. I must say, I was a little bit hesitant joining this committee. I have had the impression from time to time in the past that this committee has made major mistakes. Being on the inside now with this particular group, I can't compare it to any other because I only know this group this year, I'm impressed with how thoughtful and careful and thorough they are. The thorough is what's driving everybody nuts. The thorough is why we have to read dossiers twenty-five to thirty-five hours each week.

Nathan: Good grief.

Laky: Many weeks have been thirty-five hours a week. When the committee chair warned me about this at the beginning of the year, I thought he was joking. He was not joking. Now, the workload has reduced a little bit so we can get away with fifteen to twenty hours a week.

This reading has to be done in one particular room in the administrative building because it's all highly confidential. None of the dossier materials can leave the room, so this is why I'm on campus practically every day now.

Nathan: For how long is this appointment? How long does it last?

Laky: It's year by year, and I will not be continuing. Partially because I was hesitant and partially because of the way the committee is organized next year, so it's mutual and it's fine with me not to continue.

And I've now been invited to have a one-person exhibition in Spain, which might be in a year or so.

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: There's no way I could do that exhibition if I continue on this committee.

Nathan: You have given a lot, may I say, to the university.

Laky: Well, many people only serve one year on the personnel committee because it is so demanding.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: We get released from one of our teaching assignments and that's all. It's just barely doable.

Nathan: How many courses are you teaching now?

Laky: Next year I'll be teaching four.

Nathan: Is that a lot?

Laky: It is. We teach four and then three, three and four, so that's about right. It's a lot. Some faculty members have appointments with a higher percentage of research, so it gets negotiated somewhere along the way, but actually I think three to four courses a year is usual.

X THE VARIOUS SETTINGS OF FIBER ART

Nathan: Are we ready to talk about some of the developments in your own work—installations, for example, and whatever? You know, your life is so full of important things, I don't want to slight any of them.

Installations: Attraction to Situational Work

Laky: The installations have been a part of my work that I have liked very much, though they've never taken, let's say, a central role.

[Interview 10: June 29, 1999] ##

Laky: One of the things that I find kind of interesting to think about in hindsight, the origins of this interest of mine in installation, and working in groups, almost in a performance style. It's not a performance really, but it's an action. In fact, in my bio I always call it art events, and actions, or something like that. I then often describe this work when I'm including it in a presentation or a slide lecture of my work as situational work.

I like that language. I wonder often from whence this interest comes. What is it? Where did it come from in my thinking? Some artists do work in this genre all the time. I don't, but I'm very attracted to it. I do something like this about once every two or three years, some sort of installation work or this situational type work.

Nathan: Does it generally include other people working with you?

Laky: Very often it does. One of the places from which it comes, I think, is the same kind of interest that spawned Fiberworks. That is, in the sense of the interest in organizing something, planning something, and getting people involved in something, something that has a more dynamic quality than the quiet, slow, silent, contemplative little chip by little chip that studio work usually is. Studio work doesn't have to be like that. Sometimes it can be fast, slap-dash, sort of action art, but most of my studio work is a slower piece-by-piece, line-by-line building.

I have a very gregarious, active part of me and then this very quiet working alone, very subdued part. In a sense, subdued activity is the part of me that can spend hours and hours and hours in the studio without a sound and without a person and without stopping for lunch. I just love that sort of all-engrossing internal process; even though the work is external, it's a very internal process. My mind is free, even though my hands and eyes are busy working.

Aspects of Studio Work

Laky: The studio work has different aspects. One aspect is coming up with ideas. That part happens anytime, anywhere, and all the time. Things pop into my mind. I remember you and I had a very interesting conversation about the light bulb effect which is: you're in the shower or you're walking down the street, or you're bending over to pick up a pencil off the floor and something just happens in one's mind. For me, that is visual, that gives me a presence of something that I can imagine, it suggests a physical possibility. So idea formation happens, not confined only to the studio work worktime space.

You've probably heard discussions of the generally good creative thinking times. One commonly mentioned is in the morning when you're just waking up, when you are rested, when your mind is free to travel and you're not interrupted, and you can just have some open-ended thoughts.

For me, there is a very specific different mental activity which is augmented and encouraged by studio activity, so a lot of this creative thinking does indeed happen in the studio because I've left my rational, linear thinking behind and allowed my more visualizing creative form, recognition, imaging part, free reign. There really is a transition in the mind. I can almost feel it physically. It's very interesting. I think I talked about it earlier. So that's one part.

Then another part of me likes figuring things out, likes challenges, problems, situations with physical feats to be overcome. This is a very different part of me.

Creative Thinking out Loud, in Public

Laky: One of the things I enjoyed tremendously at Fiberworks was on occasion thinking up major public involvement, public creative events. I think we talked about them earlier. It was lots of fun. I mentioned Will [Collier's] exhibition at Fiberworks. I think that encouraged me in this direction as well, the idea that through some sort of public activity one was in a position to do creative thinking out loud, let's say, on the spot, in an even bigger way than the individual works one might be doing in the studio.

Another ingredient, let's say, encouraging me in the direction of public art works also had to do with Will Collier. He was teaching in Santa Rosa at the junior college there

for quite a while. He invited me to come do something, an event. I think it was two or three groups of students. It was quite a number of people.

What I did, I took a lot of paper. That's all I took.

Nathan: Sheets of paper?

Laky: No, rolls of paper. Rolls, just butcher paper type rolls, maybe thirty inches wide, and rolls discarded in the printing process. Then I had some narrower rolls of paper as well, and the students and I just made things out of the paper. You know, ruffled it up and twisted it, and drew with it and tore it up. It was great. [laughter] Just great. I loved it. The students did some wonderful work with just paper.

Nathan: Did you have to stimulate them, or did they come up with their own ideas?

Laky: Both. In fact, I would say that the role of the teacher, the way I understand it, is to suggest, to put possible subjects on the table, to arrange a circumstance within which people can think and do and try and play. Your question is a good one because I think maybe my interest in this type of event to encourage creativity has to do with my method and my approach and my philosophy about teaching, as well. I think I've been a teacher from babyhood. I don't know. It appeals to me so much. And there again, with such a participatory teaching event, we've got the creative process happening out loud, out in the open. It comes forward, it comes out. I find some of the most fun conversations for me, the most stimulating times in my life, are those times when my students and I are having a real dialogue, a back and forth. I present possibilities, an idea, and maybe some historical examples—I don't mean historical, but maybe what some other artists have done—and some materials for possible use, and the students then reach out and try to do something with what I've put forward. To me, that's a very, very dynamic, a very lively, very interesting process. I find it just endlessly fascinating.

One of the things we do to new faculty often at UC Davis is we give them the biggest, hardest class. [laughs] I think I mentioned that before. That was how I started.

Nathan: Yes. Lucky you.

Laky: So when I started teaching, I had one of the introductory classes, with like, I don't know, it was anywhere from 200-300 students at that time.

Nathan: Good grief.

Laky: I was convinced and still am that an introduction to art and design must have an active component, must have real hands-on creative activity included. If it's only theory, talk, paper, and images, the students will never quite understand, so that philosophy just made the class much harder for me to teach. [laughs]

Washers, Surveyor's Tape, Grids, Nets

Laky: I remember one day, one of my earliest situational activities took place in that large, introductory class I started teaching in 1978. I taught these classes once a year for several years in the beginning. Only once a year, but enough to drive me crazy. I brought to class that surveyor's tape that I've often used as in the Headlands project. It comes in all sorts of colors. It's used in forestry and construction; a continuous roll and it's about an inch wide. Big spools of it are very cheap, plastic tape. I passed out long lengths of tape to all 200 to 250 students.

The class was in a lecture hall with a sloping seating arrangement. It's at a quite steep angle, so all the students can see well. I passed out washers, small quarter-size aluminum washers used in construction. Then I asked the students to tie the colored plastic ribbons to the washers, so that the ends would be thus weighted. On a signal, they were to throw their little washers down to the front, down toward me, [laughter] we were all going to watch this.

Can you imagine? I can hardly believe I did this. It was fantastic. So here are about 200 students in this very steep auditorium with their weighted ribbons. I've explained all this, so they're ready to throw, and I've of course got my camera, I do have slides of this somewhere. So, "One, two, three—throw," and they all threw their ribbons. Of course the weight went nose first and the ribbons fluttered behind. They were, I don't know, thirty-five feet long, so it took a bit of time until the ribbons got to the front of the room.

Nathan: The weights were only on one end?

Laky: On one end. You know, the thing about throwing something is you want a little weight on the nose, so that it guides like those little balsa model airplanes. You know, it has a little weight on the nose, so that you guide it forward when thrown. It would be very hard to throw a ribbon more than two or three feet in front of you if it didn't have a weight. But the weight is like a little stone or a ball or something, you can actually heft it quite a ways away. [laughter] So all these students, these hundreds of students threw their colored ribbons and we had a whole range of colors showering down. I had done some good shopping, going to many different places: engineering supply, hardware, and forestry supply mail order catalogues, and so forth. Each company has a different color yellow, slightly, so you can get a broad palette by just looking for this flagging tape, this surveyor's tape, in different sources.

So all these ribbons came flowing forward in a magical flood, a river of color. It was fantastic. Now what those students thought of this event, I do not know. They seemed kind of surprised and enchanted by it. I certainly was. Such an experience would not be possible without the group participation.

And so that was just one of them. I mean, this has popped into my mind here, but it does give you an example of something that is very different from the line-by-line of a quiet drawing, or the stick-by-stick, drilling holes, putting in the dowels, over and over and over, day after day, to build form. This type of visual event has a kind of immediacy about it which is enlivening. And there you are. So those were maybe some early instances and events. I've done various forms of situational or public work since.

Another class group activity I'm thinking of, where it's possible to make something wonderful and informative happen with larger numbers of people, that you never could do by yourself, is a grid-making project. This project I still do in the class that I teach that I mentioned, that is a combination of sculpture and design and architecture. It's on the textile architecture end of things.

A grid is really quite a brilliant thing. A grid and a net are basically right angle relationships repeated. They're basically the same thing. A net will be soft and pliable, maybe made of string or something like that, like a fishing net. A grid tends to connote rigidity, so let's say a trellis would be in the grid direction, a grid being a little more rigid, but a drawn grid, of course, is neither. [laughs]

With flat strips of reed that are about a quarter of an inch wide and very, very long, in a two-hour session, my normal class of twenty-some students arranges and ties a very large grid. I get elements for tying like balloons that don't stay blown up, at surplus. They make great elastic tying elements. I give the students a box of these eight-inch-long, narrow balloons, and the reed, and in two hours, a group of twenty can tie a grid with a four-inch-by-four-inch square. That is, let's say, fifteen feet by twenty feet large.

Nathan: Great.

Laky: Huge. We then take this outdoors and we pull it on the diagonal, and we roll it, and we cover a bush with it, and we fold it up and somebody wears it. We interact with it, and we play with it. And in that way, we learn something about what a net, a grid, what this architectural structure is capable of and what it looks like; it's very beautiful.

Nathan: Is there a special kind of knot?

Laky: There are two or three different kinds of knots and I show them the knots along the way, so a lot of learning goes on. Now, if I asked each student to make a fifteen-foot-by-twenty-foot grid, it would take that student half of the ten-week quarter. That student would not be able to have the experience of what a large grid can do until it is completed four or five weeks later. Well, here we can do it in a two-hour session. The last time I did this with my class, they made a diagonal roll and somebody crawled through it. When this person crawled through it, it was like a snake swallowing a rabbit. The grid has give, especially on the diagonal, which is one of the very interesting things about a semi-flexible grid. They watched the grid expand and contract as the student's body shape moved through. Bamboo scaffolding, like they use to build highrises in China—you've seen them.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: They have to have a diagonal piece of bamboo in order to stabilize the structure, otherwise it does what a grid does beautifully, which is it accords, it collapses diagonally. You can pull it open or push it shut by diagonally getting rid of the air space between the lines. So that's one of the really magnificent things about a net or a grid, but it's also something you have to know how to work with if you want a rigid structure, like scaffolding, to be formed out of a grid. Diagonals are needed across the right angle grid. So the students learn all of this by manipulating the large grid they made.

Just talking about this makes me realize to what extent these things play back and forth for me. One activity will influence another. I have described classroom activities, but I think I get the same kind of influence and information from doing an installation or a work that I would not be able to do in my studio, that I have to do in a special circumstance. Several have been in public parks, which is fascinating for me. I like the public interaction quite a bit. I've often thought that doing these installation pieces, these site-specific events, these situational works, has a very positive and extensive impact on my smaller scale studio work. I don't know exactly what the influence is, how it is manifested, but the influence seems strong.

I feel as if there is intense learning going on, condensed into a short space of time, with the temporary site-specific works. And then I live off of that when I go back to the studio and go about my regular work. There's a kind of back and forth that happens. It's communication of images in my brain.

I also know that I bring some of the thinking out of the studio to the site works. For example, I'll now skip to a more recent piece that I found rather intriguing.

I was one of about fifteen or twenty artists selected from maybe 150 to participate in a small museum's outdoor sculpture installation, exhibition. This was a little over two years ago. The museum is the Art Complex Museum in Massachusetts, beautiful little museum started by the Weyerhaeuser family. It has an outdoor park-like area around it. For two or three years now they have curated an outdoor site-specific sculpture exhibition there. I think it's a wonderful idea. It was quite an interesting exhibit.

How Influences Occur: Stacking Wood, Protecting a Tree

Laky: I think the Brown/Grotta Gallery in Connecticut that carries my work put me on the museum's mailing list. They sent me a call for proposals, so I proposed something. Maybe this will be a good illustration of how influences occur:

I've always loved stacking wood, it's lots of fun. I like wood. In fact, I can remember as a very small child taking a vacation in the mountains of Colorado with my family. I must have been eight or nine years old. One of the things I was most intrigued by was splitting logs and stacking the wood. I don't know why. It's a very strong visual and activity memory in my mind.

In recent years we joined a small group of about fourteen, fifteen friends who love to hike. Four or five years in a row in the summer we have been hiking in the Alps for eight or nine days at a time. It's totally exhilarating and a wonderful thing to do. Just love it. I've noticed especially in Switzerland the neat and careful stacking of firewood. Every piece of firewood is exactly the same length. I don't know how they cut it that way; then it's stacked in patterns around houses and it's just really beautiful.

I've gotten out of the habit of photographing and carrying my camera everywhere. It became such a burden, my albatross, really. I used to love taking photographs, but it

does mean you live behind the lens. I just got to the point where I don't like doing it any more. I want to be a little more immediately involved.

I happened to have my camera one day when we came across a little house that was formed entirely out of stacked wood. The sides, the walls of the house were absolutely smooth and flat stacked wood because every piece of wood was the same length. It was, in fact, a home, a small, maybe high Alps summer home for the cowherds, maybe not one used now. I don't know what it was, but it was not just stacked wood, it was actually around a little house. On three sides it was nothing but stacked wood. It was really spectacular. Well, I did have my camera and I did photograph it. It made quite an impression on me. I began showing that photograph in my slide lectures about my work, just because I liked it so much.

Another thing about the stacked wood house was the repetition of the shapes. Repetition, in fact, is something very connected to textiles and to weaving. If you line up stones, I can see it as a carpet or a tapestry or a string, so the repetition of shape and negative spaces and lines and circles and things like that are very, very connected to what textile and fiber constructions are like. It's pattern and repetition that is basic to many, many aspects of working in textiles. So I loved this little firewood-built house, I should say adorned house.

The theme I proposed for the Art Complex Museum was shelter: harboring, caretaking, protecting, housing. Those were the kinds of words they gave us about the theme for this outdoor sculpture exhibition. I liked that theme quite a bit, so I decided to make a kiva-like, round, firewood-stacked protection for a tree.

I did visit the museum grounds and I selected the tree. This was really a very carefully planned kind of piece. In this case it was a site-specific installation that did not include other people working with me.

Nathan: Let me ask a word about materials. Much of this apparently takes place out of doors, and I would imagine the weather would have some effect on what you're building. Is it rather ephemeral and does that trouble you in any way?

Laky: No. When you say ephemeral, you're asking about the material?

Nathan: Right, or the whole thing.

Laky: The whole situation.

Nathan: That it would droop or melt or dissolve or whatever.

Laky: Actually that's something which appeals to me, tremendously, that there is that capability within the realm of textile work. (Not always, of course. A wire is a textile element and a wire, it'll take a long time for nature to reclaim the wire, and then if it has a plastic coating, it may take forever. [laughter] I don't know when plastic coating on wire breaks down in the universe—or the flagging tape, for example.)

Impermanence of Materials and Earthbound Integrity ##

Nathan: Impermanence? Can we talk about it?

Laky: Yes. The Griesdale Forest in the northwestern part of England has—

Nathan: What's it called again?

Laky: Griesdale. G-R—I think it's—I-E-S-D-A-L-E.

Nathan: The Griesdale Forest.

Laky: Forest. It's a huge forest that is cared for and harvested. There is an artist-in-residence program in the forest. Artists come for two or three months and build something out of what they find in the forest.

Nathan: Fallen branches and odds and ends?

Laky: Yes, and then they leave it and over the years it gets reclaimed by the forest. The work deteriorates, especially in the northwestern part of England where there's so much moisture and so much rain that reclaiming of fallen items, branches, leaves, et cetera, in that forest goes fairly quickly. To me, it's just a wonderful idea to have such an artist-in-residence program there.

The pieces in the forest are often whimsical. Even the grandiose structures built out of small trees and logs and things are also slowly reclaimed by the climate and nature. I'm attracted to that. I don't work with it specifically, but I'm attracted to it. So the answer to your question is no, it doesn't bother me at all, it's actually potentially a plus.

Valuing Physical Labor

Laky: The Art Complex piece was interesting in that it was very simple. It was just stacked firewood.

I also like the fact that I could look in the phone book and call some firewood people and order my two cords of wood from home. I specified the delivery date and time, and then when I got to the museum where it should be delivered, it was. I got there at eight o'clock and at eighty-thirty they delivered my two cords of wood. I discussed with the museum what part of the driveway it could be delivered in. I put down my plastic cloth, so I wouldn't leave too much of a mess, and they delivered my split logs. Then I started building. [laughs]

A newspaper photographer came by as I had my cafe latte, sitting on my pile of two cords of wood, contemplating just how I would begin; and he photographed me. It was very funny.

You asked also about the weather. It was quite cold, not raining, but quite cold the first two days. I worked three days on this project. I think it was three days, maybe through the fourth. It was unseasonably cold for this late in May, so I had on my turtleneck and my sweater and my jacket, down jacket, that goes to forty below. I was very bundled up. Once I got working it was just fine and I slowly peeled the layers as I created some heat and energy from just the work itself. Each piece of firewood weighs a few pounds, so the lifting and stacking was very physical work.

Nathan: You'd have to tote it from where it was delivered to where you were going to build?

Laky: It was delivered about twenty to twenty-five feet from the tree I was to protect, but I had to get the logs up a little slope to the tree, so I had a wheelbarrow. That meant I had to select and fill the wheelbarrow and then take it a little bit out of the way to get onto a path, and take it up to the tree. So yes, it was back and forth and back and forth and lift and stack.

But I mentioned before my enjoyment of physical labor. There's something about physical labor that is also an aspect of what I use in my work. I find it kind of strange, but I feel a very strong connection to the part of the general population that is engaged in manual labor. When I'm gathering my twigs and clipping and sorting and piling and so forth, I'm not that much different from the workers hired to prune the trees in the orchards of California. And sometimes we're working side by side: they're pruning the trees and I'm gathering up my piles that I'm going to take back to the studio. [light laughter]

I have tremendous respect for physical labor. It's something I like. I love doing it. That's how we build our world, so there is a love for it somewhere, deep in me. I like using my body, I like using my muscles, I like using my hands, I like using tools, I like making piles of things. I like the potential that sits in these activities. These are the "making activities," all the way from digging ditches and laying bricks to making a work of art. I think it's on a continuum really.

Nathan: Yes. One question. Did you specify the length of the pieces of wood?

Laky: I'll tell you about the conversation with the fire wood suppliers.

[In a loud voice] "Hello! Yeah, we have firewood. Well, sure. Yeah, cords—\$130. What, you want what size? Well, yeah, mostly they're fourteen inch."

So I'm trying to say, "Hello, I'm an artist. [laughs] I'm interested in building something out of firewood. Do you have some firewood you could deliver on May fifth?"

"Yeah, we do. How much you want?"

"Well, I'm interested in twelve to fourteen inch—probably two cords."

"Well, yeah, I don't know, we don't measure it."

This is not Switzerland. [laughter] So we came to an agreement. It was split wood and it was twelve to sixteen inches.

Nathan: Was there bark on this wood?

Laky: There was bark, yes, because it's regular split logs. Oh, it might have been oak or something. I think there may have been a couple of kinds of wood, but hard woods. It was roughly split.

So part of what was interesting to me was that each piece was different. One way of looking at it is, "Oh, my God, they're not all uniform." But I'm not particularly fond of uniform. The whole concept of uniformity and sameness, I have a love-hate relationship with repetition and redundancy. [laughter] I think I've talked about that before. So part of what was fun for me visually was the puzzle. Each of these pieces of split firewood was slightly different. In fact, sometimes quite different. One would have a big knot, and one would be skinny, one would be fat, one would be very triangular in shape, or it would be sort of flat and round on one side. How to fit each piece in place was part of what I really enjoyed about the process.

Nathan: Let's see, I'm trying to describe what I want to ask. Were there semi-loose pieces that sometimes happen with split logs?

Laky: Some were sort of connected in the middle, two pieces that are still slightly attached, umbilically? [laughs]

Nathan: Or one piece that has sort of splinters—long splinters?

Laky: Yes. There were long splinters. Also bark. Bits of bark that had come off.

Nathan: Really rough?

Laky: Very rough. In fact, extremely rough. And it's interesting to me to think about how firewood is cut in Switzerland and how firewood is cut in the U.S. What I purchased was much rougher and more uneven than anything I saw in Switzerland. There may be an aesthetic process that is built in to firewood gathering and cutting in Switzerland. In the U.S. we don't seem to care about the aesthetics of firewood and how it will look stacked.

Meanwhile, it's a very aesthetic thing in my mind. Every time I drive in the country somewhere, especially in the East where people do use firewood in winter more so than California, the aesthetics of wood stacking seem very important, especially in the rural countryside. You see it next to a home, you see it almost like a fence stacked in long lines, or filling in between two trees. It has always caught my eye. I think it is a very aesthetically beautiful part of country life, but we do not have the refined tradition of cutting and stacking that I found in Europe.

It's fascinating to think about the cultural differences as expressed in wood-stacking habits. But for me, in Massachusetts, the rough, uneven wood added another layer of interest in each shape. Each shape is a shape. It's got its special characteristics, it's got its splinters, it's got its knots; then my task was to use each one like the pieces of a puzzle.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: I absolutely love them. In fact, we don't have any puzzles at home because if I did, I wouldn't do anything else. [laughter] But you know, sometimes on vacation I will take a very complicated puzzle with hundreds and hundreds of pieces and just have a great time. If we're on vacation somewhere with lots of sitting around time, resting time, I just love doing puzzles.

So these two cords of wood became a visual puzzle-like activity. The other element that was related to this, which was far more difficult and intriguing, was that I didn't realize when I planned the piece, almost all the firewood I've seen stacked throughout my life has been stacked in a straight line, essentially. Even that little house with its peaked roof and the firewood stacked all the way up to the peak basically was on a flat plane for each side. I wanted to stack this work in the round.

Stacking firewood in the round is very, very difficult it turns out. [laughs] Never thought of it. If I was a Kiva builder, I probably would have thought of it, but the Indians who built Kiva-like buildings did not stack short pieces in the round, in a radiating pattern, they made something like hexagonal log cabin stacking arrangements.

It was all right for about two or three feet of height. I did select the pieces of wood. If any of the pieces of wood had a narrower end and a wider end, I of course used them judiciously to create a radiating circle, putting the narrow toward the inside and the wide toward the outside.

Nathan: Now was this a solid stack?

Laky: It was a solid stack.

Nathan: It wasn't a fence around? It was solid wood?

Laky: Well, no, it was like a fence around the tree. It was only as deep as one length of log, so the depth was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen inches determined by the way the wood was cut. I cross-stacked two ends, so there was really like an arc with a narrow opening at the back of the ring a little under two feet wide, allowing a person to walk into the enclosure. The diameter was around—oh, ten feet maybe, so you could actually walk in and walk around the tree or sit under it. You know, sit down and lean against the tree and look up and out of the structure. The structure was about five, five and a half feet high.

So you actually walk in at the back farthest away from the museum. You walk into the home I built for the tree, then you can take a close look. In fact, what walking into the enclosure did was to bring your nose to within a few inches of the tree.

Then there was something about building protection for a tree out of cut up trees that I found an interesting and odd relationship.

Solving the Puzzle of a Radiating Circle of Straight Lines

Laky: Anyhow, let me get back to the stacking of a radiating circle of linear elements that are longer than they are wide or deep. That's what a piece of firewood is: it's a long, narrow piece. So these long narrow pieces are radiating outward in my form. There is an automatic interest of these firewood pieces to move outward, to radiate outward, to actually physically move out away from the center, and forward.

If I'd built as high I wanted to do, the walls would have a tendency to fall forward and outward in a radiating manner, meaning that if you were on the inside, you could push and there would be nothing to stop this wall from falling because of the dynamic shape of a radiating circle of straight lines.

I realized this radiating dynamic about two or three feet high into the stacking. The museum garden is a very public place, it's a park. People come, they picnic, kids come in from the neighborhood and especially with warmer weather coming, people would use the park and they would come to visit the sculpture. If a small child were standing on the outside of my round form and someone happened to lean against the wall on the inside, it would be a disaster, so I knew that I had to do something about this situation. It was a startling bit of physical learning right then and there on the spot.

In my studio work I had been developing non-traditional doweling—drilling holes and pegging, and had by this time gotten deeply involved in a non-traditional doweling approach using nails as dowels. I drilled a hole, but instead of putting a wooden peg, I'd put a nail in it. I've done some very strange and scratchy and scary work with this method, but the pieces doweled with nails are also very strong structurally.

Nathan: (Would you like to be a little warmer?)

Laky: (No, I'm fine. I'm just fidgeting. [laughs])

So it popped into my mind that I could get some nails and a drill and a hammer and I could do the same thing here. I could stabilize my wall by putting in a row of pegged pieces of wood. If I held the top of the circle firm, then the walls would not tend to move out. So I went to a nearby hardware store and I got huge nails. I don't know, they were four or five inches long, very nice nails, and I got a drill from the museum. But you can imagine the difference time-wise between stacking wood and drilling three or four holes in each piece of wood as you put it on the stack, so my progress slowed way down. But it worked wonderfully. By stabilizing the lid, let's say, it held the whole structure.

Nathan: No one could push out down below?

Laky: No, because I was working also with a certain amount of weight and it just stabilized the whole form. It really worked quite well. So that stabilizing rim was a row of only about one or two pieces of firewood in depth, and about two and a half to three feet up on the wall. Then I stacked above that, and again stabilized the top with drilled and hammered nails in the top row or two of wood, and it was fine. It became a very strong structure. So it was fun to learn something and to solve the problem.

It was aesthetically very beautiful and I think stacking in the round is terribly worthwhile, visually speaking. [laughter] It worked wonderfully. Being inside it had a kind of intimacy that I found very pleasurable and very inviting. From the outside it was also quite beautiful to look at and so it really worked out very well, in my opinion.

Nathan: I think you mentioned that it was somewhere around five feet tall. What would be the diameter?

Laky: As I recall it was something like ten, twelve feet in diameter. The space inside around the tree was probably about eight to ten feet, and then the outside diameter was probably about ten, eleven.

Nathan: Now the rim, which really was holding it basically together, there had to be a hole in it so that the tree was there?

Laky: Yes. It did not have a roof. It was just this circular tower with a doorway, an entrance, on one side because I wanted you as an individual to be able to look up and out at the top of the tree. It was a larch tree, I think, with a very beautiful arrangement of bark; a very nice tree, so I was quite pleased. It was on a manicured lawn that had a very steep slope right past my structure, down to the drive, of about, oh, six feet, so it was quite accessible in lots of ways, and there was a path near it. You could walk on the grass right up to it. It was very easy to go up to it and enter it, so I liked its location quite a bit. I liked the fact that it was on a rise.

Nathan: And you could see it from many different angles up there?

Laky: Yes. Other outdoor work I've done has been a little more ephemeral, or not quite such a solid block shape.

Oh, I just want to say that there was one other thing that pleased me about that project and that was that I found a man who was a maintenance man for the museum. I gave him the wood. At first I asked the museum if they knew any needy families, but they said, well maybe they did and maybe they didn't, and then how to organize all of that if I'm in California, not in Massachusetts? I felt it was a burden for the museum.

Nathan: Excess wood?

Laky: No, this is my whole project's worth of wood. Well, the excess wood, too. I had a little bit of excess wood left after building the form. Not much. I used almost the entire two cords.

Nathan: But you eventually wanted it to be real firewood?

Laky: I wanted it, yes, to be recycled, and the exhibit was on until November, so it was good timing. I found a maintenance man. He said he and his family would be delighted to have the wood and I'm sure that was the case. And so he and I agreed that if he took the wood, he and his son came and took the wood, that they would be welcome to it when the exhibition was over. That was just fine. I never heard that it was a problem for the museum and I could tell from our conversation that he was delighted with this gift. So

he took the little bit of excess wood I had at the end of construction and he also took away the entire piece at the end of the exhibition.

Nathan: Was it difficult to dismantle?

Laky: No, not at all.

Nathan: With the nails?

Laky: Pulling hard, the nails could be taken out, loosened enough to pull the pieces of wood apart. I'm sure that since he had a lot of tools and skill and the truck and a son, that it wouldn't have been hard to do.

Nathan: Wonderful.

Laky: But the stability of the structure was such that normal leaning and pushing and walking and looking and touching would not disrupt the nails. Pulling on it hard, you could pull apart sections of it pretty easily, I'm sure. And then of course between the top stabilized layer, the wood was stacked, not nailed. Then, as I described, there was another shallow row of nailing in the middle and then the wood was stacked and not nailed, so it probably wasn't too difficult a job to undo it and haul it away.

I liked that the wood came, got structured, was viewed and enjoyed, and then disappeared to a home and fireplace. It was a nice life span for that piece of work. In fact, one of the things I like about these big outdoor projects I have done is that they are temporary, they do have a life span, they do come and go. The piece in the Headlands, done in 1984—can we take a break?

Nathan: Oh, absolutely. [tape interruption]

The Headlands Center for the Arts, Installations, Paintings

Nathan: I wonder whether you would like to talk a little about the Headlands installation in Marin County?

Laky: The Headlands area is 10,000 acres. It has a number of military installations. As you know, there are those pillbox gun emplacements and other old leftover military things at the top of the hills as well as barracks and other military buildings. It was for the notion of protecting us on the West Coast from invasion.

Nathan: That's in Marin County?

Laky: Yes, just over the Golden Gate Bridge, north of San Francisco. It's really almost an urban park because of its close proximity to San Francisco. It just takes a few minutes to go over the bridge and there you are in 10,000 acres. I think in the sixties there was a plan afoot to do development there. The rangers actually told me this later. The head ranger told me that he would have laid his body down in front of a bulldozer to protect

this land from developers, and I knew he meant it. It is now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

The board of Headlands Center for the Arts, one of several nonprofit groups located in the park, invited me, William Wiley, and Dennis Leon to do art pieces in the landscape.

This work was also a site-specific and temporary work. It was envisioned to be that by the board. There was a board formed to develop an art center in the headlands. That group of people worked for quite some time to try to figure out how to do an art center there. They were getting close to launching the art center. They decided they needed an art occurrence there on the site to get things going. They did not at that point have a director.

First of all, what we had to do is, the three artists participating had to decide what we would be doing and choose our sites and tell the board and the park rangers what we had in mind. This was somewhat like developing a proposal. It's 10,000 beautiful acres. It's just one of the most glorious parks we have. It really enhances our whole situation here.

It does include many, many, many military buildings and installations. Concrete bunkers built for big guns are here, there, and everywhere in various states of deterioration. There are a number of buildings and a shot tower.

##

Laky: There's a horse stable. There are occupants to this land, even though it's essentially a park. I think it must have been one of the earliest military conversions because it was in 1968, I think, that the major battle occurred over whether it would be developed with housing or whether it would be open park land. The rangers who take care of this land are a wonderful bunch and they're a big piece of who is out there and who belong to that place in some important way.

I was very amused because in my proposal I selected open park land, non-built areas. The two men selected built objects for their works: concrete, bunker-like things, and some of the smaller buildings. So I found that fascinating, first of all, that I would select the open land and that both of the men would select the built forms in the landscape.

They both selected some of the same built edifices. Neither one wanted to let go of the selection he had made, and so they had to phase their work. And in this 10,000 acres of things and land, I thought how interesting it was that they selected the same few buildings and bunkers and felt the necessity of doing their work on them so that neither could let go. To me this impasse had a curious relation to the military aspect of this land's past—conflict turning to battle when men could not come to some sort of mutually acceptable agreement about coexistence. Armed conflict did not follow between the two other artists; a workable compromise was reached, but it did mean that we were not all three present with our works on the land at the same time.

Nathan: Were they actually building onto objects?

Laky: They were painting on the objects, and maybe that was really the issue. Dennis Leon did various kinds of work, including sculpture, so I think there was some anticipation that

both of the men would not necessarily be painting. William Wiley is a painter, a very fine and interesting painter. But they both decided to paint, and that does then require the selection of walls or concrete structures for paintable surfaces. It may in that way have been a curating question.

Nathan: You were out there?

Laky: But I was out in the landscape. I was fine. There was, however, a very interesting relationship between William Wiley's work and my work, which I'll talk about in a moment. Looking at the work, you wouldn't think there was a subject relationship, but there turned out to be one.

##

Laky: I planned to darn the landscape like darning old socks. My idea was to repair it symbolically since these military things had happened in a landscape that should have remained pristine and unblemished by preparations for battle. I put three big patches on the landscape. They were, oh, about a third to a half of a football field in size. One of them I think was a little more than a half a football field in size and another one was maybe about a third of a football field. Another one was quite a bit smaller.

The blue patch of darning was actually a traffic triangle, a road formed each side of the triangle. I then laid down blue strips of surveyor's tape in horizontal and vertical directions, nailing it to the ground so that that entire blue traffic triangle became bluish, purplish. Visually it was quite striking.

The second piece was yellow and it was way up on a hillside, totally uninvolved with any human activity.

The triangle was totally described by human activity, the yellow piece was totally described by nature, and the third, the red patch, was described by both humans and nature acting on the same spot.

The red patch is a flood area of a small river, so it was a flattened space next to a river. It had a figure 8 in it which was made by training horses. The horses were walked on the figure 8, making this very interesting geometric shape in the middle. The red weaving used the figure 8, made it more obvious, and also stretched out over this flood plain area. It was lots of fun to do this site-specific installation because people would walk by and say, "Are you making a landing site for extraterrestrials?" [laughter] And then other people thought, "Is this seed strips? Are you planting something?"

But what was even more fascinating was that hawks would actually fly down lower in circles and apparently look at the work, the red piece. It was absolutely clear to me that they had noticed what we were doing and that they were somehow checking it out. The horses that were kept at a stable a little further down the road were interested also. One of the people working with the horses said, while we were out there and when this red thing was covering a large part of the ground, the horses noticed. When they let them out of the barn in the morning they would run right over to that corner of their fence closest and look in our direction. The attendants were convinced that the horses were

looking at my piece, also. So it was the first time I've had animals interacting with my art work. [laughter]

Nathan: Yes. And did you have students who worked with you in this?

Laky: I did have a lot of students. Artist friends came, students came, their friends came, some of the board members, some of their families, it was lots of fun.

Not all, but most of my installations have been outdoor and have been temporary. And most of them have involved lots of other people, which has been really fun for me.

I would not call them collaborations because these were basically my ideas that I presented to people with the possibility of their joining in the process. People often call works collaborative which really often are not, so I've always wanted to be very up front about what these works were.

What was collaborative was that I liked being influenced by the people who were working with me. Often individuals would make a comment or have a suggestion or propose an idea that would suddenly alter my thinking and move the project in a slightly different direction. I was always very open to that and liked the influence quite a bit, but what was not collaborative about the process was we didn't sit down in the beginning to plan the work together. Collaboration really means that both individuals are or the entire group is equally contributing.

The Headlands is very beautiful and it was wonderful for a week to have this outdoor spot as my studio. It was just great. Usually every day we had something like five to twelve people working on it. Tom would pack a big lunch for us. Tom was very sweet; he would roast a chicken for each day. The best part of the day was lunch time. We'd find a wonderful picnic spot, we'd have wine, we'd have salami, we'd have bread, we'd have chicken, we'd have green peppers, a table full of goodies. Often the people who worked with me brought a little something to contribute. I felt I had to feed people well if they were going to work with me. The conversations were wonderful. We sat and ate and talked about art and life.

The work outside, that particular project, made me appreciate farm laborers more than any other project I've ever done. It was hot, we were bent over, and we were working on the ground. It was really the kind of posture and the kind of activity that farm laborers do. I can't tell you how respectful I now am of the enormous strength and perseverance that that kind of labor requires. We only did it for a week and we had these massive breaks in the middle with our huge lunches. It was very hard work.

The conversations at lunch were wonderful. A group of artists, some were students, there was a poet friend, and a friend who's now the head of the Penland School of Crafts, there were all sorts of people who just had fun working together. One person brought her physicist friend who actually ended up having a very, very good time working with us, totally out of his field. So it was a terrific event.

Nathan: Yes. Now could I ask you a detail about it? You'd have vertical and horizontal elements. Were they woven or just overlaid?

Laky: They were actually woven. They could have been overlaid, which would have been a little bit easier to do, but by moving each strand over and under the strand it crossed, it was a much more stable structure. So much of textile work ends up producing stability. It's interesting.

Nathan: Could you explain again: how did you attach the strips to the ground?

Laky: That's a good question because it's one of my favorite parts. We took very large nails, we tied these plastic flagging tapes to the nails and we just hammered them in the ground. Hammering into the ground was such a strange thing to do.

Nathan: Yes. [laughter]

Laky: And it worked perfectly. It worked, but it was a peculiar activity.

##

Nathan: Back to the Headlands—and Wiley, perhaps? Were you going to speak of the others? Or have you said all you want to?

Laky: I would like to describe Bill Wiley's work because it was really quite a wonderful piece. I don't know that he's ever done anything like that before or since. His painting is full of symbols and ideas and allegory, and his work is, I think, very rich and wonderful. As I recall, he painted on five or six or seven different surfaces of built objects in the landscape. When one drove through toward the beach, there was some backwards language in some of it. And so part of what you could understand was through your rear view mirror looking at it piece by piece, place by place sequentially in the landscape.

The very final section of it was up a hill right over the beach and by the ocean on a bunker-like building. You'd have to walk up that hill to it. You could see it from a distance but also it was wonderful to walk right up to it.

Earlier I was describing the three woven patches in the landscape that I did. My idea, my concept was that I was patching, fixing the landscape, I was darning. You know, it was exactly like darning socks but on a massive scale. We don't darn socks anymore, we throw them out. In a way, this is an illustration of where we are. We should darn socks, but somehow it doesn't fit with the speed and character of our lives.

I might have already told this story: my dear mother, who was quite an amazing character, had a friend in Carmel, Mr. Glovatsky, and we'll have to just guess at how to spell that. I think he was Polish, and somehow they were friends. A real Monterey Peninsula character this guy was. My mother had a studio and a little art school for a while. She was giving classes in her studio and somehow she got to know this man.

He told her a story about during the war, the Second World War, collecting socks, because one of the big problems in Europe, fighting the war, was the cold. So he collected socks, bags and bags and bags of socks.

He told his lament to my mother one day because he tried to give these socks to people to get them to the right spot, to send them to Europe, but nobody wanted the socks

because mostly they were not matched pairs; they were all these individual socks, you know, or in some instances, two socks, but mostly non-matched socks, just bags of individual socks. [laughs] Nobody wanted them.

So he had these thousands and thousands of socks that he was slowly using for, I guess, things like dusting his furniture and cleaning his car and I don't know what. But he still had thousands of socks left, so my mother, to help him out, took some of the socks and used them to clean her paint brushes. [laughter]

Nathan: Thousands of socks.

Laky: I think it's Tapies, the Spanish sculptor who—

Nathan: Tapies?

Laky: T-A-P-I-E-S, I believe it is—who proposed a public art piece—very large—it reminds me of our controversy now over the foot that we want to build in San Francisco for a public art project. He proposed a large sock for a public art piece. And I do think, I can't remember but I think it was being darned or had some little needles to make it or fix it. I thought it was a great public art piece idea. [laughs] It would be great to see a large sock in a plaza, especially a darned one.

Anyhow, I'm wandering off here, but my notion was of fixing, healing, the landscape. As I said, it's a beautiful 10,000 acres of absolutely magnificent land, but it's also a military installation and its purpose was to protect and to fight and to house guns. And I felt that I wanted to fix that part of the history. I wanted to repair it.

Rangers' Concerns and Conversations

Laky: On the other hand, the rangers I talked with and one of the head people I talked with told me how careful and difficult a job it is to restore the military remnants. Some of the buildings there are from earlier periods, earlier than the Second World War or the First World War. So now there's the issue of historical preservation of these military installations and buildings and the shot tower. Getting exactly the right kind of paint to paint it in its original color is a big problem, for example. So how interesting. Those are art issues about a military site that are similar to the art issues of the art center's desire to establish a cultural, visual arts presence in the park.

The rangers were very disturbed about the art activity. I spent hours and hours talking with the rangers. The discussions were very good and I enjoyed them tremendously. But, often I had many people working with me, students and friends and visitors and friends of friends, who had to stand around on the beach while I had long conversations with the rangers to reassure them about our activities.

Nathan: What did the rangers fear?

Laky: I don't know. I knew some of it. It was just an incredible experience to be in this ongoing week-long conversation. It started out with, oh, two to three hours talking to the head ranger who was there in an office in the park.

When we arrived to do our work, well, let me back up. I and a few students did a test piece the week before. We did a small patch on a hillside with yellow tape, just to try it out. It worked quite well, but we realized we had to go higher on the hillside and so forth, so we learned what we needed to help us plan. It was on the other side of the lagoon and we were very pleased, so we left our trial piece there.

Now everyone knew we were coming, I mean, I'm assuming this. I had told the board of the Headlands Center for the Arts. They knew what we were working with, et cetera, they knew when we would be there. They knew I'd have a group of students with me, so it shouldn't have surprised anyone that we did a test patch. However, one of the rangers went out to our spot and cleaned it up. We left it for the two to three days until the project was to begin because we wanted to come back and be able to see it again. But a ranger went out and cleaned it up and, apparently, he was unhappy about what we had done.

Nathan: Did he dismantle it?

Laky: Well, this was only a little test piece, but yes, he did.

Nathan: I see.

Laky: He took it all. He took the flagging tape and rolled it all and wadded it all up and threw it out. Well, it turned out that flagging tape is a material most of these rangers absolutely despise. I think there are new varieties of it now, but what I used then didn't biodegrade. It's the kind of material you want in order to mark something so it stays marked, like you mark a trail or you mark trees to be cut down. That is the main use in forestry of this tape, evidently.

So to the rangers it was one of the most abhorrent symbols to cut down trees. Another major use is for construction, so all the rangers who fought so hard in 1968 to keep this as park land, were fighting off flagging tape, surveyors' tape, because flagging tape would have been the introduction of the building site. Can you see what a symbol this material then is?

Nathan: Oh, yes.

Laky: And I had no idea. I liked it because I knew I could find it all and clean it up at the end of the project. I knew it wouldn't stay and become trash in the landscape. For the rangers it was just the opposite.

Now, let's get back to William Wiley because many of Bill's formal or physical details in his paintings are associated with or can be associated with graffiti. They have some of the same kind of mark-making flavor. And he uses words, and so his paintings looked a little bit like aspects of graffiti. These rangers are struggling daily with graffiti. So again, the art being introduced was absolutely wrong for them. We all know what enormous urge there is in our society to paint on walls. For some reason we have these

thousands of creative children, youth, who want desperately to draw and write on buildings. [laughter] I think it's a positive, creative urge in society, but we're struggling with it constantly. We don't want graffiti on everything, and yet there it is pouring forth from our children.

So these two artists, coming to do the first art works ever permitted in this gorgeous land, are using two of the worst symbols the rangers could possibly have had introduced into their environment. It was an important lesson in terms of art, and the public, and interaction, and what meaning there is in even the smallest of things, in a color, or in a material, there is meaning. It has symbolic value. This is what we always don't quite realize, to what extent it exists in all creative work. Every single bit of an artwork is absolutely filled with meaning and imbued with some sort of an essence of connecting to people.

A park is a very, very public place. It essentially belongs to the public. There was also a little bit in my mind of the attitude that it also belongs to me as an artist. I, too, have the right to be here. Although I didn't pursue that too far because I really respected and appreciated what the rangers were doing; they were caring for and protecting the land.

One of them told me that they need to put little bridges here and there for access sometimes, and occasionally they built a nicely designed, quiet, little wooden bridge and it was dismantled by the public.

Nathan: Because they don't want it?

Laky: They don't want it there. It wasn't there last week. They don't want a bridge there this week. So they face these kinds of difficulties with whoever feels he or she owns the park. Who is the public?

One day a young boy, a teenager maybe sixteen, seventeen, came to talk with us at one of the three patches we were making. I forget which one we were working on, but he went down on his haunches and he was talking to us, so I sat down with him for a while.

He wanted some answers to questions. He was clearly a little bit agitated and irritated with us, but he also was curious. I could hear the edge in his voice, you know: "What are you doing here? What is the idea? Who permitted you? How are you doing this? Tell me about your work? How are you making it?" I mean, he wanted to know lots of things and some of it was clearly motivated by curiosity and some of it was motivated by something else I sensed but did not know what.

Then suddenly he pointed to the hill, and sure enough, on the tippy tippy top of some of the hills, we could see far away there were a few houses. He said, "This is my back yard. I've spent my whole life in this land." [laughs] And I suddenly realized how strongly he connected to this land and here were these people, these strangers who did not belong, doing something to it.

Nathan: Wow.

Laky: Yes, not only the hawks were wondering what we were doing to their land, but here's this kid who had played there his whole life. This was his playground, this was his park.

It was fascinating. Actually this occurred in between two incidents. One incident was that the blue piece which we had finished early on we found destroyed one day when we came to work.

The rangers were very sorry. They hadn't seen who had done it. They were upset and everybody was upset, and I just shrugged and said, "Okay, well, let's do it again," so we just cleaned it up and we did it again. We had lots more tape and somehow I felt it was part of working in a public site. I needed to be able to go on and not be too disturbed by it. Now it could get destroyed again. But I felt it was important just to clean up, tidy up, do it again, and go on without getting hung up in bad feelings. But it did hurt. It was interesting.

So then the next day was the conversation with this kid.

Nathan: Were you able to persuade him?

Laky: I felt I did a really good job persuading him. He was not the only teenager to wander around. There were others who came by and who stopped and looked but who didn't engage us in conversation. And then a little bit later one of the pieces was again vandalized at night, but the rangers caught the kid that time.

It was really very interesting because they caught him and they fined him \$350. I said, "Oh, good. Does this go to the art center?" [laughter] They said, "Oh, no, it comes to us."

Every day when we began in the morning I went to see the rangers. I talked to them, I made friends with as many as I could, I invited them to the site. Many of them came. They were men, they were women, one was Asian American, the group was fairly diverse. They were really quite wonderful people. Some were more responsive to my discussions with them than others. I felt there were a couple I never really quite convinced, but on the day before our final day when the work was to be completed on Friday, so this must have been Thursday, one of the rangers came out to where we were working and came up to me with a little package and presented me a gardenia from all the rangers along with their apology for being so hard on me. I was really touched. I was so moved.

I must say, Harriet, that even though the conversations were sometimes very difficult and they took a lot of time, I really loved them. I felt they were so important. I felt that if I was going to be an artist working in the public, I needed to interact as much as I could. I needed to include people in the thinking and in the process. The rangers were clearly one group of my main constituents. I had a responsibility to them. We had invaded their place, their place in the sense of their presence as the caretakers. They were the ones who felt responsibility for this place, for the population at large, not just for any select small group, but for all of us, and they loved the land. Clearly they loved it deeply.

The conversations were great. Some were heated debates and then eventually I might convince a little bit here, a little bit there. I talked about the creative process. I talked about what it means to me. I talked about what it means to the people working with me. I talked about the place of art in the world. I talked about textiles. I talked about hand

work. I talked about the making of things in our lives. I talked about everything with them, and they talked about their work and their sense of place in land and nature, and it was great. It was great.

Actually there were many good conversations because, as we worked every day, people did stop and talk with us. They were curious and, as I said, some joined in for a while and then went on.

Denmark's "Northern Fibre III, Hidden Treasures," and One-Person Exhibitions

[Interview 11: August 16, 1999] ##

Nathan: Gyöngy, you were saying that you—let's see, you were going to Denmark. Did you create some art to accompany you?

Laky: I did. The invitation was to come participate in something which they call a workshop but when I describe it to you it'll be clear that it's not totally like our workshops here. It's an interesting title. It's called Northern Fibre III and its subtitle is Hidden Treasures. After I was invited to come and take part in this, the people organizing the event also added on, "How about an exhibition of your work? You've never shown your work in Denmark," which was quite an exciting invitation. I had not exhibited any work in Denmark before.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: I have only had a few one-person exhibitions; they are not that common in my field. More common are theme shows and group shows and surveys and things like that.

Just as an aside, one of the most interesting of these group exhibitions is mini-textile exhibitions. I don't know how they ever started, who did the first one, but they are very interesting international venues because it's so easy to take something that is miniature and send it somewhere. So these exhibitions have actually attracted artists from all over the world.

There's an international mini-textile exhibit in Hungary that happens every two years, I think. There's one that I've been participating in that happens in Barcelona. And actually they, now, have invited me to have a one-person exhibition. I don't know when that's going to happen. There's one in Italy, in Como, that I've been in two or three times. They produce catalogues; this is all very serious and professionally done, but only with miniatures.

But I don't know of any other field that has a mini-version. Mini landscape painting, you know? [laughter] It's kind of funny. It tends to work in textiles, maybe also partly because of the kind of work people do. I'm not sure. But looking through the catalogues, it's clear that they get some very interesting work and they get some fairly prominent artists participating.

Nathan: Is it a different problem from making something large?

Laky: Well, it's a different problem in lots of ways. But mainly I think organizationally, why they do this, why one would have a mini-textile exhibit, is because a place that doesn't have a big budget can then get all these small works sent and returned inexpensively.

They pay for sending it back to the artist, usually, they pay for the catalogue and so forth, so it's a way of getting in touch with a lot of artists and having a large exhibit without a lot of cost. It's really fascinating. Also, it tends, now over the past few years, to create international communication in this field.

To be invited to have a one-person exhibition somewhere is very uncommon. It's very rare, and so it delights me no end to have received the invitation for Copenhagen. A few years back I had an exhibition of my work, a solo exhibition, in the British Architects Association Gallery in Manchester. This is my second solo exhibition in Europe, so it's quite exciting.

So I have been very busy lately getting some work done because I took some older work, almost half, a little under half, something like twelve pieces in all. A little under half is older work, older meaning not of the past year. And then I did several new pieces. I've been working like a maniac since June because, you know, my year has been a very dense one, [laughs] so I just had to work like crazy. You know, every day, every day very disciplined. I did come up with several new pieces that I am really delighted about including.

The work was then packed up and shipped there. Now, what I haven't heard yet is did it arrive, did it get through customs, is it okay?

Nathan: And again, where in Denmark?

Laky: Copenhagen. It's at the Arts and Crafts Association, Danish Arts and Crafts Association Gallery called Officenet. Apparently it's some older Baroque building. My colleague at UC knows the building, says it's very beautiful, so I'm hoping it will be quite a nice exhibition. [tape interruption]

The first thing that will happen is the exhibition opening, and that will be the 25th of August. The opening is late afternoon four to six, then I will give a talk at seven-thirty. What's fascinating to me, and I sent an e-mail back immediately saying, "Now, how is this going to work?" I didn't want to say, "Gee, don't you think you ought to reorganize this?" I just asked some questions. "How might this work? Will people really hang around from four until seven-thirty and onward?" [laughs]

Nathan: Aren't they getting hungry by then?

Laky: Do they run off and eat and then come back? Well, apparently they do go off and eat, and I think we will be eating together. Now I don't know if that's the entire audience or just a few artists. I really don't know what it will be, but I will be fascinated to see how they do this because it seemed very natural: "Oh, yes." Yes was the reply; really, sort of "Oh, this is fine." I think these same people have organized Northern Fibre II and Northern Fibre I.

Now the event for me is two parts: it has an exhibition of my work, and then a two-day workshop, but I tend to think of it as similar to a music master class. We don't really have master classes in textiles. It strikes me that it's going to be like that because there was a jury of five individuals who looked at applications received from all over the world by people who wanted to attend and be participants in this workshop. I will be leading the workshop and guiding the work they will produce.

Nathan: Oh, great.

Laky: They selected twenty-eight people from nineteen countries: Australia and Japan, included, and Slovenia, and Finland, and Italy, and I don't know, a whole list. So I find this really a fascinating thing. I'm sort of curious about language ability. The Danes, of course, all speak perfect English.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: And it's been so nice to work with them. They're all such lovely people. They just launch right into English in their e-mails and letters and it's so convenient and nice for me.

The workshop takes place quite a ways away from Copenhagen in Jutland.

Nathan: Jutland?

Laky: Jutland—J-U-T-L-A-N-D. It's the large peninsula that juts up. And we will be in a cultural center right on the edge of the sea, the North Sea. The idea is that participants will work outside and work with found materials. I don't even know if they're going to have other materials around, but the idea is to work with nature. It fits right into all of my thinking; however, the circumstances are very, very different from other kinds of work I've done that connect to nature.

Nathan: Do you plan to bring any materials?

Laky: No, I don't.

In that piece that I brought, I wrote about an experience that was similar for me going to Hungary before the end of the Soviet era. Basically my contact there, also an invitation to an artist gathering, was actually similar. It's interesting now that I think of it, although that was more as an equal participant, I was not to lead the workshop. They had brought in two people from other countries and everyone else was from Hungary. The idea was that we would bring some fresh thinking and different ideas and talk about what was going on in our field in our separate countries.

They suggested to me that I not bring anything with me because it might be suspicious and I might have trouble at the border, [laughter] so I took with me a tiny stapler and what else? Some glue, small bottle of glue, and I think a small pair of pliers, but it was a very minimal collection of things I took with me. I wasn't stopped at the border, I had no trouble. I also enjoy very much landing somewhere, and—[phone rings]

Nathan: (I'm not going to get that.)

Laky: Having to make something out of nothing, because I actually even use that phrase a lot in association with my description of textile art activity. I talk sometimes with my students about how, if you were stuck on a desert isle, you could look around, you could find some flexible materials, you could maybe make yourself a little shelter or a hat or whatever might be needed. That is so much the beginning of the technology that we're working with in textiles. So I like the fact that I, in a sense, had been dropped down on a desert isle with nothing, having to make something out of what I found there. It was very, very interesting.

I did two pieces in Hungary. One with some wood shavings I found, which I stapled together [laughs] with my tiny little stapler. Both pieces are in the Savaria Museum collection now. They kept them. The second piece was made with straw I was able to get from the local milkman. It was a tiny village where the workshop took place. I finally decided that if I had some fibrous materials, like straw, that I would be able to make something, so I made these tapering ropes. They were really very beautiful, actually. At the large end they were about oh, four or five inches in diameter and then they dwindled over about a five- to six-foot length into a thin little wisp of a rattail that just diminished and ended. The large end was crosscut chopped very cleanly.

Nathan: The straw didn't break?

Laky: No, my little bottle of glue came in very handy. So I combined the cutting with the glue. There was a very sharp kitchen knife in the workshop we were in, so I cut with this. This second piece was a kind of interesting melange of imagery: the connection to fun, the fibrous aspect of the grass-like material, the twisting of the rope, which is really a very technical construction activity, and then this unusual cut. You just wouldn't expect that kind of sharp, clean cut, like slicing a ham, to be able to occur in that circumstance. To me it brought in the notion of contrast and absurdity.

Following that thinking and that story about an earlier time, I am actually looking forward to the challenge of again arriving with nothing and then having to do something. It's also risky, because the risk is that there's no straw around, nothing particularly conducive, and nothing that awakens any ideas that help me guide these other participants to a successful experience. [laughs] I like to hover on the risk of failure. I often say adrenaline is neither positive or negative, it's just energy. [laughter]

So if you're scared or excited, it comes from the same source in the body physically, I think. It's an interesting situation, though, for me, so I'm looking forward to it. I know that I won't be able to do any of my own work in that circumstance because twenty-eight people is a lot of people. In my classes, generally, we try to keep it around twenty. So I don't expect to work, but the expectation is that the participants will produce work and that I will somehow influence them and urge them on and encourage them.

I arrive Friday evening, but we don't really start until Saturday, so Saturday night I will give a lecture, a more formal lecture. I will give some short slide shows, interspersed throughout the two days. Sunday evening, the second artist, John Olsen, is coming. He actually represented Denmark in the Venice Biennial about four or six years ago. I happened to be there and saw his work.

He works with found materials in nature: birds wings, snail shells, sticks, things like that. Quite interesting work. He will give a talk Sunday evening and then he will work with the group for two more days. The group will then continue working for the remainder of the week on their own. At the end of that period of time, they will have an exhibition of what they've done and some of their work that they've brought with them.

Nathan: And will you be present during that whole time?

Laky: I won't. I can't stay for the whole thing, but hopefully I will see some photographs of the final products and the exhibition because it will be interesting to follow through and see what came of it. They did ask me, however, to write an introduction to the exhibition catalogue. [laughs]

Nathan: Oh, interesting.

Laky: Yes, that was interesting, so that's coming back around in a long roundabout way to the question of writing. It was a little bit of a struggle, but they seemed pleased with what I sent, so I think it was all right. And it was really just a page. It was more a discussion of things artists are doing with nature and natural materials and with issues related to the environment.

Nathan: Right. I have a question for you if you care to comment on it. In what parts of fiber art do you consider the Danes do their best work?

Laky: I'm not sure I'm familiar enough yet to be able to answer that. They have over the years, however, done wonderful traditional weaving. And some very interesting printed textiles. I don't know the contemporary situation well enough. I know one artist who does very interesting work, working with twigs, actually, and handmade paper. She makes kite-like shapes, freeform though, and builds large constructions with them. I like that work very much.

England's Willow Project

Laky: I also have met a couple of other Danish artists involved in an event in northern England called the Willow Project earlier. I might have mentioned that already. Projects Environment organized it. It was in a very large and beautiful park called Ness Gardens near Liverpool, associated with the University of Liverpool. Twelve artists from various parts of the world were invited, sculptors, mainly, to come work with willow. We worked with willow in the park, outdoors, creating outdoor, site-specific works. There were two Danish artists involved. Actually one was not Danish but she's living in Denmark and has lived in Denmark for quite a while so I consider her Danish.

She made a very large sphere, actually with a skeletal structure of steel and then twigs lashed to it. She took the willow twigs and painted them red and made a very large red open-work ball in the middle of a lush green garden. It was really quite beautiful.

The other artist wove in a very typical basketry manner but she created an oddly shaped upside down willow basket. It was like a shelter. You could actually crawl into it. Interestingly she painted it blue. [laughter] Now I don't know if that was influenced by the first artist who painted in red, or just how it occurred, but it was nice to see this brilliant, non-natural color on a very natural surface in the green environment of the garden. She picked a very nice small grassy area that was totally surrounded by bushes, so it felt very protected and very related to shelter.

So those are the works I know. I also know a young man who does a variety of things and I like his work because he's so experimental and inventive. He has done printing that he partially burned, and he's done some outdoor environmental pieces: little pill-box shapes of cloth filled with dirt that then grow; grass grows out of them. [laughter] So if I think about those few works, they are very experimental and very lively and very interesting, but I don't know too much beyond that, so it is hard to say what I would think would be a great strength. I think I will have a better idea of that after my visit.

Nathan: Yes, sometimes it's better to come with questions?

Laky: Than answers.

Nathan: Than answers. [laughter]

Writing about Fiber Art, Communication, and the Future

Laky: This does raise the question, thinking about that introduction that I wrote for Northern Fibre III, the question about writing. Sadly this field does not have what I would think of as enough criticism and enough really sharp, good writing, descriptive writing, provocative writing, questioning writing. There aren't even enough books documenting what has gone on and what is going on.

That's actually why I think these oral histories are so important because if you think about the great amount of activity and the artists here in northern California and what's been happening here since the late sixties, it's unparalleled anywhere and it remains essentially undocumented. Little articles here and there, but no one, no book, has actually addressed the subject and the development of the field. Or it might be like Black Mountain School, where much later somebody wrote about it. That could still happen, but it could also be that it never will be written about, and that would be a shame.

Nathan: Exactly.

Laky: I also would like to see a little more lively writing and criticism because I think it would make life in this field so much more interesting, and it would help develop the field and it would help the conversation. It would be a big benefit to have more writing, more critical writing as well as documentary writing.

Janet Koplos is a senior editor at *Art in America* and she occasionally writes about textiles. That has been a big help, and she's a very good writer. There's a little bit more that happens here and there, but it's just not enough. Really, it would be nice if we had more, and it would be nice if we developed some West Coast people who were good at writing. Well, there are some, just not enough.

Nathan: Right. That's very interesting.

As to the question on Denmark, which I thought you answered very beautifully, I had some impression that they were very, very traditional, but that was some time ago.

Laky: Yes, they were very traditional with extensive weaving, much of it pictorial, floral, or patterned, and I think there have been changes. One of the things that I find fascinating right now having traveled around a little bit is that communication is actually promoting more interesting work. Artists meeting each other and traveling around, and the mini textile exhibitions, the workshop kinds of things like Northern Fibre III, are promoting development in the field. I've done several things in England, and there's a nice kind of communication beginning to occur amongst artists in several countries.

The most recent basketry exhibition, it's International Contemporary Basketry, I think I brought the catalogue to show you. The catalogue is very beautiful. It's really a book, and it's a major contribution to the field. This exhibition is American artists and British artists, with a few from other places. But it is a very exciting thing. It's gotten lots of attention, it's launched a major conversation, and much more interest.

So I think you're right, if we go back, say, fifteen twenty years. But I think today with the increased communication, increased travel, et cetera, I think there is a lot of stimulation for artists. I think now it is possible to go to almost any other country, not probably any country, but almost any country, and find some really interesting contemporary work where people are trying to shake up their traditions and experiment and bring in new ideas.

It will be interesting to see if national characteristics are retained, or if personalities are different in different locales, personality meaning the larger sort of artistic personality in a particular field. In a way, it would be too bad if we all became very homogeneous. I think that's what happens now, today. It is possible to go to Japan or Australia and find work in the textile field that is very much like what you would see in northern California in terms of ideas and size and experimentation and invention and so forth.

But I think the downside is that we lose the individual characteristics of different locales in the world. The upside is that I think it makes it almost more competitive and more exciting. You're likely to get a few more really top-notch and very exciting artists doing very interesting work. So it's a plus and minus.

Nathan: Exactly. Well, I noticed your interest in conversation in many ways: with your students, with foreign artists, and in your travels. The idea of conversation is very appealing.

Laky: Very, and it's stimulating. A number of years ago at UC Davis, I arranged for a Polish artist to visit, Magdalena Abakanowicz. She gave a talk and she was wonderful. I tried to get something set up for foundry work for her because she was heading into working

with metal. I think, had we set up some sort of situation for her, we might have gotten her back for a half a year or a year, but we couldn't manage that. It would have been wonderful for our students. Abakanowicz is one of the most successful and active artists in the field.

More recently another contemporary textile artist from Poland had an opportunity to leave her university and come to California for a quarter. She got in touch with us and said, "Gee, could I come hang my hat?" Well, we said, "Sure," but we didn't quite know what to do with her.

She came and she actually took one of my classes and we became quite good friends. She showed slides of her work and slides of other artists' work to my class. She showed her work, actually. We put some of her work up in our building for a while. She talked with the students. She made presentations to the graduate students. It was really wonderful to have her at UC Davis.

And I thought—I don't know how we're going to manage this—but if we could just do one artist a year from some part of the world, it would be just so marvelous, so enriching to that bigger conversation. I don't know if we'll be able to do this. She dropped out of the sky into our laps.

Nathan: But she knew you and she wanted to come. Isn't that interesting.

Laky: And she happened to have a place to stay and so forth, so it all came together, and the university benefitted.

Recognition, Awards, Commissions, and "Doing" Situations ##

Nathan: We were just talking about awards, prizes, recognition, and what the consequences were for you and whether any of them extend back in your mind as being especially important in your development.

Laky: Well, yes. Yes, and no. The "no" part I'll go to first. The quick part of the no is that I have found that things that made the most difference to me, occasions or events or recognition, let's say, were those moments when I was commissioned to do work or asked to do a work or asked to do a creative something somewhere, rather than just receive an award or recognition. It had the dual effect of recognition and an opportunity to do new work. That somehow was very important to me.

Actually, I think that's how I got into that whole field of site-specific work. Site-specific doesn't always fit. I call it art actions, situational work, events, art events. I found those kinds of occasions were recognition in the sense that I was commissioned or invited to do a new work, but then doing the work was a very important part of it. I think my interest in this kind of work, somewhat like a performance, sort of grew out of just being asked to come and appear and talk. I would, if I could, transform it into a doing situation. [laughs]

There is another similar kind of thing, which is being asked to do a commission. This is also kind of like an award, especially if there are several people and you're one of a large group being considered. To be chosen is like an award. It's an important form of recognition. But again, it focuses on an artwork, and it gives an opportunity to do some artwork that I might not have done otherwise. [added during editing: For example, in 1990, I was commissioned by the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission to do a large piece for the council chambers of the City Hall. This work, titled "Language Formation," is the largest and, in my opinion, the strongest of my colored twig wall works.]

So those I would put in the first category. I haven't gotten that many awards, but the few I've gotten have been very important in different ways. In that category, a National Endowment for the Arts award, because of the high level of recognition, was very good for my career. Also a nice little chunk of money that came with it was very beneficial, very helpful, [laughs] especially at that time. Later it got easier because I had a salary from the university and got raises and so things have gotten easier over the years with a regular income.

Your question also makes me think about the slow building of a career, the bit by bit, piece by piece, one event, one recognition, one award, one lecture, one exhibition, and the slow gathering like on a snowball. You know, it just grows, and it really is bit by bit, by bit.

Today it feels pretty good now. It's almost as if I don't have to make an effort to promote myself. People call up and say, "Do you want to come do this, do you want to have an exhibition?" I'm now fifty-five. This was not happening to me when I was thirty-five. Occasionally it would, but I also had to make a big effort to be recognized, to participate, and to get some attention.

Nathan: Did you have to promote more than maybe you would have chosen?

Laky: Yes. Yes, I had to make sure that when something was announced, some opportunity to exhibit or present my work, that I would try for it. And I still do that, but it's somehow flowing along a little easier now. It feels just great. I'm really very pleased with that. It's not as hard now. I can devote more of my attention to developing my work and to the teaching. So of course every little bit, every award, every bit of recognition helped build to a point where it is happening a little more automatically now. I don't need huge amounts of recognition. What I am really after is the opportunity to experiment and develop new work, and, most importantly, to get the work out to an audience. So each small bit of attention counts. As with incremental patches on a quilt, every single one is important.

One of the main things that really helped me was a year that I got free of any duties at the university. It was a group of collectors [organized by two angels, Eleanor Friedman and Jonathan Cohen], getting together and buying me a year's leave for free-wheeling, uninterrupted work in the studio.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: And that was, I would say, one of the best things that ever happened in terms of recognition and awards. I don't know if we can call that an award exactly. I don't know what category it fits in. It might be like an NEA grant or something like that. It was just a group of people, somewhat anonymous, but this was I think the third or fourth time selecting an artist and doing something like this. For me, it was at an absolutely critical moment. It allowed me to get out from under the pressure of the university, which I think must be there for all young professors. Sometimes the pressure at the university to participate, to teach well, to be on committees, to do the whole thing, to keep up with the whole machinery, is so enormous that it is very hard to actually protect creative work time. I know that faculty members on my campus struggle with this all the time. I also see that the more successful of the faculty have figured out how to protect their time. [laughter] I still need to work on that.

So this came for me in 1984. I guess it was '83 and '84 and it was an absolutely critical moment. Let's see, that's about fifteen years ago, right? Fifteen, sixteen years ago. And so in terms of an award, that was a very, very important one, giving me a whole year to experiment, to do work. I didn't feel the pressure to have to produce something for an exhibition or for something that was going to happen six months later. I felt I could free-wheel, I felt I could try things. It influenced my work tremendously, the work that I did during that time. In a sense, I've lived off of that year ever since.

I've gotten a few other awards, but not too many just to recognize me at a dinner. The Women's Foundation gave me an award at their event, Women in the Arts. That was also very nice. It was one of those awards granted at an evening event. I think four or five different artists were recognized that evening. I really appreciated it, but again, there are very few of those in my field. More often the recognition is in the form of being selected for a commission, or being selected for a small grant or to do an event or to have an exhibition. Something like that.

Nathan: One that came to mind was the Lausanne Biennial. Was that significant?

Laky: Well, see, it's interesting what we call that. It was very significant and in a sense we could call that an award, but it's probably more in the realm of recognition.

It is perhaps the most competitive of the few larger, international exhibitions that occur in my field. It has a very prestigious jury and the works are all enormously big. Artists send in proposals, some submit an application to present a work they've already done. This is the exact opposite of the mini textile exhibitions. For a little while they even had a very large scale minimum size requirement. Maybe this is the reason the mini textile shows occurred, as a reaction to extreme size, [laughs] I don't know. Lausanne was "max" textile. I somehow recall the size requirement as three meters by three meters or more. So the Lausanne Biennial was interested in promoting major works. It was very exciting to be a part of that.

And again, that invitation helped my career tremendously. I got so much attention for the piece I made for that exhibition. Called "That Word."

Nathan: "That Word"?

Laky: The freestanding letters spelling “art.” Freestanding and three-dimensional: the pyramidal shape of an A, the rectangular shape of R and the T--three straight legs going up to a triangular top of the T.

It was illustrated in many articles written about that year’s exhibition. Actually for two or three years after, it was still being discussed and used as an illustration in articles all over Europe: including Greece, Belgium, of course Switzerland, Germany, articles printed in magazines and newspapers all over France. It was wonderful to have my piece selected to illustrate so many articles. It added tremendously to my reputation and I’m sure that that’s one of the reasons why I’m getting more attention now, more calls, and more opportunities to exhibit my work. So it was a very important exhibition for me.

Nathan: Are you attracted to newer and different materials? You’ve been working with twigs and wires and nails and dowels--.

Laky: I have been wondering about the same thing myself. Earlier in my career I tried all kinds of materials. I worked with very different kinds of things and in very different kinds of ways. One of the things that troubled me now and then was wondering if maybe I was too all over the place in my work. Was I going in too many different directions?

Defining a Body of Work

Laky: I would hear people talk about bodies of work. Actually, I find that whole concept of a body of work a very interesting concept to think about and discuss. I often try to provoke my students with a conversation about what a body of work is. A little bit of it comes from the commercial end, because it’s the gallery that asks for a body of work, and a museum that asks for a body of work. I don’t know that Ed Rossbach ever sat down and said, “I’m going to do a body of work.” [laughter] [added during editing: He has done an enormously wide range of work over his career, as has Katherine Westphal, in terms of materials, methods, and concepts.]

Can the work and a body of work be different, or must it all kind of fit together? Does it need to have a cohesive theme or can it be like one of these and one of those and one of that and one of this? Can, for instance, a retrospective collection of an artist’s work be a body of work? So I find the question interesting.

Earlier, as I say, I did move from one thing to another in sometimes jagged steps, as I look back. One of the reasons that happened is because it was so difficult for me to be continuous in my work time. Massive interruptions would come along, often related to the university. Interruptions, meaning that I would get so busy with new classes, or a new program, or things I had to do, and committee work, that there might be several months that would go by without my being able to work in the studio for any significant amount of time. What I found was that when I got back to my studio, I was four months or eight months older or two months older or whatever it was: I’d had a number of different experiences in that time. I was at a different point in my life and in my

thinking. It was often not so obvious that I would pick up my thought from three months earlier. I was often in new thoughts and new materials and new ways of doing things without even fully realizing that I had made a leap into a new area of work.

Over the years, I noticed older, more seasoned professors around me, who seemed somehow to have figured out how to lead their lives and do their creative work. I think maybe I have, too, a little bit, or I've somehow learned how to make it an absolute priority that I continue my work at some level all the time so that now there's a kind of continuity. [added during editing: For example, after the first year of chairing the Department of Art, I had an exhibition of my work at the Brown/Grotta Gallery in Connecticut. At the end of my year on Committee on Academic Personnel, I had the solo exhibition in Denmark.]

I see my work changing, but it is along a continuum. There are no longer absolute breaks, and then picking it up again with quite a different flavor weeks later. Just describing this makes me think, "Well, there might be something beneficial to making a clean cut and then see what happens after a few months." [laughter]

I also find now that I'm very, very interested in what I'm doing. I'm also more aware that as hard as I've worked at it, using twigs and wire and nails and this and that, basically the same sort of genre of materials, that I feel sometimes as if I'm just at the beginning of the idea. I'm just now getting really good at doing it. I'm just now really understanding what I like about it. So I may have, in some sense, slowed down my fast dash forward. I may be more content to do many more pieces in the same realm of thinking and move my work forward more slowly and deliberately.

Nathan: And explore what is there?

Laky: Yes, in a sense, I'm more aware of the nuances. And also, some of the work that I have tried to do more recently has been difficult to construct. It's been difficult to construct pieces that are strong and hardy, and also that I can construct in ways where I'm freer with the ideas. In the last two to four years, I feel that I've gotten much better at construction. I've figured out a lot of things. I'm now feeling much freer about what I can do. I'm also much more aware of the impact of detail, so I don't know, I may be working in this range or realm for a number of years more.

Attraction of the Roughly Natural Branch

Laky: I have done, since I think 1996, three pieces which really intrigued me. Not that the others don't, but three that are a little different in that they employ parts of the natural branch that are more roughly natural. I think we were talking about this earlier.

Nathan: Yes.

Laky: It's very difficult to use the oddball shapes the branches become as they grow. These three pieces are very compelling to me somehow in what they say about nature. In other works I feel I have totally taken over and the human element has taken over what

the work feels and looks like at the end. And I'm interested in that, I like that. Some of my work is totally industrially oriented and human oriented.

These three pieces, however, have such a strong voice from nature in them. I'm just absolutely fascinated by them, but they are very difficult to do. It's very difficult to find the wood for them and they're hard to construct. I just know that they're very powerful, and I want to do more. I don't know if I can do more. I just know that it's something I'm heading toward. But when you see those three clumped in with all my other work, you wouldn't necessarily pick them out as essentially different from some of the other work with branches.

Nathan: I was thinking of that strong bowl with the gnarled wood. It's different.

Laky: See, it's different. Now, it's not that different. It's twigs and it's screws and it's the same sort of geometric arrangement. The underlying structure is essentially the same, and yet it comes across as being quite different. That's what I'm finding very interesting right now.

Nathan: That is interesting.

Laky: The question now in my mind is, can I find that character in new pieces of wood I might gather and can I purposefully pursue that difference? Can I pursue it, or is it just the luck that happens? You know, studio luck? [laughter] Is it just that I happen to do a piece and it just sings? You go, "Oh, right. That's great, that just hit a note. A terrific note." So I might not be able to actually pursue it purposefully. I might just have to wait until it happens now and then almost by accident. But I would like to see more of that quality in my work, more of nature's hand.

And then, almost as if I'm pulling apart my very theme, I also am enjoying, right now, going in another direction of more of the human element. I want to work with some lumber, I want to work with what you find in a hardware store. And I have always enjoyed juxtaposing those two, the industrial and the natural, so maybe I am taking the theme and bifurcating it, I don't know. I might be going in two directions, but I don't know yet.

I've always found it hard to imagine or pose for myself a future. In fact, in the past, I've found on occasion that once I do that, I say, "Oh, I'm going to do a big work now." The next thing you know, I'm doing the smallest, most delicate, little tiny work. [laughter] That's happened to me two or three times. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's my own internal order: "Oh, so you think you're going to do a big work, do you? [laughs] Let me show you." I don't understand it. It's very strange, but I like that. I like that about creativity. I like that about my own studio process. I like very much that sometimes surprising things happen. They're not things that I don't think or that aren't in my head, that aren't part of my intelligence, but that they would occur at a particular moment is sometimes very much a surprise and very unexpected. And I like that. It gives me lots of energy and I enjoy that about my work.

Nathan: The idea of something else taking over?

Laky: [laughs]

Nathan: Maybe the materials are talking to you, whatever that could be?

Laky: I'm sure that happens, just as when I travel, things I look at are talking to me. I was thinking about this Northern Fibre III Workshop and I was trying to figure out how I would approach it. I decided that if it turns out that the participants are not already ready to go with their own ideas and ready to jump, that one of the first things I'm going to ask them to do is go out for a walk and collect some things. Because I know that what happens to me is I have very selective attention in my vision. I look at everything, but I'm constantly translating and selecting. I'm constantly turning my travels, let's say, into my visual resources. I must sort somehow very quickly because I look at everything I pass by, but I focus only on certain things, and those things really do influence me.

One of the three pieces that I just mentioned that has this very, very strong connection to nature, was influenced by a truck I saw loaded with firewood in India ten years ago. I don't remember when that last trip was, ten or twelve years ago. I discovered the connection after I made the piece and I now can show a slide of that piece and the truck in my lecture. [laughter]

Nathan: Wonderful.

Laky: You can see that the lines and shapes and the overall form are very influenced by that visual experience.

Nathan: You have a wonderful little filing cabinet right behind your ear? [laughter]

Laky: I think it's an automatic process and maybe all visual people do this. Every day that my eyes are open, I am gathering resources and getting influenced by what I see. Sometimes I start being interested in a particular kind of thing for a while and then I think that influences the work.

For example, I'll start looking at window treatment: how are windows divided up? And right now, because of the project of renovation with our new home, I'm very interested in windows. I've been photographing them, looking at them, and drawing them. They are related to my work because usually they are organized wood structures. Now I've been doing these wall grids in arrangements like panes, and so maybe that's also why the windows are so interesting to me. It creates a kind of subject area theme of how I use looking around in the world.

Support for Art Students. Programs: Creativity and the Interdisciplinary Model

Nathan: And, you have had such interesting work with students. Do you have anything you hope would happen in the future for design and art students? What is it they need in order to pursue what they love?

Laky: Well, I think, as I said earlier, if we were a more enlightened society here in California, we would support our art programs much more. We would encourage people to be in

them. And out of that we would get some people who were interested in the creative direction for their own work: artists, designers, craftspeople. We would also get some who were mathematicians or English majors or political science majors or administrative management, or engineers, who would be greatly enriched and much more creative in their thinking if they had an opportunity to be educated in environments that really recognized the creativity.

I don't mean studying about art, but getting your hands on clay and smearing things around on that piece of paper and rolling up your sleeves and tying some knots and trying something. I think it's very, very beneficial to everyone. And then I also think about our individual students in art and design, I mean, it's also about them, because we don't support them enough. It's very hard for them to get on alone. It's hard for them in school, it's hard for them when they come out of school. There aren't jobs popping up for them right away. In a way, it's the strong who survive. If they really feel dedicated to their creative work they will struggle like mad to do it and to form their lives around it.

I also would like to see more that is interdisciplinary, interactive, truly interactive and interdisciplinary in our schools, for all of us. I think relating one part of art to another, just thinking about cave paintings while you're making a print, thinking about psychology and human nature while you're thinking of ideas to form in a clay piece, these kinds of interactions of subject matter I think are very important. I think they allow a kind of freedom in the mind that I appreciate tremendously, so I would go for the bigger mix in education.

And I would always leave a door open to the sort of whimsical and humorous side of things: the story-telling side, the toy side, the playful side, but I would also bring in the serious, you know, the civil engineering side. I think they can go together.

I think if we could be interdisciplinary more in our thinking, it would enrich us all. We'd have a better time and I think we might get more interesting things out of our folks and our educational system. I think maybe we'd build different kinds of bridges. I think maybe we would be more inventive. I think it would be good, so I would like to reform education right now. [laughter] Why not? I don't know if that's what your question was all about.

Nathan: Yes, it really was.

Laky: I would like to see more interdisciplinary interaction happening.

I would love to see more interaction with age: older people with younger people but not in the usual, "I'm older and I know everything and you're five years younger and you know nothing," but rather to really interact, if we could somehow promote that. I don't know that we can, but I think around art and in art activities, it's easier. It's much easier, because sometimes there's a five-year-old next to a sixty-year-old and the five-year-old is doing more interesting work. And that helps the sixty-year-old person open up a little bit more and then use the intelligence that that person has gathered over the years. [added during editing: I think of a Henry Miller quote I like so much, "The thing is to become a master and in your old age to acquire the courage to do what children did when they knew nothing."]

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Harriet Siegel Nathan

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