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

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

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

ROLANDO CASTELLÓN

Artist

SFMOMA Staff, 1972-1980
M.I.X. Program Coordinator, 1972-1975
Curator, 1975-1980

Interviews conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2007

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Discursive Table of Contents— Rolando Castellón

Interview #1: March 19, 2007

Interview #2: March 20, 2007

Interview #1: March 19, 2007
[Begin Audio File 1 03-19-2007.mp3]

01-00:00:04
Rigelhaupt: It's Monday, March 19th, 2007. I'm at the SoMA Arts Center in San Francisco, doing an oral history interview with Rolando Castellón. We are going to be talking about the Museum of Modern Art here in San Francisco, and his work there. So to start, how did you first become involved with the museum?

01-00:00:29
Castellón: Well, to tell you the truth, I came here in 1956, as a nineteen-year-old Nicaraguan immigrant. I was one of those children that stayed with his interest in drawing and making things; you know, I never abandoned it. Since my childhood, [I] always enjoyed drawing. It was part of my life there in Nicaragua, where I was born. I came here for reasons that had nothing to do with either politics or art or anything. I had an injury. I used to play soccer, and I injured my shoulder, my clavicle. I was told I needed an operation. My mother lived in the United States, in San Francisco, and I decided to come here to do it.

When I got here, I was totally mesmerized by all the artistic activity. I didn't have plans to stay; I just came for the purpose of the operation. I was so impressed with the art activity, I decided to stay. My hunting ground was all the galleries and the museums. The San Francisco Museum [of Art] was the most interesting aspect because it was art closer to my times. I didn't know at the time that I would end up working there because for me, it was like a religious act to go to the museums all the time. I remember I was telling a friend a few days ago that at that time, I could make a trip to the three major museums in San Francisco with one fare, one bus fare. Because you would take the Mission bus. I used to live at Army and Mission, Bernal Heights there, and I took the Mission bus, transfered at Van Ness, went to the San Francisco Museum with the transfer, stopped at the corner of Van Ness and McAllister, went to that museum; then took the bus that went to the de Young, with the same transfer. Then after the de Young, I went to the Legion of Honor. I had two and a half hours to get there. So that used to be my almost weekend trip, to see the art. I remember the halls of the San Francisco Museum.

It started there. I'm self-taught as an artist, as I didn't have sufficient funds to go to school. I went to City College and studied commercial art, advertising. I went on to work, after two and a half years of studies at City College, and I continued to work on my own work on weekends, or whenever I had time. During that time, there were people from the community, artists from the community, some friends, who were interested that I come join art groups in the area. I was very aloof with things; you know, I never liked responsibilities, I always tried to stay on my own.

01-00:04:51 So during those times that I worked in advertising, I kept doing my work. I had shows and I had some experience with galleries and things. I was building towards the museum, really, because as an artist, I got involved with one of the galleries where I showed. I learned the process and became part of the administration of the gallery. That was my school for future activities. In 1968, I decided to quit advertising and I went to Europe, with the intention of staying there. But my boss at the agency that I worked, he just said that I shouldn't quit, that I should go, but come back to a safe job, you know? He said he would give me a year's leave of absence. I thought it was such a generous offer that I took it, and I came back nine months later to a job. But it was not the same anymore. Just after being in Europe and all that, I couldn't come back and do advertising again. So I quit.

At that point, I accepted the invitation of my colleagues to join this institution that was named Casa Hispana de Bellas Artes; Spanish House of Fine Arts. I became the director of the art program that they had. And art projects were held at schools or gymnasiums or all types of community places, and all inadequate for it. So when I became the director of the arts program, I decided that we needed a space. What we needed was a formal space to show our work. Of course, going to the galleries to try to have them show your work was a lost cause, you know. Discrimination was extreme, and you couldn't even show them what you had, much less exhibit, as a minority. So I soon enough learned that there wasn't much of an opportunity. There were few Mexican or Latino artists that were in any of those mainstream galleries.

So I said, "Well, we need our own space. Just like they have their own special interests, we have to do the same." So when I got to that position, that was the first thing I did. I started the idea of what is now known as Galería de la Raza, which was started in 1969, which was the year that I resigned from my advertising job. Of course, I continued working as a freelancer, and I needed an office to work from. The most important thing was to be able to open the doors, because [to] maintain a place active, it's more important than anything else. So I figured, well, I would have my working conditions, and I would be opening the gallery on a daily basis.

I got together with my colleagues. There were, I think, twelve, thirteen individuals. We all started the gallery as a community thing, like a collective. We all put ten bucks a month to pay rent and expenses. As director of the arts program at Casa Hispana, I had a $125 a month budget to work with, because we were helped by the Neighborhood Arts Program. The first thing I did was to go around and look for space. One of the things I liked about the arts in San Francisco was going to the openings, you know? This feast every month. I became addicted to that. So I've gone to a million openings in the city since 1956. I knew many gallery spaces. There was a person in San Francisco, an artist, Frederick Hobbs, a guy who had a gallery on Union Street. In fact, in his office, what we know now as *ArtForum* was started. That magazine started

in San Francisco, at his office. He moved to the Mission and opened a gallery on Valencia and Fourteenth Street.

01-00:09:48 There was this place that I knew was empty, because people wouldn't come [to] the other side of the tracks, you know? I mean his clients, and the regular public will not do the trip over. So he closed. It just didn't work. It didn't go. He kept an apartment upstairs, and I knew about it, as a place that had lights, that had white walls. In fact, it had studios in the back. It was really a wonderful space. I said, "Well, I'm going to look at that space and find out who owns it and whether it can be used." I did, and I went to Neighborhood Arts and I wrote a letter to request information about it. So I spent all morning typing it. At that time, there were no photocopies, and I forgot to put carbon paper to have a copy. So I just had the original. I spent all morning typing the letter to send to this place. At lunch time I went home. I lived in Bernal Heights, which is up a hill. Sure enough—It's an area that's very windy. I went to my house, parked in front, and I had the letter here on the seat. And I go out, and there was this wind, very strong wind that's coming, and literally took the letter. It just went up to the top of the hill. I remember there was an antenna up there. But the letter just disappeared. Of course, I was so upset about it that I got back into the car, and I went and I drove to the place.

Sure enough, to continue with this mysterious wind event, the door was ajar. It was slightly open. So I knocked at the door, and I heard a voice coming from above. Well, I came in, because it was open. This guy comes out. Turns out that he was an avid tennis player, and he was in his tennis suit. He says, "What do you want?" I said, "Well, I was interested, I was trying to find out about the space." So I explained to him that I was an artist, and trying to find a space to show, to have a community gallery. It turns out that the guy was much interested in Spanish poetry. He told me that he loved García Lorca, which is one of the great poets of Spain. His name was Frederick—and *Federico García Lorca*. So in time, as I got to know him, I used to call him Federico García Hobbs, which was his name. He was very positive, very enthusiastic about this. He says, "Sure." He said, "Take it, take it, take it." I said, "How much is it?" "Well, give me $125." That's what I had for the budget, so it was just perfect.

When I tell this story, people say, well, did I really invent this, or did it happen that way? No, it happened that way. So I got the space. The gallery opened, and we were [there] for about three years. I was the first director. It was a collaboration, a cooperative. We started the project with the idea that—I was saying before that I don't like to be committed permanently. So the first thing I suggested to my colleagues was that everybody should be involved in the directorship of the place; that I didn't want to be this dictator, or that nobody should be; and that we should have elections to have a new director every year.

01-00:14:21 So I was the first director, for ’69—’70, and it went fine. We were successful. We had good audiences and so on. The place has had staying power. They’re still there, and it’s still active. That always makes me feel good, that we could do it and that it meant something, too. Of course, it was community. Then after the year, we had elections; we elected somebody else. I remained a member. During this year, I apparently established myself in the community. I had knowledge of much of the—because of my interest in the arts. You know, I went; whenever there was an art show, I would go.

And of course, I had friends in the Chinese, Japanese, Black communities, so I knew many people. Then I got a call from the San Francisco Museum. Somebody from the museum was calling because they heard about me and my activity at the Galería de la Raza and that they were looking for a person to direct their program, a new program that they were trying to institute, which was the M.I.X. Program, which came about because a trustee who was interested in changing somewhat the audience and the responsibility of the museum to include other cultures, aspects of the visual arts and the performing arts and so on. As you know, the social problem has been eternal; all this trying to join different types of groups is always very, very difficult. And so that’s why we have such problems in the world today; we just separate ourselves, you know?

So I’ve always said that for the system to change, it has to come from within. You cannot do it from outside. Someone has to come and decide that things have to change. This is what this woman did. Her name was Sally Lilienthal, who was a major collector of American art, as well as a patron of the arts. Politically, she was with Amnesty International. She was concerned with social problems, other than—I mean, on her own. In this case, she thought that it would be interesting to establish a program at the museum that was concerned with minorities. So that’s how it started. She went out and got funding from the San Francisco Foundation, and named the project M.I.X., which stood for Museum Intercommunity Exchange. That’s the M.I.X. acronym.

I was skeptical about it. Because again, I always was aloof of the rest of the world. I like to be alone. I don’t want to be in a—I like to work, I like to do things, but I want to be able to control certain situations. So they hired another person for the program. Apparently, she knew me, and she had recommended me also. She was a woman by the name of Becky Jenkins. She was the sister of the famous dancer, Margaret Jenkins, whose father [Dave Jenkins] had been involved in the labor movement in the United States. So this lady called me one day, asking me if I could do [it]. And I said, “No. I don’t want to get in this type of—” I claimed that I really had no experience. I mean, I have my interests and my knowledge, but I was not a person with this kind of professional ability. So I turned it down. But they kept calling me.

Lilienthal did also call me. They insisted, so at one point I broke down and said, "OK, I will do an interview." So I went to the museum for an interview, and the person that took over as the second director of the Galería de la Raza was also there for an interview. He was a very conflicting person. When you have groups, you have different characters and different points of view, and so that's natural, differences. Apparently, I was not the only candidate. They had asked this person also. So I was sitting waiting for the appointment, around nine o'clock. All of a sudden I see this guy come out. I thought to myself, uh-uh.

01-00:20:34 You know, first, having to compete with him. Second, I have an excuse not to do the appointment. I like to make quick decisions, too. So when I saw him come out, it meant that somebody from my community was interested, and that's great. I told the girl at the desk, "Tell Miss Lilienthal that I changed my mind and I will not do the interview." And I left. So that was just perfect for me. I had an excuse that I didn't have to accept this situation. So I left and didn't do the interview. So the fellow got the job. He became the first director of the visual arts program, because Mrs. Jenkins was the performing arts person. So six months went by, and apparently, there was a conflict between these two people. My colleague was saying, "It's a very difficult person." And she was also. So it didn't work out. So six months later, I get another call from this woman, checking with me again, because she said they still wanted me to do it. So I discussed it with the man who ran the gallery where I had my work, and had become a friend by then.

He says, "Well, I know what you mean by not wanting to become involved in this big, big social problem that we have. But I think you should consider that maybe you can help somewhat in this." So I did follow his advice, and I accepted to do the interview this time. So I did get together with Lilienthal, and I got the job. They offered me the position, and I went to work. This was in 1972, when we started. So fine, obviously, by this time my experience was better, as far as—I mean, working that year, it was very important for me, in directing the Galería.

So I started the program, and six months later, another problem arose. It turns out that the San Francisco Foundation—This was a three-year program they were funding, this pilot project. And myself being a member of this community, which we of course tried to get funding for the place, and for the gallery, especially, it turned out that the foundation suggested that since they had this program with the museum, which they were funding, that they thought that they will channelize funding for the community through the museum. I thought that this was not acceptable, because they will be taking the bloodline directly from the community. I thought that was not something that I could accept. The other person, Mrs. Jenkins, had other conflict with the museum. It was outside of my realm, but she was a very conflicting person too, so she didn't get along with the director or whoever. So we both had

problems with the program as it was being administrated, and we decided to resign, to protest for things that we thought were not—

01-00:25:08

I mean, one of the reasons I didn't want the job was exactly because I didn't want to be the fall person or the person who was being used as a token. This had to do with my reasons of not wanting to be, because knowing how these things work, I just couldn't accept those conditions. As this developed about taking the funding from the communities to give it to us, well, I couldn't accept it. So we did resign. We both went. At that time, we had a director that was very—What would I say? Not conservative, in the sense of—But I understand that he said that a program like the one that this woman wanted to institute would be done over his dead body or something like that, some sort of expression; that he was not really interested in having work that was not from the academy or the mainstream or whatever; that the [M.I.X. program] was not his idea of the museum.

Rigelhaupt: Which director was this?

01-00:26:27

Castellón: This was Gerald—

Rigelhaupt: Nordland?

01-00:26:35

Castellón: Gerry Nordland, right. But the woman, Lilienthal, apparently had the power to overrule, and so the program took place. But in time, Gerry realized that it was worthwhile, that it was working, that he was not embarrassed. Because he would say, I guess, something that he didn't want to be embarrassed by having the type of work that—I mean, and this is a person who has been part of the ruling-class system, and a major director, who's dealing with history and important work. So he was really not interested. It was not what he was there for; this was added to his responsibility, and he did not agree with it. But in time, little by little, he changed, he began to change his mind, so that what we were doing had merits enough for him to support it.

When I left, he wrote me two wonderful letters of recommendation, one of them suggesting that if at any time I wanted to come back, that the doors would be open for me. Very, very positive. He supported me when I had problems in the community. Because the program included going to the communities, taking works, and doing mural projects, for example. I had an interesting situation at a community here nearby, a Black community; there was a playground, and I had requested that they let us use the wall to do a mural about Black artists. He had a theme of important Black Americans. And he had these portraits of important figures in the culture, including political figures like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and so on. This didn't go well with one of the members of the committee of the recreation and parks

commission. I had an open argument with this person. Newspapers cover these things. It came out in the paper that there had been this confrontation between this museum administrator and a person from the committee. But Nordland was very supportive in that. So he really turned around completely, and he was very receptive after the year or so that I was director of M.I.X..

So I did. But out of a conviction that what was going on was not acceptable, we did go, both. I continued with my freelance work and my own work. But the museum kept questioning me about it. They offered me the program in full, but in respect to my colleague, I said—I mean, when we left, they suggested that why didn't I stay and run the program? But I told them I couldn't in fairness to my colleague. But time went on, and the monies were there to maintain the program. They continued to look, but they couldn't find the proper person. And so at that time, Nordland left, and the museum remained without a director for quite a while.

I had worked with the assistant director at the time, which was a man from City Hall, who took over as director of administration. His name was Michael McCone. I mean, I had a working condition with him, and he was one of the people who kept after me, saying that he wanted that I come back to it. So finally, I decided that since they couldn't find a person for them, that meant that the program would go down; they would just cancel it or whatever. So I decided to give them a ten-point demands, let's say; that if they would accept my conditions, that I would return. And they did. The San Francisco Foundation reconsidered my main objection, and so that did happen. So I did come back a year later or so, maybe less than a year.

Rigelhaupt: If we jump backwards a little bit, before the years after Nordland left and you continued work with the museum, when Galería de la Raza opened, was there a crossover with the Museum of Modern Art at the time? Was there an artistic connection between the work you were doing in the Galería and the museum?

01-00:33:16

Castellón: No. No, absolutely not. Basically, what I said about the gallery's difficulty—I mean, having worked at the commercial galleries, imagine how difficult it would be to work at the museum level. Just, as I said, much more demanding. There's a history that they are maintaining, and Gerry, or any other museum director, had the same attitude toward work that was not [mainstream]. I mean, it's supposed to be a museum where the highest whatever. The only connection that I can see was that some curators, like from the Oakland Museum, would come over to check the programs. I never saw anybody from the San Francisco Museum. But I remember that George Neubert, who was at that time an artist, who became a curator at the Oakland Museum, he came over at one time, and invited us to do a group show at the Oakland Museum. That did happen; I don't remember exactly what the time was. But with the San Francisco Museum, there was no connection that I can remember.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think that was a common experience, at this point in the late sixties, that people of color who were working as artists had a difficult time with galleries and the museums? How much could you speak to other cities in the country? Was it unique to San Francisco?

01-00:35:20

Castellón: I don't think so, no. In fact, there were things in New York at the Whitney Museum at the time. I mean, apparently, there were some shows that were presented in the basement, and people had a derogative name for that gallery. That's where they had black artists or so. So I think in general—In fact, I think this was the first city that had a full fledged program like this one. My main responsibility when I came in was to look at the rest of the world. And San Francisco being fortunate to have so many different cultures represented. So it was kind of ideal or logical, that—There were some artists that were part of the mainstream {inaudible} especially I remember one. His name was Luis Gutierrez. But very few. And very few black artists who were in the mainstream or represented in galleries. So I think it was common of the culture in the whole country. I might be wrong, of course. But as far as to my knowledge, it was a similar situation everywhere.

I think we did set a precedent when I became—One of my ten demands that I asked when I came back was that I did not want the program to, after the three years pilot program, to look at it as a third world separate thing. I wanted it to be integrated into the museum program. But I, as the curator, will be just a regular curator in the museum, with emphasis, of course. I did not want to be—I got to be known as a third world curator at the museum. I mean, people today, they will say, "Well, he was the third world curator." But nobody likes to be—You know, you want to integrate into the culture, you don't want to be the other guy. So that was accepted, too. After three years, we took off the M.I.X. part, the title, and I became a regular curator at the museum. And I looked at everybody. I mean, my exhibition program was totally integrated.

As [*San Francisco Chronicle* art critic] Thomas Albright used to say, putting down the M.I.X. thing—Thomas was an art critic at the time—he said, "Well, all artists are fourth world artists." Saying that a white artist was also a minority. And sure, I agree with that. I mean, my motto was something to the effect, "Well, I want to be able to succeed or fail; but I want to have the opportunity. I might not have what it takes to succeed, but I want to try." And so the M.I.X. part disappeared after the third year. I just went on to do any exhibition, any artist, really. Especially, I would rather be like the regional curator; you know, that I will look at the area, and this is what I recommended. I will not take on any major artists—like a curator in charge of Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns. They didn't need me. So I just wouldn't have anything to do with that. In fact, some of the other curators resented it somewhat that I had this autonomy, that it was my decision as to what shows I would do. But for me, I thought it was important, because I wanted to

concentrate in the area. There were so many resources that were not being looked at. That was successful, and I went on.

Rigelhaupt: Could you talk about the relationship between Galería de la Raza and a broader social movement? There was a strong connection between the gallery and the civil rights movement.

01-00:40:42

Castellón: Well, by association, I would say, because you know how strong the African American movement was, and how, with the presence of Martin Luther King, that this was a forceful and—I mean, César Chávez was fighting his own movement about the farmworkers, but King was so much more visible. And of course, it was a larger community at the time. But we benefited, because changes did begin to take place. There was connection between all the various communities. Yes, there was connection amongst colleagues from that community. Obviously, we benefited from it, and we could speak out.

Also, many of the artists who were doing posters and the murals that were done were very political. I did have a show of murals in the museum that covered the main gallery. About seven murals that were produced inside the museum by various groups from various communities. The political—In fact, I think there was some problem with some trustees, with what I was doing. I think that {inaudible} might have come somewhat, related to that; that some of my shows were very political. It was natural, because that was an important aspect of how we were born. The name of the gallery had that connotation of confrontation, somewhat. That exhibition of murals, I had some very accusative themes. Especially, there was one about a judge across the street. The Chinese community was fighting at that time for the International Hotel. That was a place for the elderly in the community. I mean, that site was needed, you know? What is there now? The pyramid, I guess. So the Chinese artists were very strong about that. The sentiment was high. There were direct, real, very current themes in this. But as I say, it was natural, because that was part of—And artists will always be there. I mean, one of the most important roles of the artist, is to talk about his time and what's happening. Depending on how politically involved the artist will be, the art will demonstrate that. So the Galería had a strong role about that. There was obviously an involvement in the many things that had to do with the social-political struggle.

Rigelhaupt: When you first came on at the museum—just to make sure I have this right—your two major colleagues, or who you were working closely with, were Sally Lilienthal, and is it Becky Jenkins?

01-00:44:58

Castellón: Yes, it's Becky, that's right.

Rigelhaupt: And they were advocates for the program?

01-00:45:09
Castellón: Yes. Absolutely. Well, Lilienthal being the inspirator, or the person who got the program going, and Becky being in the performing arts, was the person in charge of that aspect. And myself. I mean, after my other colleague left, I became—And then when I returned, I took both roles. I used to do the program. And it was wonderful, because in those photographs that you saw there, you see the crowds that used to come. It was once a month. We had a huge audience. I mean, I had Japanese drums, mariachis, {inaudible} flutes, everything. I mean, I remember going to the streets and getting—play that Scottish music, with the wind. The windbag? What do you call it?

Rigelhaupt: Bagpipe.

01-00:46:27
Castellón: The bagpipe. And I used to do that. I used to go to the street and pick up musicians from the street and say, "Would you like to play at the museum?" And they'd go, "*What*?" And so I got a lot of people from the streets, players. It was wonderful, because I was telling somebody the other day that if they asked me, after these fifteen years of being gone, if I see any change in San Francisco, I'd say, "No, except that there are a few more big buildings. Two or three wonderful ones, and a lot of ugly new buildings. That's the only change, because I still see the— The one thing that attracted my mind," I said, "Is that I noticed that the Chinese parade was now held outside of Chinatown." The people were lining on Union Square. Which makes sense, because this city is attractive for the tourists because of all the ethnicity, the different cultures coming from the communities. So all the parades should be held downtown, not over there necessarily, you know? Because this is very attractive to bring people in. It's part of the economy and things. I saw people lining the sidewalk with chairs and things. So I said, "That's the only thing that I see different, that before, it was on Grant Avenue, and maybe they came out on that street where Grant Avenue starts, you know. So those changes I think—I don't know whether the Carnaval from the Mission is now done in the downtown streets. But there was so much activity going on that you had all the resources to do a successful program at the museum. And so the openings were full of people from all different cultures. They were always wonderful.

Rigelhaupt: So you also said that the city arts program—

01-00:48:53
Castellón: Neighborhood Arts Program.

Rigelhaupt: —Neighborhood Arts, was part of starting M.I.X.. No?

01-00:48:59
Castellón: No, not M.I.X.. But the Galería and the other communities. I mean, the Neighborhood Arts Program was put in there to support arts programming in

the neighborhoods themselves. So financially, as well as equipment and in-kind type of—

Rigelhaupt: So you said—I'm trying to get the timeline right—that you were originally involved with M.I.X., and then left for a short period of time, and then came back? So you started at M.I.X. in about 19—

01-00:49:54

Castellón: I started in '72. I think at the end of '72, I resigned; and returned in '73, I guess, the beginning of '73. There was a period of six or so months that I was gone.

Rigelhaupt: So when you came back in '73, what did you see as your primary goals for the position?

01-00:50:25

Castellón: I continued with my primary role that I started with in '72. That didn't change, because from the beginning, it was clear to me what I wanted to do. So I just continued doing the program that had been successful. And I told you for Gerry to change his mind, I thought it was very important, a very wonderful development, because his doubts were cleared. He supported it. In fact, I had good press for the shows that I did. There was the [opportunity for more artists] through those means. People were looking at all the points of view, all the types of creativity. In time, some of those artists have become part of the mainstream. I still see artists showing with the big galleries, that started with us. So yes, active and successful. But as I said, the city was fortunate to have so much talent, so many different cultures represented. So there was no reason not to have such a program.

Unfortunately, it stopped. But for those nine years that I was involved, it certainly did change the scene, the attitude, some of the musicians. In fact, I used to take the program to the park across the street from City Hall. Some of the programs, we did them outside the museum. We had these large crowds in that park. We had musicians that went on to become recognized in their own right.

Rigelhaupt: So if you could talk a little bit about your relationship with the director when you came back, and the other curators.

01-00:52:48

Castellón: Well, as I said, when I came back, Nordland was not there anymore. He was gone. The assistant director of administration took over. There was quite a long period of time between directors. I got along fine with the other curators. There weren't too many of us. The chief curator was Suzanne Foley. Then there was John Humphrey, which was the photography curator. He was the senior curator, let's say, and he concentrated on photography. He started that department. I was taking the responsibility, as I said, for the regional. I never had any problem working with them. They let me alone.

At the beginning, I understand that when the other fellow was there, he had to submit to Sue Foley the work that he would present. But I guess I had more experience than he did, more credibility, so that they respected my knowledge more. So I never had to present anything to anybody. I did have sort of autonomy, as far as that's concerned. I felt responsible to the institution, too. I just couldn't put anything in there. If I want to compete, I want to compete with the best that I have. Obviously, I wasn't going to embarrass the institution. So my working relationship was always very respectful, and I got the best treatment from my colleagues. No problem there.

Then the new director came. I don't know if it was a year later, after I returned. I investigated a little bit when we found out who it was going to be. It was a man who had been at Dallas-Fort Worth. I think it was his first directorship. He was an education man from the LACMA in Los Angeles, and I think he dealt with galleries there. He was also an artist. I mean, he was not a professional, but he was adept with drawings and things. I investigated somewhat his background, found it very, very small. I mean, Nordland was a scholar. He had many books to his name. He was a respected writer and historian. Henry Hopkins was the person who took over, and he had a very light file in the library where I investigated to see who it was going to be. Now, in that period—

[Begin Audio File 2 03-19-2007.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: So just before I changed tapes, you were talking about when Henry Hopkins began his directorship.

02-00:00:13

Castellón: Yes, I had been there, I guess, six months. I remember when there was no director, and the director for administration had very little knowledge of—I mean, he was not an art person, he was an administrator, mainly. The program slowed down a little bit. I remember I took some leadership, and I began to, since I was originating most of my shows, and I used to go get monies for it too, I had to—I mean, the budgets never are large enough for what you wanted to do. So in some instances, I would organize shows for which I would go out and get monies. One major project that was the case was that I felt that the conceptual movement was about ready to do a documentation of, well, twenty years in the Bay Area. So I went out, got monies from the NEA. I invited my colleague, the chief curator Suzanne Foley, to do the main part of that exhibition. She was knowledgeable in that. I got the monies to do it. I did part of it, more the performance aspects of it. I invited other groups in the area to come into the museum. We went out to the community, also, to do various—It was a very active program. There's a wonderful catalogue that came out of that. Since there was no director—I think it happened when he was here, but it took a lot of previous work to get the monies and to do all the homework, so to speak.

When he came in, he gave his first speech, where he suggested that he will be supportive of what I was doing. I think M.I.X. was still part of it. So he seemed to be supportive of what I was doing, and had no problem with it at all, either. He was a nice person. I don't think he was on the same level as Gerry, in that aspect of a historian; he came from education. I think he was in charge of the education department at LACMA in Los Angeles, and then went to Texas. But he was very personable, his attitude was very positive. I think that as a director, the most important work he did was, he was able to bring many gifts to the collection. The Clyfford Still thing, where Still donated lots of works to the museum, he was instrumental to that, and getting some De Koonings. So he was very productive, as far as the collection's concerned. He did himself a few shows, which—I remember that Albright was a very strong critic, and he applied his [chuckles] acid commentary to some of Henry's shows. I remember we used to have a monthly viewing. It was just a public relations thing, in a way, where the museum opened doors to anybody to submit. And the curatorial staff and the director will look at it. I was the one who used it most, because I had the freedom of showing younger people. But very little, anything major came out of it. So he used to come, and I used to notice Henry when we were looking at works. He wasn't there all the time. So I remember he'd take his glasses off, looking at work. Sometimes I would say, "Well Henry, that's a litho"! He always showed a great interest in stuff, but I don't remember that he did any major shows himself. He was involved with that [show] by Judy Chicago that was done at that time.

02-00:06:04

But I think he was good with getting support for the museum. He was there when I left. He gave me six months—What do they call it? He let me know six months in advance that he was going to let me go. He claimed that there was—Well, at the time, the NEA began to cut, and foundations began to—economic. But I think there was some influence from trustees that were not too happy with some things I was doing. So my last show was in 1981, which was a social-oriented piece. It was the work of a German artist and a German writer, who had worked on a project in Canada, where the government had constructed a dam that eliminated Indian land. The name of the show, "The James Bay Project." The subtitle of the show was "A River Drowned by Water," because the dam just covered an entire area of Indian land. In fact, you could see the pine trees, just the top of them, come out of the water. It was a show with a social conscience. A major catalogue was produced in cooperation with the Goethe Institute, which had a very strong political—

In fact, I got in problems with Thomas Albright from that show, because Clyfford Still was Thomas' favorite American modern artist. He loved his work, and he wrote quite a bit on it. Still had, in the donation that he gave us, a claim there that they had to build a gallery for his work only, and you couldn't have anything else. In fact, they did this gallery that had these walls that open up. You know, like a box. They had paintings on both sides of it. It

was demands that he applied everywhere he donated works. So I needed that gallery for my show. There was a smaller clause there that said that if necessary, it could be used. So I did. Albright was very, very critical of the fact that I had taken Clyfford's work to put what he called—He said, "You don't have to be in favor of the mainstream to know this is propaganda art." So some of the work was strong, and in reference to the social problems. And that was my last show. In fact, I did two shows when I was—It was a drawing show of a local—and that show, at the same time.

Rigelhaupt: Was the museum collecting artists that were being shown through your exhibits in the M.I.X. program?

02-00:10:11

Castellón: I recommended several, and some of them were accepted. That part was not emphasized, because many of them were young and untried. To be in a museum collection, you have to had a good background. But several did get in—Rupert García, Mary O'Neal. I didn't do too many one-person shows. Again, because the artists were not that experienced. They didn't have that much work. Or the older ones had had shows at the de Young, maybe, and their work didn't fit into the contemporary or the modern museum. But it was not an emphasis. I didn't have an emphasis in that aspect. But there were some works that went into the collection after having shows there.

Rigelhaupt: What do you think the perception of these artists that you were showing, that were, in a lot of respects, their first showing in a major museum, what do you think the perceptions of those artists were of the museum itself?

02-00:11:42

Castellón: Well, we knew what was happening. I mean, we knew that this was the museum making a special effort to give us attention. But I don't think it mattered. The interest was never there, so how could it be recognition, if [they] didn't even look at your work? If they had been interested, they could have been part of us in a normal way. So I never found any resistance or any negative attitude from the artists. Everybody collaborated. In fact, one of the shows I did after Hopkins came was called "A Third World Painting and Sculpture Exhibit," which was a major show; you know, it took the whole museum. I invited artists that were part of the mainstream, like people in Stanford. What's his name? A famous painter there. [Nathan] Oliveira. I invited established artists to be in this show. Manuel Neri and others. So this exhibit was the first attempt to put together a show of people from the different communities.

It was demonstrated that the material was there, the resources were there. Then the reason for including established artists was to put them in context with the younger people, and so that there will be communication. Also, for the younger ones to be with their peers, famous peers, was important, too. Of course, the artists, as I said, there were many that were in mid-career. But

most of them were younger people. As I say, I think I did about five one-person shows. Most of the shows were group exhibitions. But all the ones that had one-person, I think they got into the collection. But as far as their reaction, no. Even the well-known people didn't mind being categorized as third world. Because Oliveira is supposedly of Portuguese descent. He had a Portuguese background. So that's why he was put in it, or asked to participate. And he said fine. You know, none of them rejected the idea.

Rigelhaupt: What was the educational role of the M.I.X. program?

02-00:14:54

Castellón: Well, I think its entire reason was educational. It was righting a wrong, in the first place. Imagine all the information that we give the kids, let's say, children, as far as artists who dealt with their culture and who dealt with themes that were important to African American society or Chicano, Mexican, Latino. I mean, everything I did had that. I was very close to the education department. I got along very well with them. Robert Whyte was the director at the time. We did all kinds of things together, as far as both performing and the visual. Really, it had a didactic quality in itself, intrinsically. So that was very important to me. I went to the schools, too. I did commission artists to do murals, for example, that could be transportable, and we will take them to the schools and go from school to school. So I worked closely with especially the high school and some of the earlier. What's the first six years?

Rigelhaupt: Elementary.

02-00:16:45

Castellón: Elementary, yeah. I did that. Also, I went into the streets and commissioned an artist to do, for example, something with the idea of graffiti and sidewalks. I did a show of graffiti in the late seventies, that was a study of street, as well as studio work that had graffiti as its main goal. So all of these things were done with the idea of connecting the mainstream to the influence that might come out of the communities. So I think that basically, it was changing attitudes, which is educational. And respect, I guess. It worked very well. I mean, I had to come and do talks about my shows, organized by the education department. I would just do the introduction. So discuss works, and have workshops, things of that nature.

I was asked by the director to revise the Latin American collection, which was strong at the beginning. The first director had much interest in Mexico, so there were many works. I was asked to rearrange it, and I recommended to deaccess some of the works to get more monies for purchases. So one thing I did at that time was that there was a very strong graphic collection, by the three major Mexican muralists. I took prints and got a grant to frame them and then get them ready for travel to various California communities. So for example, an art festival in the Mission, I will take out twenty-five works by Mexican masters, and hang them on the streets. Well, the olives were the

mural olives. It was taking a chance to take major works to the streets, but that work was for the people, basically. It was about the revolution, and about things that were important to them. So certainly, education was probably the most important part.

Rigelhaupt: Would it also be fair to say that your role in the M.I.X. program was also about educating trustees and directors about art that otherwise, they were not focusing on?

02-00:20:17

Castellón: Well, absolutely. I mean, maybe you can say informational, [chuckles] if you don't want to say that you educate them. But at least, let this side of the world know that there were other concepts, other ideas that they might not be aware of. We made it work both ways. I mean, the people who thought it was too political weren't too impressed. Then there were others, I'm sure, that they learned something from what they saw, *if* they saw. Because maybe they didn't come to see what I did. I didn't know them all, I never got to meet them all, but I knew a few of them. I had conversations with some of them. But certainly, that was one aspect. Unrequested by them, but there it was. Yes, it's a two-way road.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any members of the board of directors that you had a particularly good working relationship with, or were supportive of your work?

02-00:21:39

Castellón: No, it was never any demonstration of—I mean, the fact that the program existed and I was there full-time as a regular curator shows support, yes. With some of them, I had a personal friendship. I remember going to homes of some of them. I was invited to some dinners or parties or something. And because they were always changing, you know—But there were some people who were more friendly and supportive and personalized the situation. I could say "friends." I remember this gallerist's son. Now, what's the name of the gallery?

But in general, I can't say that I had the same response from everyone. Not until the end, when I got the information that there was not enough money to maintain my activities. I'm sure it's part of their decision as a group, you know? It was not just the director. So it's difficult to say how much influence they might have had. Of course, they did something interesting. They let the chief curator and me go at the same time. I don't know whether that was planned to soften my demise. Then they brought this fellow from Oakland that I mentioned before to replace her. They did not replace me. They said that they will continue to work—I mean, the excuse, also, was that they wanted to move up the junior curator position. That was what I understood.

Many of the people in the community were upset about my being let go. I talked to them and I said I didn't want any demonstrations or anything,

because it wasn't my way of doing things. Instead, I called for a meeting with all the directors of all the museums, because it was happening too, in all the museums. What were they going to do about the regional? So we did have a meeting at the Art Institute, where we invited directors of the Berkeley Museum, the de Young, the Legion, here. We had a discussion about it. Henry, at the time said, "Well, you know, I'm not changing anything. We'll continue." Which, in the end, was not true. They did not continue anything. It was stopped. Nothing has happened in there since. So when people see me, they say, "Well, you know, when are you coming back?" At that time, that meeting took place at the Art Institute. And we got really serious. There was confrontation with the [directors]. I thought that that was more productive or more logical than just making a big fuss over it. Unfortunately, it did stop.

02-00:26:05

I think that a lot of good came out of it. In fact, I get calls, even in Costa Rica. People who are doing research and writing this or that, they have questions and want to know what happened. I get calls from students who have seen such-and-such catalogue, and they want—I mean, I even got email from England once, about an artist that I had introduced. I think it was certainly a very important period. And the museum, as far as another audience, it really—Because the attendance went up quite a bit. I don't know, why would you stop a program like that, that is successful, instead of saying, "We don't have any money." So that means that the will was not there to continue. Something that I can't tell you; I don't know exactly.

I heard rumors that some trustees were against the political activity. I mean, the political theme. It was not to their liking. But there's no way to know exactly what happened. I was told that Hopkins, weeks before he told me about the demise, that he had praised me to heaven, in an open meeting. The museum and the art schools association were meeting, and he spoke highly of me and my program and what I was doing at the museum. But a couple of weeks later, he dumped me. [chuckles] So at the end, I told him that I would be interested in support from him for me to get a—Because what I was going towards was to have an institute of contemporary art, which would be totally open, and continue my program somewhere else. And so I asked him personally. I said, "Well, I would like you to write letters to the Haas people, because I knew they had empty spaces at the Embarcadero Center that sometimes they would give to the de Young museum or some art galleries. I said, "I wonder if you'll support me." But later, I found out that he thought I would have become competition to the museum. So there was no support from him, from the director. In the press, some critics supported me. They said that I should be given the opportunity to maintain the role that I had.

I tried, but it did not succeed. I did not succeed. I needed more support. And then I went on my own, of course. I opened a couple of galleries. I opened an alternative space in North Beach. I had my own gallery on Sutter Street. So I continued, but at my level and expense, you know? On a smaller scale. But I

always had the press support. They were all supportive of me, wonderful. I'm sure that it affected many people in the process. Certainly, for me it was an incredible adventure, because I really—You know, it changed my life. And what I said about coming to San Francisco, I didn't know I was going to end up working at this place that I liked so much,. In fact, I carry with me a membership card that came to me two years later, two years after I'd been gone. And I remember that I said, "This is strange," you know, two years later, they send me this. It was a lifetime membership card. At the time, I was organizing an exhibition, a group show in one of my galleries, which was a—What is it called, a house that sells works?

Rigelhaupt: Auction?

02-00:31:19

Castellón: An auction, yes. So I auctioned the card. I mean, I'm always interested in an option, like, why don't I auction that card. And somebody bought it. I think it was about $37.50 or something. [laughs] Just a joke, you know? I said, "It's been two years, and now they send me?" So this guy said that one day he went to the museum, and there was somebody there who knew me, says, "You're not him." I don't know if he still has it, but then they sent me another one.

Rigelhaupt: Some of the programs you did with M.I.X., the use of multimedia, music and visual art, combining them, and doing them in community settings, was that the first time that had been done at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art?

02-00:32:21

Castellón: Definitely. Yes, absolutely. In fact, as I say, I don't know other cities, but I know the Whitney had a Downtown branch at one time. I don't know if they still do or not. But I think so. Remember, this was the sixties, seventies, so it was quite early. My graffiti show had a lot to do with community activity. In fact, I researched that a lot. The only thing I didn't include was the New York trains, because that makes a whole show for itself. I saw a recent book that was about New York graffiti. It was so big. In fact, I saw a show in Paris, a photographic documentation of New York graffiti. I tried to get that exhibit to give it a whole room just to it, but I could not. But I did a lot of research in Chicago and Los Angeles, and I had this major, major project dealing with it. Of course, I have allegiance to the community. I mean, that's where I started. The major benefit was for the artists that had been denied in the past. I think that that was the most important part. But in general, it was good for everyone. I think they got their money's worth. The San Francisco Foundation has always been very supportive. I don't know if it still exists or not, but certainly, it has been a good source.

Rigelhaupt: Do you want to talk for a minute about some of the specific exhibitions you put together for M.I.X.? The first one, exhibition number one, was portraits.

02-00:34:40
Castellón: That was not mine. That was my colleague, that was his show. I started with the Asian community.

Rigelhaupt: "Roots II: The Asian Community."

02-00:34:52
Castellón: Yes. Because he did the Mexican community and the portraits. My first one was the Asian community.

Rigelhaupt: So what do you remember about putting that exhibit together?

02-00:35:09
Castellón: Well, as I said, my experience at the time was that I knew people in the other communities, from being an artist, basically. I always kept informed. I mean, I would go to Hunters Point or to Chinatown and whatever. I always kept a mental notebook of things that I'd seen. One of the advantages I had is that I had information in my head of what was needed for these kind of programs. So when I started this, I had a good list of people that I already, for my own interest, have kept track of. When I did the Asian community [show], I knew a lot of people who were doing good work. So it was not difficult to assemble it and put it together. But as you see, I kept away from specific shows like that, by community. I did thematic shows. I did a third world photography show, which was very interesting, because the photographers were ahead of the others because the subject matter was so strong.

So I did not do any more community—I don't think I did a Black community show. I think the "Roots II" was the Chinese or the Asian. But I kept working with all of them. There was a group in Japantown that I commissioned to do murals, which they kept in the community for many years. Eventually, I got them to Santa Cruz, because I kept track of what happened to things. I donated them to a school somewhere. The children's stuff on cement block, they were given to Sonoma State University. I donated that to that university, and they have them as a wall piece. So all the shows obviously had a reason for being. And with M.I.X. stuff, then it was open to all cultures. You know, ruling and [laughs] secondary cultures. And that's ideal.

I always remember Albright's comment. All artists are third world artists. Or "fourth world," he called them.

Rigelhaupt: It sounds as though the transition then to being a curator was relatively smooth. This could just be semantics, but you went from being director of M.I.X. to being a curator for the museum. But the types of shows you were doing were very similar. Was that your experience?

02-00:39:05
Castellón: Well, when I got to the museum, I already had done this for that year, and before that. As I said, I had curated shows in various places. So I never

changed my attitude. I had a point of view, I had a reason, and I had the resources. So it was not difficult for me. I mean, I was doing it in another, larger environment. I was being *paid* for the first time, [chuckles] which was quite an interesting aspect. I was a professional, working now with a theme that I had some knowledge about, and I knew the resources, where they were. It was a question of putting them together. But it was not difficult, really. I mean, people ask me, "Well, you know, what university, where did you get your degree?" And I say, "I have no degrees." It was work learning on the job; it was in the field because I was interested. I'm not a historian, but I know a lot about the history of art, because I make a point to learn on my own. You know, I kept abreast of what was happening. My [going] to the galleries and museums is absolutely important in my development, in acquiring knowledge and training my eye and so on. That was the way I studied. So I mean, just as a rule, curators have to have a high education. Not that there is a university or school that teaches how to be a curator, but you need the historical input. I did that on my own. Then oddly enough, when I got to the University of California, I was invited by the extension to teach classes in gallery administration and curatorial work, for students. In fact, I did it because I thought it was missing. There wasn't anyplace where you'd go and take that course. So I did it at Santa Cruz, and I did it here, at the extension, too, by invitation.

Rigelhaupt: What were some of the most memorable exhibitions you put together while you were a curator at the museum?

02-00:41:56

Castellón: At the museum? Well, I knew the third world one was important. Let's say to make a point and say, "Look, this is what it is. Here it is. There has been work done all these years. This is what we do." To me, it really was the most important one, because we made a point. We said, "Look, the system has been unfair to us. Maybe we could go further, if we had been given the attention before, but this is how far we are, on our own, basically." And so we made a point. I think that was the most important project. All the rest were details of that, you know, just emphasizing, deeply looking at other—But I would say that it was one concept that had many ramifications.

So when I see the list of exhibits that I did, I think about thirty-eight or so—It's interesting that you mentioned that you have done research on my shows, because what happened in Santa Cruz, the reason I got invited to Santa Cruz is because the young man that was the director of that gallery—who was a student, and after he graduated, he was named director of the gallery—he apparently had researched my career at the museum. He had been influenced, apparently, by my shows. He's the one who asked this artist to call me, to see if I was interested in taking over, when he was to leave to another museum. When I got there, I was astounded. In the files, there was one entire half a file drawer with all my catalogues. Everything that I had done was there. When he left, he asked this artist to call me and ask me if I was interested. So it's

interesting that, OK, if I change one mind, then what I did was absolutely important. Because he, and those who follow me—For example, I was in Chicago in '99, and I was invited as an artist in residence there, from Costa Rica. I gave a lecture, and I was working with the students. One night I gave a talk. After I finished, this young Mexican girl stood up and she said, "Well, I want to thank you. Because I'm here," she says, "Because of what you guys did at that time." And that's what is important, what happened years ahead, and how many things—I remember using a metaphor that what we did was to open doors, or serve as a bridge. I mean, to create a bridge of communication and so on. Certainly, you see more articles in the art magazines with bylines of Spanish or other people, you know, from communities. So that was very important. This example of this young man in Santa Cruz was interesting, because somehow, I affected him with what I was doing; and he was kind enough to say, "Well, hey, let's talk to this guy."

02-00:46:21

I just happened to need a job at the time, because I closed my gallery like, the day before they called me. It's like the letter that was taken by the wind. I closed the gallery, and I had $500 in the bank, I remember. The guy said, "Well, you want a job?" I said, "Well, you know, I closed my gallery yesterday, so send me the papers." Then another magical thing was that as an artist, I never considered myself as being part of a mainstream. I had the conflict of interest of not being able to show in commercial galleries because of my museum connection. There is a problem there of conflict [of interest]. But I always would have my own shows of my own work. Several critics were always very fair with me. Albright was good, Al Frankenstein, Charles Shere. All these people always gave me time. So as an artist, I had something to—I mean, there was response to what I was doing. That also always helps an artist.

So the day I had the appointment at Santa Cruz to apply for this position, I had a show. After I left the museum, I was invited by Hank Baum Gallery, which is a gallery down in the Fillmore area. I had a show there of work that had to do a little bit with this idea of using mud and dirt. I've been working ever since with these materials. Albright came, and I went down to a gallery downstairs, and the owner of the other gallery said, "Well, Albright came by yesterday, and was raving about your show." So I looked at the paper the following couple of days, and sure enough, he wrote a wonderful article for me, that started with something to the effect that I was the exception to that old expression that you cannot [celebrate] the mass and ring the bells at the same time. Meaning that I was a curator as well as an artist, and that I was fairly good at both. So he started talking about what a conscientious curator I'd been all these years and blah-blah-blah. All favorable comments about my curatorial part. Then the rest of the article was about my development as an artist. The next day, that I come to the interview, I notice that all the seven people who interviewed me had a copy of this article. I mean, talk about timing. Sure enough, I got the job. And so these magical things did happen.

It's like I couldn't get away from this. I mean, rejecting the job, getting somebody else to do it, having to come back, having to return. It was almost like I was being pushed into something that I really didn't [laughs] feel that I was the person, you know? But somehow, it worked that way. When you think back, you say, "Oh shucks"! It's interesting, at least, these coincidences and things of nature and all that. So here I am, talking to you about something that was part of my natural life. I had to, well, do the best I could, under the circumstances. I'm thankful that I could do something to contribute in a small manner.

Rigelhaupt: What were some of your most important or exciting acquisitions, and your collecting strategy, while you were curating?

02-00:51:09

Castellón: Acquisitions for the museum? Well, as I told you, that part was the most difficult to deal with, because of the nature of the place where it was. At the Galería, obviously, there was no such thing as a collection. In fact, when I wrote my proposal for a contemporary museum or a contemporary institute, I wanted to run it as—What's the name? In Germany, they have a name for an institute that does not collect. A *Kunsthalle*. So they are museums that only present work, present exhibitions. Because there are many difficulties to [owning a collection]. You need space, you need maintenance, you need finances. So only a large institution, a museum can do it. It was something that was not in my expertise, to a certain extent, because we never did it.

So all the works that I did get into the collection are very important, I think; everything that I was able to convince the system that they were worthy of their collections. I understood that I couldn't say, "Well, I have a hundred works here for you to—" Because as I said, many of the artists were young, they were not proven yet. I'm sure that now many of them have works in other collections, not just this museum. But at the time, it was like a secondary part of my responsibilities. I mean, I did it in the best of the circumstances as I could, but it was not a priority. At Santa Cruz, I did something that was interesting. One artist, a major California artist—well, he was not from California, but he lived there his professional life. His name was Charles Farr. A realist painter. In later years, I gave him a show in Santa Cruz, at the university. He had been discussing with the Oakland Museum about leaving his estate to them. Apparently, they weren't too responsive to him, although he had many shows there and he was in the collection. So I asked him if he might be interested in leaving it to Santa Cruz. And he said, "Well, yes." You know? And so he donated his entire estate, in a financial arrangement to the university. Hopefully, the new gallery that they are planning on building will receive the benefit of that. So in a way, that was important, to a certain extent, because he didn't have family here. A brother or a cousin here, I think, who had no interest. So I was able to get that; they did get the estate and all. His work will be preserved and taken care of in that collection. But again, I was more interested in the actual living [chuckles] things.

[Begin Audio File 3 03-19-2007.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: If I could ask you, how would you characterize the role of SFMOMA in the Bay Area's art community?

03-00:00:19

Castellón: Well, you have to remember that the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is the second oldest [modern art] museum in the country, after the MoMA in New York. There's no comparison, of course; that one is so much more active, so superior a place, and it's the biggest collection in the world of modern art. And this museum was a private institution. I think it still is. I'm not sure, but I think it's still private. It has a great deal of prestige.

And the art world is a world in itself. You could say that it's a place for the people who invented it. It's their Garden of Eden. It's their playground, I guess you could say. [chuckles] And the institution only deals with what they consider the best American art history and so on. I think there was a connection to the Art Institute at the beginning. I mean, the museum and the Art Institute were closely—So again, that question of education comes into being. When they started, the first generation of abstract expressionism was important. And the first director—What was her name?

Rigelhaupt: Grace Morley.

03-00:02:20

Castellón: Mrs. Grace Morley, right. She was like Alfred Barr in New York. They were both interested in Mexican art of the time. So there's a parallel there. I think that the museum, it's the only time that it was interested in other than American or European-derived art, at that time, where there was interest in that other culture. There was a very large collection. They collected quite a bit of that work. But that and M.I.X. were the only two times that an outside type of work came in to be an important part of the institution.

I hear now that it's almost impossible for any local artist to get in there. Like, the museum is totally an isolated something; that artists don't go to the museum, because it has become very elitist. That's what I hear about it now. The times that I was here, I think from the fifties to the eighties, at least myself, I was there all the time, and my colleagues were not. I was more interested than they were in the activities. So I think that the museum has taken a much harder road now, where what they show is strictly what is important within the context of the mainstream culture. And there is no venue, apparently, for anything local there. I'm sure with exceptions. But we only see major East Coast masters and so on. This is what I hear from friends, that they don't bother to go anymore. I mean, the openings at Van Ness and McAllister were fairly well attended by artists from the local scene. Minorities, when I was there, there was some attendance. But I think that the museum has gone back to being a very specialized institution for strictly American mainstream.

Rigelhaupt: So do you see the museum now, compared to when you were working, say in the seventies, is more of a national and international institution than being a part of the local art community?

03-00:05:40

Castellón: Well, I would say that it's always been that, national and international. And that's their call; this is why they are there, to maintain the history of American art and the international connection. At that time, there was this interest, in which I participated; and now that does not exist. I knew there was a young man who was in the education department. I met him last year; he was still there. He said that he was just part of the education department, but he had no input at all in anything that had to do with the content of exhibitions. That is something of the past. That's something that occurred at one time.

The director [Neal Benezra] wrote me about this interview. I don't know how much he knows about me, or whether he's going to listen to this or not. I mean, that letter from him might have been just a formal thing, because the university, I guess, has more of the interest, more than he does. So I don't know if they know, before this happened, that such a program existed and that I existed, because I don't know how many people really know what I did there. When I left, as I told you, I was afraid that—The reason I kept the photographs was because I was afraid they would be thrown away or destroyed. Because I was the one that was interested. After I left, various directors have gone through, and curators and so on. I'm sure that it didn't matter to them, that history, to know if it's there or not. They come from other institutions that have the same attitude, so they just maintain that status. Would it make any difference? I think it already did, in the examples that I gave you. Maybe it's something, a temporary thing that will have no further effect.

Rigelhaupt: What kind of role did you have in the large shows, like the biennials, world print exhibits, when you were curating?

03-00:08:22

Castellón: Well, there were the world print shows—I think it was about three times they did it. I was involved in one of them, because I was asked to submit the name of a Latin American juror for one of them, which I did. A very important historian and critic came, as part of that. The museum curators had nothing to do with it, as far as content. It was a separate thing. One connection I had is that I timed one show, a graphic show, at the same time. It was local Bay Area printmaking, which was well taken at the time. I remember Tom Albright saying that you didn't have to go all over the world to find interesting work, referring to my small show at the time. So there were no biennials at the time, really.

In fact, I tried to start the first San Francisco biennial. I proposed to the museum that I get time off to document the major biennials—São Paulo,

Venice, Documenta—so that we could maybe start one. I was interested in a San Francisco invitational, I called it. I applied to the NEA. The museum granted me permission to do it and to go, with my salary paid. I applied to the NEA, but they turned me down. So I could not do it. When I got to Santa Cruz, I did an invitational. I did four of them. It was the University of California, Santa Cruz, Invitational. They were one-person shows. They were exhibitions that would have a major catalogue and a traveling show. But that was stopped also, after I left. My assistant, whom I recommended to take over, left, and then that stopped. The idea that I had for my invitational at the museum was not to do a major multi-countries [show], but to do, every two years, a review of areas—let's say London, San Francisco, Tokyo, New York—in one place, here, to confront two cities. That's what I wanted to do. That was also for managing; it's easier than doing fifty countries, right? I knew that I wasn't going to have the major financial support. So my idea was to do major cities together, to sort of compare what was happening in New York with Tokyo, London, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Rome. That was my idea. But I couldn't do it. I was turned down.

Rigelhaupt: When you say you were raising money for some of the exhibits, could you explain how that worked? I mean, would you have to apply for grants, and then you got some funding from the museum? There was some budget from them? Or how did that work?

03-00:13:08

Castellón: I had a basic budget from the museum for every show that I had in the schedule. You get so much, so much, so much. But it's not enough. If I wanted to do a major catalogue, it was not enough. So I needed to go out and seek funds from the California Arts Council, from the NEA, from private institutions. I had to do that, go out myself and get funds. I was successful most of the time. It made it possible to have the catalogues that I produced, because the budget that I got at the museum was never enough, that's for sure. It also depended on the exhibition, because the museum will get monies from Phillip Morris to do Rauschenberg or so. I go to the institutions more than the commercial, industrial part. But it was something that you had to do if you wanted to do a more comprehensive project. I did at Santa Cruz also, the same. I had to go out to the NEA to get financing for some of the exhibits.

Rigelhaupt: Well, speaking of exhibits, do you think it would be worthwhile to just talk about some of the specific ones?

03-00:14:54

Castellón: Sure.

Rigelhaupt: The museum staff helped me by pulling some of the files. So I don't think I have a list of all of the ones you curated, maybe just some highlights. You mentioned the José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, Siqueiros; the three that you put together. Would you talk a little bit more about that?

03-00:15:21

Castellón: Well, that was at the time that I was asked to look over the collection, and to recommend as to what to keep and what to deaccess. Then I took the opportunity to feature a show from the collection. That was basically it. I did not go outside to gather work, I just used what we had, and I had that show take place. As I said, there was quite a bit of work. So you were able to do a fairly good show. Drawings and prints, as well as paintings.

Rigelhaupt: Well, the one before that, Carlos Gutiérrez Solana and Oliver Jackson.

03-00:16:14

Castellón: This was work by a Cuban American, Solana. They were doing interesting work at the time here. Oliver Jackson was one of the best abstract expressionists in the area. And major works; you know, very large works. That was just part of, again, my investigating of the best people in the area. They were different in attitude. They had their own ways. In fact, we did get a wonderful response to Jackson from the press. He made a big impression. He went on to become quite important in American contemporary art. He was very aggressive. I mean, his work is just very powerful. He's a very intelligent man, and he was a professor at Sacramento State. He had one of the best responses to any artist that I showed here. I used to do two-person shows. He would have been perfect for a one-person show, so I had ideas that were never able to—In fact, I was sad not to have done a one-person show for a Filipino artist that I had on my schedule for the following years, before I left. Leo Valledor, who was a Filipino colorist, hard-edge painter, who had wonderful stuff. I didn't have time for him. He was the only person that I did not do that I was sorry I couldn't do a show for, because he was good, very important. Time caught up with me. But all the shows, again, were timed so that every year I would have a good resource of different tendencies and directions, and to show the variety of activity and what was going on in the area.

Rigelhaupt: And then you had the "People's Mural" show, which my notes say were part of the museum bicentennial program, and was commissioned.

03-00:19:20

Castellón: Right. Well, this was done at the time they were celebrating the United States two hundredth anniversary, or something. You know, it had to do with that, more than the art biennial. I did two shows. That one, and then I did a smaller show about—I called it "Americana." Which was works that related physically to the symbols of American culture—the flag, parking lots, many things. It was a show that had some sense of humor. I remember one critic saying, "I don't know why this didn't happen before." Because it had to do with things American, symbols of American culture, low and high culture. It was a small show, but it was fun to do. So for that event of the two hundred years, or five hundred years, I don't remember what it was, I did those two shows.

Rigelhaupt: And then a show with Cleveland Bellow, Marva Cremer and Dewey Crumpler.

03-00:20:45

Castellón: I did a series of thematic shows. In this case, they were similar technically. They were using very simple materials, colored pencils. So I would do small group shows like that. I did another one where it was watercolors. And this one was these three. The three of them were black, and thematically, they were not related. Cremer did portraits of friends and relatives and other portraits. And what's his name? Can you give me the names again?

Rigelhaupt: Oh, Cleveland Bellow.

03-00:21:55

Castellón: Cleveland did politically oriented works, with pencils, too, and Crumpler did something to do with musicians. So they were cultural to them. Cremer was very wonderful. I mean, her rendering was quite beautiful. She used to play tricks with the eye, with the figure. So I used to do these very small group shows that had something that joined them; there was some connection to them. And in this case, technically, they used similar materials.

Rigelhaupt: The show with Julius Hemphill. It was a performance piece. My notes say that it was jazz, collage, the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

03-00:22:58

Castellón: Right, right, a young saxophonist. I don't know whether he ever went on to greater things. He was a friend of Oliver Jackson. In fact, they had an accident when he was here. He was driving with Jackson, and they had an accident. And he went through the window, and his face was awfully hurt. It was really a serious, serious accident he had, when he came for this concert. But the show was wonderful. Again, culturally, this is important stuff for people. He was at the beginning or middle of his career as a saxophonist.

Rigelhaupt: Were other curators doing multimedia shows like that?

03-00:23:55

Castellón: No. No, just me. I was in charge of that.

Rigelhaupt: Could you say a little bit more about the "Aesthetics of Graffiti"?

03-00:24:06

Castellón: Well, basically, nobody was giving any thought to that theme at that time. Graffiti was totally low [culture], nothing to do with art, you know. I wanted to change that attitude, because I knew that certainly, some people had been influenced by this stuff in the streets, and it can be very exciting. My idea was to demonstrate this, that some of these artists who claim not to have anything to do with it, obviously they did, because it was so similar, it was so close to them, it had to have some information. So I decided to do a comparative thing of having street stuff right next to the studio stuff. So my intention was not to

diminish the value of the artistic work, but to give credit to the real stuff, to the street material. So that's why I went to such extremes of getting as much stuff from the sources, to put it on the wall. The catalogue was quite extensive. Everything was illustrated. There is an interesting essay by a former graffitist who became a writer. My intention was just to really do a documentation on both aspects. I mean, I had a Rauschenberg piece from the collection, where he has all kinds of inks and stuff going on. They look like walls to me. And then Cy Twombly, who does all the squiggly stuff. It all looks—definitely has to have had an impact on him. So there was one artist who was upset about it, a famous New Yorker, who wrote a letter accusing me of trying to diminish the value of his work by saying that he was doing graffiti work. He did not participate in the show. And Albright panned the show. Frankenstein praised it. I got into things like that.

I remember critics fighting over my shows; you know, correcting one another. One time Frankenstein said something about a show I did of what I call "fetishists." I had written something where he quoted me, but he cut the quote mid-way, so the whole meaning didn't get through. So Arthur Bloomfield, who worked for the other paper, reviewed the show, and responded to him. You know, this kind of thing. And Albright was very upset with it. It was one of the worst reviews he gave me. He always was very fair. But both were from the *Chronicle*, one thought it was great, the other one did not. Charles Shere, from the *Oakland Tribune*, liked it very much. But again, talk about education and changing attitudes. I mean, that was much in the back of my mind when I organized anything. It wasn't just doing it, I had reasons for choosing themes.

Rigelhaupt: Well, and it seems like in the late seventies, the idea of graffiti was still being defined. So I wonder if you could talk about—

03-00:28:18

Castellón: Well, I think in the eighties, the whole thing broke open. Then it became such a big standard of the art world, especially in New York. I'm surprised that it did not get more attention earlier. But when it did, it certainly added a lot to the dialogue of the American mainstream. The mainstream took advantage of it, too, you know. Basquiat, who did it in the streets, he was used, to a certain extent. His work, it's pretty high there in the ranks of American art history. I think sometimes his work, for me, can be uneven. Or Keith Haring, whose work I don't really like, in the sense of having—I mean, it was fun, it was kind of cute stuff. But obviously, the system took it with gusto. Once they did accept it, it really went bananas with it. And it's great. I mean, I was happy that it was happening. When I touched it, nobody was dealing with it. Then of course, with the Mexican movement of the murals, the awareness became more open. But a mural is not graffiti. It is, to a certain extent, but it's formal, formalized. But those shows, again, I wasn't trying to bring it up or make a thing out of it. I was really studying almost a natural thing, something that we have had since the beginning of time, right here on the walls. Some people call me about that show. I get some commentaries or questions. Then a couple

of other books have been written, and they quote me, out of my text. So it has had, sometime after it happened—

Rigelhaupt: Was there a similar idea with "The Floating Museum"?

03-00:31:20
Castellón: Well, does it still exist? Is she still doing it?

Rigelhaupt: No, I'm referring to one that was done in 1978.

03-00:31:29
Castellón: "The Floating Museum" was an idea of a woman artist.

Rigelhaupt: But you participated in it.

03-00:31:36
Castellón: No, what I did is, that show that I told you [about] of conceptual art, I invited all these people to participate in this project. She had this museum, a museum without walls, or a floating museum. She was part of the project, in general. She was one fragment of that project. Just as the Museum of Conceptual Art was a part of the thing by Tom Marioni, to do his beer drinking idea in the museum. So it was the Conceptual Museum *in* the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. So we had the refrigerator with the beer, and a table, and the bottles on the wall. So I was really just putting their stuff inside the institution as a documentation of an era. And "The Floating Museum" was also—They did a catalogue that was called *The Passport* or something, which had all the activities listed. So it was the passport to get into all those projects.

Rigelhaupt: What about the show with Jo Hanson, "Public Disclosure: Secrets from the Street"?

03-00:33:00
Castellón: That, I didn't do myself. I think it was John Humphrey. I remember it, yes. It was another curator, and I think it was John. That was about a cemetery, something to do with a cemetery. What does it say? Read it again.

Rigelhaupt: I can't remember if I copied it or if I have the notes correctly. I didn't note too much about it, but it was "Secrets from the Street."

03-00:33:35
Castellón: The thing is that she did a series of the dirt in the streets. So she will collect the garbage or whatever was in front of her house, and she made a project out of that. But it was not my project, it was another curator. I worked with her. She was in the graffiti show herself. I had photos of hers there. But that particular one was not initiated by me.

Rigelhaupt: If we move away from some of your exhibits, how would you discuss the accession of a large group of paintings and drawings by Latin American artists that happened in 1981?

03-00:34:23

Castellón: Well, that's when I left. I mean, they probably sold more of the stuff that I had preserved or reserved. I remember the exact date I did that project because I left in '81. Maybe they sold more stuff that I recommended. That's the only thing I can think of that, because I did talk to the people from the auction house that came. Somebody questioned one painter from Peru, I think it is, whose work I still don't respond to. I recommended that he be [decessioned]. And the artist apparently is being revived. Somebody asked me, how would I allow that work by him to go? But in my opinion, it was work that, according to my experience or way of thinking, was an artist that was never that important, really. But at the time it was bought—Again, in hindsight, you buy something and you say, twenty years later, "Maybe I made a mistake." Somebody questioned me the other day, recently, about why I let that painting go. But '81 sounds like too late. So it sounds like they did sell more stuff, the new curator or the director, I don't know, whoever made the decision that it was not important to them.

Rigelhaupt: What about the "Space, Time, Sound"? Did you work with Suzanne Foley on that?

03-00:36:33

Castellón: Yeah. That's the one I told you that I originated getting the grant and getting the idea. Suzanne wrote the text of that part of the catalogue, because there were various parts to it, see? There was that, which was the historical document work of those twenty years; and then all the live activity, I did that part. So it was two segments to it. And that's the title of the catalogue, so we used that for the whole project, because it was some of the same people. Something that had to be done, I think, at the time, because most of the artists were mature, and the best work had been done. They had moved on, you know? So I think the timing was correct.

Rigelhaupt: About what year was it, again?

03-00:37:41

Castellón: Well, 1978. I lost my copy of the catalogue. I recently had to pay $125 for a copy. Well, they gave it to me for $75, because I got a discount. It is on the net, but it's very expensive. I only had one copy, and somebody must have stolen it, and I had to buy one a year ago. Because it's out of print, and there're no copies of it. It's a very good document, too. In fact, it was done on very inexpensive paper, like almost newsprint. But it gives this touch to it that is nice.

Rigelhaupt: What if we jump backwards, way backwards a little bit, to your childhood? If you would talk a little bit about growing up and some experiences in childhood, maybe related to art.

03-00:38:52

Castellón: Should I read you my approved biography? I have it here. Well, this is my first drawing. Wait, wait, let me show you something first. That's my first drawing, right there. The next one up. No, that one. The yellow one, yes. This is a six-year-old, or five. I can't tell. It's the only thing I have. I used to do a lot on books and stuff. See the one, the dark one to the right? No, the lower one, next one down. That one. If you compare the two, they're the same image, but done at different times and different techniques. One is an adult version, and the other one is the original.

I'm having a catalogue made of my work. This hasn't come out yet, but it's ready to go to print. This is a dummy. But that drawing is here, I'll show you. As I said before, all my life, since I can consciously remember, I did things on the wall and on papers. I had albums and stuff that I used to keep, with all my drawings of one kind or another. I don't remember not doing this, this idea of working on visual things. See, this is litho, and this is when I was thirty-five or so, I did this. This is just a copy of it. So the person who wrote the book, she pinpoints several aspects. So I use many names and many personas in my work. So they call me—well, it is in English, too—the mystery guy, the suicidal guy, the boxer, the lover. It's kind of interesting how she's doing it. So what I do now is exactly what I was doing then, because I don't plan anything. I just go to it and do it. It's just almost automatic now.

This photography was made for this book to select what we used in the book. So I might do something with this, because none of this work is reproduced. maybe I'm going to do like a catalogue raisonné, with this format, where you just put everything in and number them or something. So going back as far as I remember, there is not a moment where I haven't been doing something. I don't know when I had time to do all that, because I always worked. I was never a professional artist; didn't consider myself professional, although I did sell and showed. But it's been a game really, a wonderful game, a pleasure to do things that you can say they're your own. And I did write this text. I call it the authorized biography. Which is full of lies; I mean, it's not true, what I say. But neither is the book. See, the title, it says, *The True Story of a Fictional Character, or a Fictional Story of a Real Person*. So the woman who wrote it mixed my lies with the reality she knows about me, and we wrote a book that is fictional, really, based on the things I've done. It explains a little bit many things that have to do with my reasons behind—I don't have any, really. I mean, anything I do is something that is wonderful to me to see it, to realize that I did it. I don't know why or how. It's just like I have it as a matter of nature. I think most people in my family did things artistic. My mother is also a very good artist. In fact, I included her work in the book.

Rigelhaupt: Do you talk about your family in the book?

03-00:44:52

Castellón: My mother, because of her interest in the subject. She's almost a colleague, because she did works. I have exhibited, I have curated works of hers into shows. But most everyone in my family did something manual. Latin Americans are very involved with handwork, material. I guess all cultures, everybody does something, weaving or knitting or whatever. There is not a traditional art system, but now of course, every country has something to do with contemporary art, because now it's easier to. I remember that every member of my family did something. In fact, I was the one that refused to do the homework at school, because I said I was incapable. So my uncles used to do my homework. I told them that I couldn't do anything if somebody asked me to do it. It had to be whatever *I* wanted to do. That's how I've maintained independence all my life. And if you commission me to do it, I can't. I don't know how.

Rigelhaupt: Well, maybe instead of skipping backwards, since you write about it and it's documented—we don't have to put it on tape—so you leave the museum in 1981. And so your work after SFMOMA, could you—I know you discussed a little bit owning your own galleries and working at Santa Cruz; I just want to try and put the years in place.

03-00:46:54

Castellón: Right. Well, I left the museum, opened my own gallery. I am also an editor. I have a magazine, a literary magazine that I started in '79, around the time of the graffiti show. Of course, I did poetry readings at the museum. So I used to get a lot of manuscripts from people wanting to read. It was so much that I decided that I needed another means to use it. So I started a magazine, which is called *Ashes*/*Cenizas*, in Spanish. Ever since, I have been publishing that magazine, to the present. I've got forty-two issues. I kept that material. I know many poets all over the world. My country, Costa Rica, many places. One tells another and another, and so it's like a chain. So I maintain that, to the present. When I left the museum, I took that, too, that material. I have been using it since. I had the two spaces, and then went to Santa Cruz, where I continued doing what I started at the museum. I mean, I just passed my program to my galleries, and then to Santa Cruz. I did more exhibitions at Santa Cruz than at the museum, because I had it all. Everything I did was originated by me—with some exceptions. So I think I did around sixty projects at Santa Cruz, something like that. Never stopped. And then I went to Costa Rica. At some point, an art critic synthesized my career by saying, "He's self-taught, has no curriculum; came to San Francisco in 1956; showed sporadically; co-founded and directed Galería de la Raza; got married; curator of San Francisco MOMA; got divorced; director of the {inaudible} Gallery; resigned and went back in 1992 to Costa Rica to do nothing." And so in parenthesis, actually, I did something. In 1994, I was selected to become chief curator of the new Costa Rica Museum of Contemporary Art and Design. So when I got to Costa Rica, I accepted the position there at the museum, which was starting its role in the community. I was the chief curator there for about

five years. I have been doing curatorial work at other museums and independently, and have had a couple of galleries. Now I have a new one, just opened in January. So I'm still at it.

Rigelhaupt: And the galleries in Costa Rica, are they—What was the German word you used?

03-00:50:54

Castellón: *Kunsthalle*?

Rigelhaupt: Are they that same model?

03-00:50:58

Castellón: Well, they are more galleries than institutions, because they're small. They are my studios that I used to organize shows. They are not commercial places because selling is—I have no idea why or who will buy it. I mean, I do sell my work; I have many people who collect my work. But they are galleries that function like commercial galleries, but I don't sell anything. I don't emphasize that. I sponsor all these things. I always invest in the arts. I say I don't live from art, art lives from me. Because I spend my money on the arts, on the things that I do and organize. But I have been a member of a committee, a selection committee at another museum there, where I organize various exhibitions. I resigned recently, but I kept one, which is an annual of graphic art. I have done five so far. I feature drawing, prints, graphic work. Again, if I was at the museum, I would be doing these things at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. But the philosophy and the concept is the same. It's just the things that I consider that have to be done. I wrote a text recently, where I was saying that I no longer work for anybody. I don't work for institutions, I work to please myself. What pleases me is what I show. I don't work for any system or for any other idea than pleasing my aesthetic needs. So I did a show that was called, in English, "Curator's Choice." Total freedom. And Costa Rica, moving there has been a wonderful thing for me professionally. I have attained a lot of things that I would not have here. I've been invited to many wonderful projects in Europe and even in the U.S. Many good and well-known curators come there, Costa Rica. I have a chance to have them look at my work. I've been doing very well.

Interview #2: March 20, 2007
[Begin Audio File 4 03-20-2007.mp3]

04-00:00:05
Rigelhaupt: Ok, it's March 20th, 2007. I'm in San Francisco at the SoMA Arts Center, continuing to interview with Rolando Castellón. Let's go to, to begin, a really open question. What was your most memorable day at SFMOMA?

04-00:00:36
Castellón: [chuckles] Every day. Every day. It was a job with a purpose, a good purpose. So every day was an adventure and for me, a satisfying contribution. [recording stops, re-starts]

Rigelhaupt: So you were saying just before the interruption, that every day was the most memorable.

04-00:01:20
Castellón: Yeah, nothing stands out as saying, well, this is—I think that it was a serious undertaking. One of the things about not wanting to be in it at the beginning was the great responsibility that you had. You were going to be the target of a lot of things, a lot of people, I guess. I wasn't ready for that. I came here of my own choice, and I was—I don't know, I had certain doubts about when you come to a society like this. It's so big and so powerful, so educated. So I really didn't want to be in that position. As I said, I felt that this was serious business; you know, there are a lot of people involved. I was there in an important role, I thought. So I never thought of it as something funny. I took it very seriously. You asked me about what show was the most important show I did. Well, I thought that the one I mentioned, the third world painting and sculpture, was. But they were all important. That was the most important, in the sense that it was a massive kind of an undertaking. And again, we were trying to make a point about the importance of the program, through the show. But all the shows were important. So I generalize that, because the concept was the important part. It was up to me and the others and those who assisted us to do it, and to try to do the best job we could. So I never thought of saying, "Well, today, we got a big review." I mean, we had lots of reviews, and they were all big. [chuckles] So I think that that question or that idea never crossed my mind.

Rigelhaupt: Just a minute ago, you described yourself as a target. It sounds as though you felt that way when you began the position as M.I.X. director. And I'm wondering if you could explain what you mean by that.

04-00:04:22
Castellón: Well, remember that I also said that earlier, I had been approached by my colleagues in the community to—I have had shows. I came in '56, and from the sixties on, I began to show sporadically in some places. In my first show, I was accepted at the Oakland Museum; I had a piece also at something that was called "Art of all Faiths," which was one of my first juvenile successes. I

got an award in that, by a panel of museum directors and critics and so on. It was a competitive show. I did get a little bit of press. I remember that when I was saying that the galleries wouldn't even look at your work, this very famous gallery was on Union Street, near the gallery where I had had this award. And so I decided, "Well, I'm going to go in now and show them my award piece," and see if they would be interested. No, I didn't get through the door. The guys says, "Oh, we don't look at anything." I want to reemphasize my earlier experience, that it was a closed issue. In that sense, I was looked at as a Latino, not as a person. I was looked at as a minority, a suspect person, because the color of your skin tells on you. As a minority, you always felt that somebody was looking at you. You were a prospective danger to somebody, because people generalize. If you are this, they say, "Well, everybody's suspect." It even happens today. It happens in Costa Rica. So you always felt like people were looking at you. This all relates to what I said. Even more so, because here I was representing a community; I was also representing the mainstream. You know, I was in the middle of both. So a lot of people were looking at me. They were watching my performance, watching what I did and all that. You felt like you were the center of attention, and that's from both sides.

When I told my colleagues that I really didn't want to be involved, because I'm working, I do my own work, and I have no time to do this, it was also that I was keeping aloof. My personality is that; I'm an introvert. So that was part of my experience, even as a child. I was an only child. I was the youngest baby in the family, and all the adults were quite on in their lives. So I always had this feeling. There was discrimination in Costa Rica, when I was a kid in school, with my colleagues there. I mean, I supposedly looked like a Chinese person. In Latin American, everybody would call me *chino*, Chinese. They would make fun of me. So all my life, I have been like that; kind of somebody—I look different or something. Even now in Costa Rica, it happens. One day I went to the market, an open market, and this guy said, "Hey, *chinito*," he said, "come and buy lettuce." You know, "Five for a dollar," or whatever. Five for a hundred colones. I corrected him. I said, "I'm not Chinese, I'm Japanese." Because I [traveled] in Japan, and I do have sort of a feeling for Japanese food; I just now had my lunch; it was Japanese food. And I went to Japan. I was there a month and a half or so. People thought I was Japanese. They talked to me on the streets. People at my openings would come to me and talk to me in Japanese and so on.

04-00:08:58 So I've been correcting people since, and saying, "Oh, I'm Japanese, not Chinese." So the next week, at the marketplace, I went again, and this guy was with another friend. And the other guy said to me, "*Chinito*, *chinito*." And the guy said, "No, no, he's not *chinito*, he's *japonés*." So I mean, it's been part of my—I always sort of protected myself, you know? For the circumstances that I grew up, for many, many reasons. So when I would turn down my colleagues about joining the group, that had something to do with it. I wanted my own independent life. I've never really been part of a group. Except that I

play soccer and even in that, I was captain of the team, and so I had some leadership. But I really like being by myself. All of this were reasons for me to be difficult to convince. And so that's what I meant by it, you know, that I've always been receiving it for various, various reasons, various different circumstances, and this was one of them where I was even more difficult than others, because I was playing a role, a professional role. I had a lot of responsibility, obviously, to the field, as well as to the institution. So that will explain that situation. [recording stops, re-starts]

04-00:10:51
Castellón: So I think that will answer it.

Rigelhaupt: What accomplishment with the M.I.X. program are you most proud of?

04-00:11:07
Castellón: [chuckles] That we could finish it, that we could conclude it successfully. Because we did the three years that we were meant to have. It was a pilot program, so it could be successful or not; and we were. So I think that concluding the grant was certainly—Obviously, that I would remain at the museum afterward, in a normal capacity. I was just the third curator there. As I said, there was the chief curator, the photography curator, and myself. So I certainly feel good about that, because the experiment was successful. I guess I proved myself, that I was capable of doing it, and I remained at the institution for six more years.

Rigelhaupt: So besides the three curators, you—And who was the photography curator?

04-00:12:25
Castellón: John Humphrey.

Rigelhaupt: And Suzanne Foley was the chief curator.

04-00:12:28
Castellón: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: And then the director when you first came on was Nordland. Was there anyone else that had an influence on what was shown in the museum? Or was it just you and the curators and the director?

04-00:12:45
Castellón: No, obviously, the director has the power of decision. The exhibitions were done in a regular administration manner. You usually had three years in advance, programming. Any large institution like that works two, three years ahead. The decisions were made at meetings. There were regular curatorial meetings, and everybody submitted ideas to the director. Museums always work with other institutions, so there's always a possibility of this, that, or that show, and you make what will be the show that will interest the museum. That aspect was just the regular administration that takes place anywhere. There were curatorial assistants, for example, who maintained the paperwork. In

fact, the present chief curator [Senior Curator] at the Oakland Museum was the curatorial department assistant—her name is Karen Tsujimoto—who worked at the San Francisco Museum originally as an administrator for finance. Then she became assistant of the head of the curatorial department; and then she was the administrator for that department for many years. [Editor's Note: Tsujimoto started as Curatorial Assistant, then became Assistant Curator, then Associate Curator.] Then she did some freelance work. She did some work for me in Santa Cruz. She wrote some texts for some catalogues there. Then eventually, she went on to the Oakland Museum, where she is now head curator there. So those aspects, I had nothing to do with; it's just the working circumstances, the normal working circumstances. I mean, my input was just the shows that I thought would be important to do. There was no special anything. As I said before, my predecessor had to submit ideas to the chief curator before it was presented to the whole board. When I came in, I didn't have to do that. I had more acceptance from their side, as far as my abilities or my understanding.

After M.I.X. finished, I just joined the regular staff. Sometimes I would take shows that traveled from other countries or other areas, because they would emphasize my interest or my specialty, which had to do with outside work, let's say. I brought works from Spain, and I brought works from Canada. My last show, which was the story about the building of a dam in James Bay in Canada, that was a show that originated in Canada, through the sponsorship of the Goethe Institute. I brought works from Argentina. So the M.I.X. idea was the beginning of something else that just went to a higher level, I guess. Without M.I.X., that wouldn't have happened, you see, if M.I.X. hadn't existed. The problem that museums have is that the curators, the real curators, have no interest in those areas, or expertise. So that's why they don't do anything. And now, that is the case again. None of the curators have any interest in these activities, and so there is nothing there to fill in, that people of other cultures will be represented. Because they're still dealing with the mainstream. If it hadn't been for that trustee that instituted the M.I.X. idea, nothing would have happened.

Rigelhaupt: So your perception is that the museum continues to de-emphasize—

04-00:17:51

Castellón: They don't de-emphasize, they just don't deal with it at all. I mean, such a thing doesn't exist. The same concept that Nordland had, that this was not something that he could accept, could deal with. Because they have their priorities already set. That's the case again. From what I understand, I think there might have been a Chicano show curated somewhere else. I don't know when it happened; I don't know the details. But the emphasis that we had on the intention of a permanent program—Like the music part, I don't even think they have any concerts anymore, of any kind. Chamber music or anything. I don't think they do. Maybe, I don't know. But the way we knew the program when I was there, I'm sure nowhere in the country, it's being—I guess that we

were just one period, one decade, that there was interest from the—And as I say, it's unfortunate, because the success, the attendance went up, the interest, the education process of the communities coming to see their artists that were important—that doesn't exist anymore. Maybe the system doesn't like this idea of specialization. Or a separate concept of—And again, you will have to take somebody who is—I mean, a director that has that in his mind already. I think the fellow whom I replaced in Santa Cruz is probably now in a position that he already has that in his mentality. I'm sure that he does things of that nature, wherever he happens to be. He's gotten pretty big. So the institution will have to have an interest to do it. And the curators or the directors that are hired, if there is no interest in their minds, nothing is going to happen. Because that was part of the times, part of the context of the time, and that helped it to happen, to take place.

Rigelhaupt: I've read that SFMOMA was pretty good about showing art by women and feminist art in the seventies. I'm wondering if that was what you experienced as you were a curator there.

04-00:21:01

Castellón: I don't think there was an emphasis on that, either. The chief curator was a woman, and I don't think she ever did anything of that nature. She just was a professional in the field; a man or a woman will maintain the status, the historical status of dealing with the art of the times. I think the only show that I can see was the Judy Chicago thing, because it was at the time, too, just as the African American movement, Chicano movement, when there was the women's movement, too, happening at the same time. So when they did that show, when Henry Hopkins did that exhibition, he might have had some of that in mind; you know, that this was for the times, the correct time to do it. There was a lot of controversy about that show, and much of it aesthetically. They were questioning her, the quality of the work that she showed. I see now that there is another book—at the museum, I saw last week—that she is being revived. That exhibit that was done then is being done somewhere else, and there is a new book out. So she's still very strong with those ideas.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about the debates about her aesthetics?

04-00:22:39

Castellón: Her aesthetic?

Rigelhaupt: Yeah, and the debates about the piece.

04-00:22:42

Castellón: Well, it was aggressive, you know? There was a lot of people that felt that she was taking advantage of the circumstances. I mean, she was part of the movement nationwide. I think she started on the East Coast. Well, she started in Los Angeles, I think, but she was involved in—And I think one forgets the one ad where she changed her name. I mean, she lived in Chicago. That is not her name, you know. She adopted that. There was an ad where she is in a ring

with gloves on, and she's fighting. And that was a powerful image. Then she worked on that, and she had an aggressive attitude of getting things done. So you could disagree with the results, or might not like the aesthetics, but obviously, she was fighting for a cause, just like I was. When the show was there, I had no connection with her. As I understand, she was very tough with her assistants, many of whom were women. So there were these aspects that come up. But we were all fighting for a cause. In both cases, it had a staying power, because she's still around and doing work.

What we did outside of the institution itself—the many books, the many critics, writers with bylines, Spanish people. So I think life goes on, and none of those things disappear. Maybe you don't see them as much. But the Yerba Buena Gardens were supposed to take a little bit of the slack off the community-oriented institutions. I worked on the development of the Yerba Buena Gardens, because I was hired to do the—prior to the building of the place. It was supposed to be a community-oriented institution. I was hired to do the investigation as to what we should have. I had to do what you're doing, talking to writers, artists, community people, school directors, to build the idea of the center. I think the program, from what I've seen, has done that. I don't know how close they are to the communities, really; but that center, as far as the mainstream was concerned, was supposed to take care of that. And obviously, still active. I mean, the show they had recently was part of that movement that was not ethnic. But artists from the mainstream or the minorities also, the graffiti and the cartoon people, were very much a part of that movement. That was all part of the flower children movement, was that, really just rebelling against the system. It was very obvious in San Francisco and New York; maybe less in Cleveland or other places. But I think everybody was working for their goals, with different degrees of success.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about the redevelopment around the Yerba Buena Gardens?

04-00:27:08

Castellón: It took a long time for things to pass. Of course, that's main property. I mean, it was the same type of fight with the International Hotel. There were other interests, there were many interests about the Yerba Buena Gardens. The politicians were just using it for their own causes, and it took a long—You might want to find this, but there's a book. It's called the Blue Book, that is the history of the Yerba Buena Gardens. It's a very thick thing. My report about the center is there. I was hired by the group that was in charge of the documentation of this. Oddly enough, when I was in Santa Cruz I had a call, where they were looking for a director for the—When the go-ahead took place, they hired a director for the center. He decided to start a visual arts program immediately, even in the offices of the place. And so they called me in Santa Cruz, and asked me about recommendations, what to do. In my conversation with the director, it ended that he asked me if I wanted to do it. So I accepted. While I was working in Santa Cruz, I did the first two years of

exhibits in the offices of the Yerba Buena Gardens. Well, for me, it would've been the ideal place to move. The institute that I wanted to start, that I mentioned before, the Yerba Buena Gardens would've been ideal for me to direct it or to work in it, because that was the thing that I wanted to institute on my own, and couldn't do it because it was too big. So I did those first two years, a two-year program with various group shows. But by the time that the position became available, I was already committed to Costa Rica. I just couldn't go back, and so I didn't even apply for it. But I would love to have had that, to work at that center, because it was ideal. I had a lot to do with it, before it happened. Poetic grace or poetic justice, when I got to Costa Rica, there was a center like it. They hired me to run the curatorial program of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design. So in a way, I was teased by destiny. I did this for five years. We established that museum internationally, now having great, great success.

One of these books that I brought today, it's the latest project, which is a major, major exhibition that just happened last month. It ended in February. This was an international biennial. Actually, it was a triennial. Which is the first one. I participated as an artist, yeah; but I was also—I'm a founding member of the institution that organized it. The person behind this institution, which is private, was the director at the museum that invited me to come work with them. So obviously, my experience in San Francisco extended to Costa Rica and Central America, because we did many Central American shows. We have established the area. Before that museum, very little was known about the area. Now we have artists [who] have gone to the big biennales. Venice Biennale, which is the oldest, artists got awards in those institutions. So moving to Costa Rica was timely, and I was able to help in the development of that museum, which is still—They are fourteen years in existence now, and doing a great international—and these are artists from all the continents. Africa, Asia, Europe, America. So my job continues I am supposed to retire, but no way. [chuckles] It's good for me. I still have a lot of energy, and I don't mind it, I love it. It's what I do, and what I love to do. It's not a job. It's not a job, it's a responsibility.

Rigelhaupt: So do you think your experience in the M.I.X. program and as a curator, working across mediums, versus being a specialized curator, has helped you in San José?

04-00:33:21

Castellón: Well, sure. I mean, the more you know, the better you are, the better off you are. So all the things I have done—As I say, I'm also a publisher; I publish various magazines. In fact, there is one that you can look up on the web. It was called *Éxposee*, which was a magazine that I invented so that we could advertise community activities in the mainstream. It was like a gallery guide to community galleries, which became a magazine. With the assistance of the Neighborhood Arts Program, after I left for Santa Cruz, I gave it to the city, the editors of the Neighborhood Arts Program, and they continued it for a few

more years. So again, that was another connection to—I felt that, well, we have all this stuff going on in the communities, but there's no advertising about it. There is no way to let people know that it's happening. So that's why I invented the publication. At first it was just ads, advertising community activity. This was after I left the museum. And it came out of my spaces. That became a magazine that eventually, at the end, they were doing interviews to major artists like Jay DeFeo, Bruce Conner, all the mainstream local, as well as all the community artists in the area. A year or so ago, they asked one of the editors to write a historical review of that magazine, and it came out. There's a magazine on the net that requested it, so it came out and talked about that publication, which for us, was very important, because we could let the world know that these places existed. Again, that was another success. In the process, I learned to be the editor or curator. What is it? A person who organizes concerts. What is it called?

Rigelhaupt: A promoter?

04-00:35:58

Castellón: A promoter, a music promoter. All those things. It's wonderful. For me, God! I'm the one that's getting most of the benefits with this experience. I learned so much from all of it and made hundreds of friends. Of course I made enemies too. [chuckles] It comes along with the territory. But certainly, I had a dynamic life, thanks to it. I became a professional, once I began to get paid for it. Now, in Costa Rica, the lack of budgets is all over the world, I always have been using my own resources to do all these magazines. I have paid for them. I produced them, I did everything. But financially, I put my personal resources in all this. And in Costa Rica, the same. I'm a sponsor of the arts. As I was telling you before, I was saying that I don't live from the arts, the arts live from me. [chuckles] At my level, of course. But again, it's an investment that has always paid back, even if it's just personal satisfaction to do it.

04-00:38:11

Rigelhaupt: I was, well, *surprised* is not the right word, but struck by your description of making enemies. How did that happen?

04-00:38:37

Castellón: Well, it comes with the profession. It's the kind of profession where you make selections. You look at something and you say, "Well—" Any curator, or any editor of a publishing company, you accept and you reject. That is part of—well, supposedly, excellence is the pinnacle of anything that you do, so you always select; there is a process of selectivity. That's the professional way, let's say. There are many artists in the mainstream that never make it to the top, never make it anywhere, for whatever reasons. The system is mean that way, you know. That will happen to anyone who is involved; it's not just me, obviously. When I said that, I mean, you get a rumor of somebody saying, "Well, he's done a great job at the museum," but the other guy says, "Well, but what has he done for me?" See? So obviously, I could not possibly please everybody, because of that process. When you go professional, well, that's the

way it is. What I like to do is to be competitive with the rest of it. If I have weaknesses in her—

Of course, it's a question of opinion of the person who's making the selection. I might be totally wrong. So the other person has also the right to say, "Well, what does he know?" You see, when you have groups that get together, they stick together and they fight together. There's all-inclusive. At that level, there is no discrimination. We're all learning from each other. We're learning by growing and by doing. So at that level, you don't do that. But when you go to the next step, or you go into the professional world, then the selective process comes in. One thing that I liked in the United States about the competitive in the arts, especially in the visual arts, it's so many people trying to make it, or going to the thing, that people really work, you know? They compete, and they do this, and they work at the post office or whatever it is, and they keep doing their art. In Costa Rica, it's not as competitive. There are many, many artists, but they are more complacent, is that the word? Some of them paint for the biennales, and they don't do anything in the year. But here, it was serious. It was like, you work every day and you do your stuff, and you try to be in shows. I think that that makes you grow. Maybe you will not be accepted now, but you keep on working, and at a point, you will be. That was healthy, I think.

04-00:42:21 Nobody ever confronted me, except when we did the third world show, we had a big conference, a big open table conference. We invited critics, mainstream critics. Tom Albright was in that, and other writers, artists. It was a long, square table, round table? There were artists there that were not [in the show]. Because part of it was invitational, and part of it was competitive. So we received work from all over the area, and far away. I had a three-person jury that was Raymond Saunders, Ruth Tamura, and myself. I invited two other people from the communities to help me jury the show. We looked at hundreds of works. In fact, many white artists submitted works to it. We had it qualified as third world, so there was a limitation there. But we had to select. Many artists from the communities were not accepted.

In that meeting, an artist spoke up and defended his work; you know, that he didn't understand why he wasn't admitted, because he thought his work deserved to be there. That's what I mean, that when you have to do that idea of rejecting, somebody will resent it. I mean, it's natural. One doesn't like to be in that position. I mean, it has happened to us for other reasons. And here, I was applying the same. But I thought that that was part of the growing process, that some people might not be ready yet. But there are many people who didn't appreciate that I did not include them. I understood; you know, I suffered from it myself. But that's the way, the professional way to work. When I had my magazine, for example, my literary magazine, I didn't put an address, and there were no editors. Because I had a lot of material for one, and I didn't want to receive requests. So I would rather just have it as invited, and not have to reject anybody. Because I don't like the idea of rejecting. It makes

you feel bad. But you have to do it. And so for me, in this magazine, which was mine and it was my decision, I just didn't have a way for anybody to submit. I was all over the place looking for material, and so I saw somebody, I read something that I liked, so I invite. So I'd rather invite than reject. And that was an explanation of what I meant by that.

04-00:45:57 In Costa Rica, it's the same. When I got there and became chief curator of the museum, I set the same standard that I worked by anywhere else. There were artists who were major figures in the area, and they just didn't come into the program, because they didn't fit. We were doing very contemporary new media stuff, and there are many people, very well known, very famous, who paint, and their work just doesn't—And I'm sure that in Costa Rica, many people don't think so highly of me because of that. That's something that you have to live with. Fortunately, I think most people understand it, in the back of their minds. I mean, it's not just me, it's how the profession works. I always felt that people would understand what the circumstance was. But it's inevitable that somebody's not going to think highly of you. Not enemies in the sense of having some confrontation. I guess the closest one was this person who spoke up at the conference. But people come and tell you what somebody said, you know. It's the human condition. But on the other side, I know that there are so many people that felt that I was doing the job that I [was] supposed to be doing. So it's just a balance. I don't know, I guess a mainstream curator might not have as much of it, because he is just rejecting on aesthetics. But I had the extra responsibility that it was political and social. And that is much more sensitive. That's what I didn't want to face at the beginning, when I didn't want to—Because I saw all those things. I always like to be careful, you know; not be so just splash, but think about the consequences and so on. But as I said, it was almost that it was meant for me to get involved. I'm sure that many people benefited from it, and that makes it worthwhile. Personally, as I said, every day was a successful day, because it was important, what I was doing.

Rigelhaupt: Those dynamics of thinking about aesthetics, but also the social and political, did those dynamics change over your tenure during the M.I.X. program, and your curatorship?

04-00:49:24
Castellón: No. That was consistent, because art is the means to illustrate history or what goes on. And those are very important themes. So that has never changed. Even now that I qualified my last exhibition, saying that I was doing it for me; it wasn't done for a system or for institutions. My interest is still the same. This lady came here the other day and handed me a—I was talking to them about that mural project, because we were talking about politics. It happens that this lady and her husband were very much involved in denouncing the present activities, political developments, and they were white. So I was talking about my earlier experiences, and it's exactly what they were doing now. You know, like they were renting a space on Market Street to do the

projects, because most galleries will not accept them. They're too political. They're too accusative, they're too open. That will always be there. Same thing with sexual themes. They'll always be difficult to get your work to be accepted, because there's always somebody who is against such-and-such.

But as far as I'm concerned, I always felt that conceptual art was one of the best mechanisms to expose political and social misgivings, or to pronounce yourself. I mean, performance art can be very powerful in that sense. There are some artists in the mainstream who practice it. But in many cases, it's just show; it's just fun. I mean, when I had my magazine, there was a performance artist who was very good himself, and his name was Michael Peppe. He wrote several articles titled, "Why Performance Art is so Boring," for example, and "Why American Art is so Bad." He just spoke against the system. The articles in the magazine were all critical. In fact, my editorial page was called "Sharp Darts," and I asked people to write slogans or short commentaries about what's bad in there about the art and political situation in the area. So that is certainly part of my interest, and I think I still do that. In fact, in this book, which is something that is coming out today, one of the writers ends up with this—I mean, in my conversations with him, ends up with exactly that idea. If you read from here, Castellón, to the end, you'll see what I mean.

Rigelhaupt: I'll have you put it on tape.

04-00:53:32
Castellón: No, you better do it.

Rigelhaupt: No, no.

04-00:53:34
Castellón: Your voice is better.

Rigelhaupt: No.

04-00:53:37
Castellón: No, I want you just to read it. But no, I think—

Rigelhaupt: Well, would you mind putting it on tape, since it's what you're thinking about right now during the conversation?

04-00:53:46
Castellón: Well, it was only to respond to—I mean, this doesn't have to be in the—But I said something to the effect that being mestizo—I mean, it's a blood cross; my father is Spanish looking, and my mother is more indigenous. And so I claim that I'm 100 percent mestizo, because I'm a new race, a new group, you know? If it's the mixture of two, 50 percent of two different cultures, well, I claim that I'm 100 percent. And it's that I am invented, and I will never avoid this. The simple fact of being a mestizo creates a barrier. I came from the sixties, from the revolution of '68, from Martin Luther King. I do not like

human outrage. In this way, the word *dispossessed*—[chuckles] Well, I feel funny talking about myself. That I'm against all attempts of intimidation, and I refuse the false utopias of neoliberal promises and its symmetric reaction to populism. So this is something that somebody read from my conversation. So my politics and my role as the artist was, to a certain extent, using art as a means to try to change things to a more equal standing for everybody, equal opportunities. And that was something that people who know me respond this way, and acknowledge that what I've been doing since I got involved in this was trying to make changes. On my level, of course; you know, one-to-one. Going into the institutions, having budgets that I could spread for other interests or other ideas, well, working from within the system, that's the only way to make some changes. As I said before, the M.I.X. started exactly that way. It was somebody from within realizing that there were things that were not fair, to a certain extent. I got involved in it, and that was the principle of the matter.

[Begin Audio File 5 03-20-2007.mp3]

05-00:00:07

Rigelhaupt: Yesterday, you mentioned that you were in Europe in 1968. I know there were a lot of political movements very active in Europe in 1968, and I'm wondering if you talk about what you saw, and if it influenced you.

05-00:00:28

Castellón: Well, I come from a society, a country that has had much, over a hundred years, political problems with a lot of dictatorships. I was born at the times of—I guess the Second World War is what it was—a lot of turmoil, both locally, as well as international. In fact, that drawing of the little kid up there, the plane is supposed to be an American plane that I've seen in the magazines. And the star, American planes had the star. In my drawing, I just used the two triangles and made the Star of David; it's not the American star. I mean, a child just drew a star like this. I didn't find that out until I was an adult. Somebody said, "But this is the Star of David," you know? I said, "Oh. I didn't know." [chuckles] I had no idea. I just made a star. And the American planes had that; still do. So I guess there has been much around me in my lifetime. The discrimination that I suffered from childhood on, all these things shape you, your concept. As you grow, you understand it better. People respond to all these things.

In my case, well, it seems to me that the arts was the mechanism, an easier mechanism to get involved, just as a natural development. I was here during the times of the Haight-Ashbury movement. You know, the park. I was not involved with that at all. I had no idea. It happened while I was here, but I didn't participate. Again, I've always been a recluse. I had no experience with that, because I never participated. Maybe once I participated, where you did chalk drawings on the sidewalks at the park somewhere, and I participated. But after the fact, you know? So I wasn't really involved. I was studying, I

guess, finishing my advertising school. Then I went to work. I was always so busy, with three or four jobs, that I concentrated on that. So I was not involved in any way. Even when I rejected my colleagues, I was just trying to maintain my independence. Then obviously, that did not succeed, and eventually I became—But I already had this idea of being a minority person or whatever I'd been; that in a sense, I took it for granted, almost. I just went on, and didn't seem to bother whether I was being rejected or not, I just kept on going. All of that had to do with experience and realizing that it didn't matter what anybody said, it was up to me to do something out of my life or not. So I started independently of schools or teachers or whatever, and I used the libraries and everything that I could learn from, both as an artist—I learned how to do all types of prints. I learned all the printmaking processes. I would go to certain classes. I tried to better myself by learning on my own. I was aware of all the difficulties of this type of stuff.

05-00:05:33

As time went on, I went into this profession, and I was able to, as I say, make certain changes and change the minds of some people. All of that is political activity, one-to-one. Because I always felt that that's the only way you can do it. If I can get one child, one kid from the streets to come into the arts and become involved, it might help him later. So that's political action. The idea that the artist is not as important as the person—As an artist, you might say {although you want to?}, you might not be able to make any difference. But as a person, you can. You can become involved, and make those changes that you think should be made. So I know that art in itself is powerful, but I think the person behind the art is more important than the artist himself. So getting involved was important and {meaningful?}. Again, I was working at my level. I never had any pretensions to go into politics or anything like that. I'm doubtful of that system. So obviously, I was aware of the serious aspects of the movements, and respected the people who put themselves on the line. It all was part of growing and learning.

Rigelhaupt: Did you see different dynamics in the art world on the West Coast or the East Coast, while you were working at SFMOMA?

05-00:07:45

Castellón: Well, in time, you saw it. When we were talking about graffiti and how strong graffiti was in New York for so many years, and did [have] a negative impact for the society, because it is a crime to do graffiti. It's against the law. When I made my visits to New York, which I visited several times, I never wanted to go to New York, because I really don't like to peddle my work, in a sense. I always worked, I always maintained myself from something else. I never depended on my art to live. I didn't like the idea of being against the wall, that I don't have money for tomorrow, and I make something to sell it. That was out of the question; I always worked. And I had three jobs in the United States. Each one was of nine years duration. I would go to New York to visit and enjoy myself with the museums and things. It was par for the course. I

mean, the system was very difficult to get into, even worse than San Francisco, I guess. I never attempted to do anything. In fact, next May, I'm doing my first personal project in New York, because I met this artist in Costa Rica who has a studio that he lets other people use. I've been invited to a Bay Area drawing exhibition that took place at the Drawing Center in New York. I've been invited to another show in that same center. So I never had any serious contact with New York. I never wanted, again, to go around peddling stuff. I ignored that early. So the system went on with its happy ways. I think when the graffiti stuff came up, I saw a little change there. Because speaking of dynamics, that did bring a lot of energy that had been there all the time, but not within the system. So when the big galleries began to deal with it, I said, "Well, they were powerful enough to conquer the system, and now all these guys are major figures. Before, they couldn't even come in to see the shows." So I think that will be the one moment where I thought that things changed, when the system weakened up a little bit and began to accept—Then at the New Museum, they had the "bad" show, which was named "Bad Art" Show. Although that was an imaginary institution, too. The New Museum was not the mainstream. Now it is, because it's become more mainstream. But at that time, the New Museum was inclusive, not so exclusive. Then, decades later, when the financial situation became so bad that many artists who were making it, all of a sudden there were no more checks coming though. Many artists disappeared because there was no money. That was very heavy, as far as many artists were concerned. It's like Wall Street came down on them.

05-00:12:08

Right now we have Bruce Nauman and Brice Marden as the two major shows right today, at the San Francisco Museum and Berkeley. When you see that, then you know nothing's changed. I mean, these two guys have been very successful from the beginning, had no problem whatsoever. One local, studied at the SF Art Institute, the other one in New York. But by the time I came to the museum in '72, Brice Marden, who was a very young man, there were some catalogues there at the museum, of a show that had been organized at MoMA in New York and came to San Francisco. They were left over material. I remember using some of those myself. Meaning that this young man was already famous in the seventies, and in 2007 he's having this major retrospective. So what else is new? [chuckles] Schnabel went on to do films. And Stella is still in the soft light, because he was a big superstar, and now it's questioned and stuff. But things go on. I don't see major changes. I guess the big biennials are a big change, because many third world countries are getting into this thing of the contemporary art scene, because it's good for the cities to bring lots of people. And now it is Istanbul, and there is the Taiwan festival. So those are changes that you certainly notice. But life goes on.

Rigelhaupt: Well, you mentioned yesterday you have a sort of authorized biography. Some of your younger life is documented in a book that's soon to be released, that you did. So maybe we don't need to spend a lot of time talking about it, because you've written it. But if you could talk for a minute about some

experiences in your childhood that perhaps influenced your art and your curatorial work.

05-00:14:50

Castellón: Well, I always mention that you are influenced by everything you see and hear and do. Every minute of your life, we're always exposed to something or another. The mind is the best computer there will ever be. Everything is stored there. What I do really just goes right back to my childhood, absolutely. I just don't remember any time that I didn't do something with my hands, something graphic or two-dimensional. It's something that is part of living and part of breathing or eating or whatever. So there are many things that when somebody asks you, you see, yes, there's some connections to why do I use mud? And so those walls are like the kitchens of some of the houses that I lived in, in Nicaragua. You know, people hang stuff there. I mean, your own apartment, you have your utensils hanging on a wall. And that's what that is. It's just hanging things that people do on a daily basis. It just happens that in my case, we use adobe walls. So many times unpainted, most of the time painted. So I refer to those things when I see this. I tell the story about one of my aunts cleaning a dirt floor in a house that I lived in. She will just use the broom to get rid of the dust, and then she will water the floor and make some mud, and she will make designs with the back of the broom. Every day, she will do something different. So that had to influence why I use mud. Those were things that were vernacular, things that come from daily activity.

As a child, I remember my uncle and myself going to a little museum, an anthropology museum that was near the house. We just liked to go in there and look. All those things influenced, I think, what I do. You see here, I do many, many things. There are some that relate to others, but this milieu of ideas going on. When the mud came in, it sort of amalgamized everything. It was like, I can draw, I can paint, I can sculpt over this thing, and the mud seems to keep things cohesive. So discovering that had a meaning beyond being a work of art. It sort of gave space to the other things that interest me. Different techniques and things kept my things for awhile, and then I stop and do something else, and something else, and something else. That was the way I worked, because it was totally natural. I don't know what I'm going to do next.

05-00:18:52

But it has been a continuous experience that if it has grown, fine. I don't see any difference, you know, from this drawing to that one. To me, it's been a merry gallop, a process of enjoying. When they say *artist*; that's what they say. [chuckles] To me, it's just something that lights my soul, I guess. It's something that I can't live without. Even though now I don't do as much, I don't sit down with the consistency that I did before, I'm not as consistently involved anymore. Now when I get invited to shows, I do this; I get material from where I am, and I build up stuff. Obviously, there is a system that qualifies this as art. I came in, became part of it, and fine with me. I made

some money with it, too. There's people who like the work and buy it. I have nothing against that. I don't go out and try to sell anything, but these people—And if I show in galleries, well, I accept that they are there to sell work. So I keep on learning, keep on going every day. It will be like that until forever. [chuckles] It's been a great trip.

Rigelhaupt: Is that hard for you? You said working as an artist, you never know what you're going to do next. But as a curator, you're working two or three years out. Could you talk about what it was like being an artist and a curator at the same time?

05-00:21:00

Castellón: They were two aspects that were separated physically. Let's say they were like train rails; they're parallel. They were two professions. Well, one profession, and one pleasure. One was pleasure, the other one was profession. And they are complementary, of course, because people say that my installations of other people's work, things come through from my artwork. Like, sometimes I will install somebody's work in a way that I'm bringing some of my own interests as an artist into it. It's possible. I usually try to present the work the best I can. The artist's work is what's important, and I will do every possible thing to make it look correct, how it's supposed to look. I could separate them because physically, there was time for being a curator, and there was time for being an artist, totally separate of the other.

Aesthetically, I'm sure that I've been influenced by every single artist that I've seen in my life, you know, which is lots. Something sticks, I'm sure, and it registers in your body and comes out in your work. But there was never a conflict. When I was in advertising, jobs came up for doing illustrations. But I always rejected it; I didn't want any part of making art or drawings for a purpose. I just maintained my activity in that profession in the production part of the business. I produced an ad here and there for somebody, in my freelance work. But I just rejected the idea of making graphic work for the purpose of usage for something else. And in my art, if you ask me to be commissioned to do something, I can't. I have done many portraits of people, but because I want to do them. If somebody asked me to do your portrait, I can't. I can't get your likeness. Sometimes by accident, a drawing might look like somebody I know. But I cannot do anything on commission. Because I'm just totally independent of it. What I do is what I do. Nobody has to like it; I don't care. Great, if they do. Even greater if somebody wants to buy it. So that answers that.

Rigelhaupt: Just a couple of things about some other folks that have been part of museums in San Francisco. Did you work with Eduardo Pineda, who's a muralist, and then worked for some time at SFMOMA?

05-00:24:39
Castellón: I met him last year. He is the person who told me that he just worked for education, and he had no input in the program. He is now with the African museum [Museum of the African Diaspora, SF]. But I only met him once. We did talk a little bit, exchanged addresses and so on. But no, we never had any—They were different times. I was already gone when he came in.

Rigelhaupt: What are your thoughts on the genesis and the formation of the Mexican Museum?

05-00:25:15
Castellón: Well, I was there at the time, because one of the members of the Galería was the guy who had a collection that he started the museum with [Peter Rodriguez]. So I knew him very well, and we were sort of in the same group. But he went on, on his own. We didn't have much to do with his museum. Then he himself eventually left it, and other people took over. I don't know what the situation is now, because I hear that it's not open anymore. But it was coincidental that one of the members of the group had been making art before and was in some exhibitions. He was one of the few that had been involved in some manner in the arts before. He was from Stockton, I remember. So he was just one member of the group.

Rigelhaupt: What's his name again?

05-00:26:19
Castellón: Peter Rodríguez.

Rigelhaupt: How would you define the [San Francisco] Museum of Modern Art, now that it's approaching it's seventy-fifth anniversary?

05-00:26:32
Castellón: Well, it's the second oldest [modern/contemporary] museum in the country, and it has a long history. I don't think it's been as important as the MoMA in New York, but it's a force. It's a historical force. Maybe it didn't get as much press as the New York one. And that might be one reason why it's secondary, too. But it's been important. There was a connection with the artists from the first generation of abstract expressionists, to it and to the museum. So I think it's a very important institution, and backed by that history. And continues to be so. There's not much more that I can say. It's just an important center for the cultural history of the country.

Rigelhaupt: How do you think it's perceived locally?

05-00:27:55
Castellón: Many of my artist friends never go. I understand. I think when it was less overmanaged, it was more appealing to people. I haven't been to any openings in the last fifteen years, because when I've been here, there haven't been any. So I don't know what the dynamics are; you know, if there are huge openings or what. I have no idea. I do hear that some people who experienced the

sixties and what I did, that they sort of feel that there is no connection to them; that that was the good times. They've gone. I get that, too, from mainstream artists that are still struggling too, and they don't get any attention from it. But again, I haven't experienced myself to get an idea how bad it is, in that respect. Of course, it is much more expensive to go to a museum than before. So people don't have the ten bucks that it takes to get in. Fortunately, I have my lifetime card, and I don't pay when I come in.

Rigelhaupt: How do you think the museum is perceived nationally and internationally?

05-00:29:45

Castellón: Well, you see it mentioned in things, but you never see them, like, originating major things. I don't know. Again, I might be missing some. You don't get the feeling that it's a think tank of activities. But you do see it mentioned, as it always has, really. It always had this. But it's not a fountain of great projects, I guess.

Rigelhaupt: Where would you like to see the museum at its hundredth anniversary?

05-00:30:29

Castellón: Hundredth? That will be twenty-five years from now? Well, all museums are sort of safe institutions, right? They maintain the status quo. I think that that goes on. That will be forever. There's no other way. The Louvre maintains its format. And it's always going to be that way. I mean, they added new galleries to it, and they have now big photography shows and stuff like that. But that is what goes on all the time; that is the status quo. I guess that's their nature. I think the change occurred when contemporary shows began to be placed in any museum. Because they were supposed to be repositories of history, right?

I mean, the word *curator* is that. I mean, a curator is a person who took care of a collection, who maintained it properly, safe. At one point, they began to draw from those collections to do exhibitions. That went on to be what contemporary museums do. So I can't see any change. Of course, it's more difficult to collect now than before, because the artists are so demanding, what to do. And how do you collect Robert Smithson for example, with his land pieces? It's impossible. Of course, we depend on photography and video now, to document. But imagine how much work the MoMA in New York has. I mean, space becomes important. And the work now is so monumental. So there might have to be another system. But maybe we'll have reached a point—Well, painting supposedly has been dying for the last two hundred years, and it's still going on. But maybe history stopped there.

The new generations, who are so involved with the cameras and the media, they are the ones who are going to kill it. Because kids now can't imagine sitting there with a pencil, painting, or throwing paint around like that; it's just foolish, you know? So they are the ones, the artists are the ones who are going

to say when it stops, when they don't do it anymore. And so I've been talking about the fact that monumental and land art is the most interesting stuff that's being done. Now the inclusion of the architects—or sculptural buildings. That's the most interesting stuff that is being made. For me, personally. I get a kick out of one Italian artist who builds in three continents. Each piece is in a different place. You have to go to different places to see the work. There's four pieces that relate to each other, and to time and space. They are placed in a south, north, east, west axis. And they are buildings that have characteristics of the area, technically and thematically and the material. So to me, that's the most interesting work that is being done. There is nothing new. Again, I noticed an article in the paper yesterday about the idea of the seven wonders of the world. And so those were major works of art. I see that they are going to include Stonehenge as one of them. I mean, that's impressive. People like Richard Serra come to mind, that he's been dealing with this monumentality. And the open spaces for that is really something that they have an immense space to continue doing work that is—

05-00:35:32

You know, you go see a painting show, and you say, "Oh, well." You can understand why some people say, "Well, I've been trying to kill it, it's not having any importance anymore." Of course, the individual, the modern artist, per se, that is his own person, that's always going to be there making beautiful small stuff and very particular, very unique. That will continue to be. But as far as where the major stuff or where is it going, you know, it might be coming to a necessary end.

Rigelhaupt: How do you think the new building affected the museum?

05-00:36:22

Castellón: I don't like the galleries. The inside, they sort of look like corridors. I think it's unfortunate to me that the photography rooms are like part of a corridor. And you go around like this. The only good space is the top floor. The only space that has possibilities. Because at the other place, we had one, two, three, four major galleries. And here, we only have one. So it sort of did this. I don't like this claustrophobic sense. I mean, there's a lot of space that is just space. Like above from the entrance, you have all this huge four-story blank.

Rigelhaupt: So you were talking a little bit about the new building. And I guess it's not as new, but it's still new. So your thoughts on that.

05-00:37:30

Castellón: Well, the one that comes to mind is that when Botta, Mario Botta submitted the first drawing for the building, he had the rotunda with the trees on top. And that caused a lot of controversy at the time. I don't know if you're familiar with it, but in the circular part, it had trees. And so we were all against it. And I usually use conceptual art to make fun of things. So I made this project where I put together an image of Coit Tower, and the circular part of the building, with the trees. I suggested this erotic connotation, Coit Tower,

which is a phallic symbol, and the circular element. Then I suggested three different versions without the trees. So I made it like a formal issue on paper. I made the drawings and I passed them, and I rhetorically asked, "Well, what are the trees going to be? Are they going be poplar? Or are they going be plastic? Are they considering what the birds will do to the building, once things go down?" So I made rhetorical and funny remarks about it. I showed it in a group show. Then weeks later, it comes out, an article in the *Chronicle*, where they had asked him to remove the trees. I said, "Well, look, I was responsible for that." [chuckles] Because my piece was exactly about suggesting that the artists were against it or whatever. I have used that in my conceptual exhibitions. But I was very happy that the trees went. Because it was kind of a joke, you know? We all took it as, "This guy must be joking."

Then I learned that he had submitted that same project to a church in France, and that they rejected it, too. So he tried to impose it on us here, San Francisco. We went against it. So in some instances, I claim that I was responsible for having it changed, because of my drawing. I mean, part of my jokes. I do like his architecture. I mean, he falls into that category of the sculptural building. In fact, there's one by another architect at Seventh and Mission, between Market and Mission that is wonderful. It's a government building, which is interesting. I like it. I think it's beautiful. That is the most exciting to me of stuff that is being done. Sculptures that deal with monumental stuff. Many people think Botta's work is too symmetrical, too stiff. But I've seen several buildings of his, and I like—I don't like the inside at all. I think it's anti-art, in a way. You're too close to everything. You never get distance for things. So I don't like it at all. So the building as a sculpture, yes; but he didn't give art the right space. That's my opinion.

05-00:41:58

[material deleted]

So I think the museum's role is going be the same, continue to be that. That's the nature of museums. There is not a museum just for contemporary art. That's still lacking. Maybe it won't be able, because there will be competitions. The Yerba Buena Gardens apparently did not interrupt at all, even though they're across the street. But I think having the two institutions right next to each other is very good, it's very important, because the Yerba Buena has more freedom. I've seen more catalogues that have looked like interesting shows. So I don't have anything to say. Par for the course. Goodbye.

Rigelhaupt: Well, typically the way I end—and I think we're winding down—is I ask, one, is there anything I should've asked and didn't; and two, is there anything you'd like to add?

05-00:45:03

Castellón: No, not really. I think that whatever I say will be an afterthought. Everything I said comes from my recollections, based on fact. I usually like to fool around with dates and facts in my own work; you know, I like it a lot to tell untrue stories. But it's the nature of my artistic activity. I like to be obtuse and confusing. It says there that I have a big fight with history, and history with me. In my own work, I have this total freedom. But what I did in my participation in this social struggle, it's all as it happened. There is no interference from me. People think I'm very serious, but it's not true. [chuckles] I like to fool around with people and do things to them. Fun. And art is that for me. It's a source of enjoyment. It's continued to be that. After you do it, you know, it's secondary. Other people made decisions on it, and that's not up to me. I'm happy with the freedom I have had to do it, and the opportunity, again, to do it. That will be it.

[End of Interview]

Castellon Gallery is newest cultural spot in S.F.

Carlos Loarca's exhibition of paintings on paper at the Roland Castellon Gallery is indicative of the kind of high quality, thought-provoking shows to be seen at this new exhibition space at 683 Sutter Street No. 1 in San Francisco.

Loarca's exhibit, which ran through October, was the fourth shown at Castellon's gallery. The gallery's opening closely followed Castellon's departure from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where he held a curator's post for the last ten years where he paid particular attention to contemporary and local artists. The museum's termination of Castellon and also of former curator, Suzanne Foley, has largely gone unexplained by the administration.

In an interview for the NOB HILL GAZETTE's October 1981 issue, Director Henry Hopkins is quoted as saying: "We felt that the younger staff members were ready to try their wings, so we made some sacrifices at the top, rather than at the bottom of the curatorial staff. Without Rolando Castellon, we will continue to integrate his areas of interest into our programs."

Just what this means in unclear, but what is certain is that now working within his own framework, Castellon is less boxed-in to a specific role – loosely understood as the "third world" curator at the museum -- and is able to express his deep interest in the artist's personal convictions and motivations. This approach is ultimately more humanist and universal in that specific ethnicity can be viewed without distortions or stereotypes, allowing the pure expression to emerge.

This is particularly true in the case of Carlos Loarca, Guatemalan-born artist who has lived in San Francisco since 1956 and who has long been involved in the Latino community, not only as a muralist and as a painter, but as an art teacher in Mission District elementary schools and as an art organizer. He was among the eleven founding members of the Mission's Galeria de la Raza, which include Castellon, and is presently an Artist-in-Residence at the Mission Cultural Center.

His current paintings draw upon deep-rooted childhood memories from his hometown, Quetzaltenango, and speak about such universal concerns as growth, change and death. In these large paintings, symbolic dog-wolves, skeletons, masks and floating faces are orchestrated in frozen motion by soft, veil-like cubist divisions of space and pale tones of pink and salmon--in an effort to come

close to the sensation of the death-state. Works from this series, with titles such as "La Purificacion de Las Almas," were recently on view at the San Jose Museum of Art.

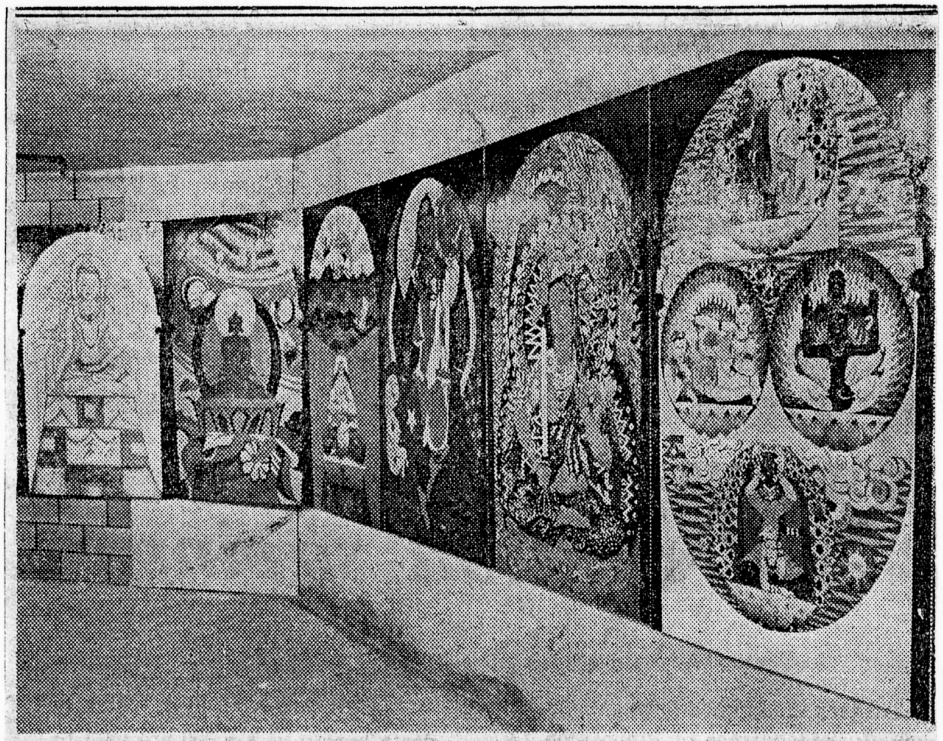
Smaller works on paper were shown at Castellon's gallery. Each study is a singular, stark image of a monumental human form, generally emerging as a woman, with a tiny, disproportionate bird's head with beady, piercing eyes. These are exquisitely painted works, in deep tones of blue, purple, red and green, with an occasional gold or soft magenta glowing from behind the figure. The bold shapes of the human figure interchange with those of its background, creating the illusion of ambiguous human and animal forms hovering within the majestic female form. Four smaller drawings depict graceful hourse-wolve creatures in symphonic movement, the best of which recalls a lyrical yet solid Franz Marc painting.

Carlos Loarca's paintings are recently on view at the Palo Alto Cultural Center through November 15.

–Andrea Lis

MIX's exotic sounds

Flautist G.S. Sachdev will play ragas of northern India as one of three featured artists at a free MIX Museum Intercommunity Exchange) concert Saturday afternoon. Other musicians to appear in the event, sponsored and hosted by the San Francisco Museum of Art, are Richard Bains, playing the Chinese lute and African Balangi (marimba); and Jeffery Chinn, playing the 16-string Renaissance lute and 24-string Baroque lute. The concert will be held in the Museum, in Civic Center, Saturday from 2 to 4 p.m., and the public is welcome to attend.



Japanese Center's new mural

The Konnyaku Artists Collective painted it, the SF Museum of Art's MIX Program commissioned it, Nihonmachi Gallery had it on display last week and soon it will adorn the community garden on Sutter between Buchanan and Webster Sts. Here is a section of the mural, which, in all, has 20 panels and stretches 80 feet. It was completed in a two-week period in September.

Jess Rigelhaupt is an assistant professor of history and American studies at the University of Mary Washington. At the time of this interview he was a postdoctoral research specialist in the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. from the Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on California politics and culture. He is writing a book on mid-twentieth century progressive social movements and politics in the San Francisco Bay Area.