

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

GARY GARRELS

SFMOMA Staff, 1993-2000; 2008-present (2010)

Chief Curator, 1993-1995

Elise S. Haas Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, 1995-2000

Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, 2008-present (2010)

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Interview conducted by
Richard Cándida Smith
in 2009

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[End of Interview]

Gary Garrels
Interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith, ROHO
Interview #1: February 9, 2009

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Cándida Smith: We start out with your background, where you came from, where and when were you born?

01-00:01:12

Garrels:

I grew up on an Iowa farm, born in 1951, in the summer, August. It was the standard small Iowa farm, at that point. My father had raised corn and soybeans and hogs and cattle. We were out in the middle of nowhere. We were about seven miles from town. I had a very unremarkable childhood, I think. I did very well in school. It was very clear fairly early on that I was not going to be a farmer. I read. I remember my father at one point, really, literally dragging me out of the house and saying, “You can’t learn everything out of a book.” By the time I got into high school, I was clear I wasn’t going to be a farmer and I would go to college. I thought I’d probably end up being a history teacher, actually. Then I got this idea about maybe studying architecture, which was something very exotic. So I went to Iowa State University, which has an architecture school. I was there for a year and I was in a fraternity and I was really unhappy. I had friends at the University of Iowa, which is more the liberal arts university, which has the professional schools—the law school, the medical school—and it has good humanities programs and arts and so on. So I just thought, well, I’ll go there. I spent a semester there and I realized, basically, I was just fundamentally unhappy in Iowa and I just thought, there’s got to be something else going on in the world. So I went to the library and started researching colleges. I ended up going to an experimental new college called New College, in Sarasota, Florida. That’s where I then finished my undergraduate work. It was a very interesting school. Most of the kids who came there were from the East Coast, they came from very affluent, sophisticated backgrounds. I basically just hid in my dorm room. I was studying, I was reading, and I discovered sociology. I became completely fascinated by sociology because it was a way for me to understand and explain to myself my own life circumstances.

I became particularly interested in the German sociologists like Max Weber and Georg Simmel, because Germany, at the end of the nineteenth century, was going from the transformation from this small-town, agrarian society into an urban, industrialized society. Basically, that was my own transition from the farm into city modern life. I was really reading the German sociologists to try to understand my own

biography a little bit. Then I ended up, I moved to Boston for a couple years because I didn't know, really, what I wanted to do—go to grad school? I thought I would go to grad school, but I wasn't quite sure. I did some odd jobs, and then I ended up applying for doctoral programs in sociology. I ended up going to Princeton. This was 1976. I realized again, after the first semester, I didn't like Princeton at all. I found it very smug and closed. I could see my job prospects. I would get a doctorate in sociology from Princeton. If I got a good teaching job, I'd probably end up at the University of Wisconsin. I thought, why am I doing this? I'm not happy, and I'll end up right where I have been trying to get away from for the last few years.

At that time, too, I started going into New York City. It was quite close; I had a car. A friend told me about all these new galleries that were opening in SoHo. So I started going in. The galleries were free; I didn't have a bunch of money. I also discovered that the museums had a free night. I think Tuesday, if I recall. So I would go in and go to the museums on the free night, and I'd go in in the afternoon and see some of the galleries in SoHo. I was really interested. I realized after the end of the first semester at Princeton, I was sitting there in my office, and half of my desk had all the books I was supposed to be reading—statistical tracts, census information, and all this stuff. Sociology was moving then much more into quantitative analysis, away from more traditional historical analysis. The other half of my desk had these art catalogs I was picking up, and poetry. That's what I really wanted to be reading and doing. I realized at the end of the first semester that I was just in the wrong place and I had no idea what I was going to do. My advisor was very distraught and he was very angry at me. He said, "You know if you leave, this is your last chance." I was like, oh, my God!

I left. I had a fellowship. I'm sure it was disappointing to them because they had put an investment in me. I had no idea what I was going to do. I moved back to Boston. I just started looking for part-time jobs. I typed really fast, eighty words a minute. Back then, it wasn't posted on a website but you'd go to a bulletin board. There was a bulletin board at Harvard and a bulletin board at MIT, with job postings. There was a part-time job posted at MIT for the office of what was then called the Hayden Gallery, which was the contemporary art gallery, looking for a part-time clerical person. So I went and applied for the job. The assistant curator at that time was a woman named Kathy Halbreich. We spent about three hours talking about everything from [Mark] Rothko to [Martin] Heidegger, and I typed eighty words a minute, and I got the job. Basically, I became Kathy's assistant. Then it became a full-time job and I started helping Kathy on her projects. Then the director left and Kathy became the director. Then the registrar left, after a couple years, and I became the registrar. MIT had about a

thousand works in its collection and it was spread all over the campus. They were in offices, libraries, conference rooms. I really started taking care of that collection, which nobody had taken much care of. I got an IMS [Institute of Museum Services] Conservation Grant to survey it. I got the conservation team from the Fogg to work with me on it—a wonderful woman named Jeri Cohen, who was head of paper conservation at the time—and went through the whole collection and got the records going. Then a couple years after that, the assistant curator left, and I became the assistant curator.

While I was doing all this, I was going down to New York constantly. I had a friend there from college and had a key to his apartment. I could always sleep on his couch. Sometimes he wasn't there, he was off with a boyfriend, and I had the whole apartment to myself. So basically, I could go to New York as often as I wanted. At that point, there was something called People Express Airline. It was \$29, I think, round trip. Or you could take the Amtrak, whatever. I would go down every few weeks and spend a weekend, and I'd just blitz the galleries. I would see as much as I could possibly see on a Saturday and Sunday. At that point, you could pretty much see all the galleries in New York, between Midtown, Uptown, Downtown, SoHo. Then I'd spend Sunday at the museums.

I was just looking, looking, looking, and teaching myself. Then helping out with the gallery. Then I became an assistant researcher for an architecture professor at MIT, who was doing a book about Boston architecture. I did a lot of the research for him, Don Lyndon, who's now over at Berkeley. I worked on his book. I saved enough money from working on that book that I had enough money to go to Europe, and I went to Europe for the first time. This was—I can't remember—I think 1980. I had never been interested in figurative painting. My first real epiphany experience with art was seeing the Rothkos at the Phillips Collection. This was after I got out of college.

I was staying with a friend in Washington—actually, the same guy who had the apartment in New York. We went over to the Phillips Collection one morning and I was just completely mesmerized by those Rothkos. I had no idea why. I didn't have any language to describe the experience. I didn't even think that much about it, but it was just something that lodged in my memory and experience. Then when I started going into SoHo in '76, it was seeing things like a Dan Flavin installation at Heiner Friedrich's gallery. Or Vito Acconci at Sonnabend. These were experiences that were completely unlike any other experience I had. Again, I didn't really understand them, I didn't have a language for them, but they were completely fascinating.

Then when I went to Italy for the first time, I discovered art before [Jackson] Pollock. I discovered the Renaissance and the Baroque. I went to Florence, Rome, Venice, and I was just amazed. When I got back, I signed up for a night class at Boston University, in Italian Renaissance. It was taught by a professor named Helmut Wohl, who was a Renaissance scholar. His special scholarship focus was on Domenico Veneziano. He was a wonderful man, a wonderful teacher. At the end of the semester he asked me, he said, “Have you ever considered studying art history?” I said, “Well, not really.” He said, “Well, why don’t you take another class next semester, and you might want to think about grad school.” So he suggested I take a seminar in classical art with a man named Fred Kleiner. Fred was the head of the whole art history program. I was studying Roman with Fred. At the end of that semester, Helmut and Fred invited me to apply for the program. I had never studied art history, but they waived the requirements and let me in to a masters program at Boston University for art history. So I was doing that, then, on the side.

Cándida Smith: While working full-time.

01-00:13:27

Garrels:

While working full-time and going down to New York as often as I could. It took me, I think, four years to finish the master’s degree. So I would do one seminar—There were a couple semesters where I did two, which almost killed me. I got to curate my first show. There was a show that had fallen through. I had an idea for a show with an artist whose work I really liked in New York, named Agnes Denes. That was the first time I worked with an artist. She was wonderful, crazy, inspiring, and a complicated but marvelous person. The show, it seemed to me, would be interesting at MIT, because she was very interested in science, philosophy, and mathematics. All of that is embedded within her work. The show was a great success. It was a little bit unusual, an unorthodox show. It wasn’t the thing the gallery had been doing, the kind of artist the gallery had been showing. So I got to do a couple other little shows, as well as helping Kathy with her shows and projects.

In 1984, I finally got my MA. I had been living in Boston then for almost ten years, off and on, and I really wanted to move to New York. I had just finished my degree, and the summer of ’84, a woman I knew named Irena Hochman, who was opening a gallery in New York with another woman named Laura Carpenter—I knew both of these women. They both had worked in galleries in New York, and I knew them from that. They asked me if I would come to New York to be their gallery director for a new gallery they were opening in SoHo. So I did that, and my partner and I moved to New York. After about three months, it was very clear this gallery—that the two partners weren’t in

agreement on things. I didn't think they had a very clear idea of what they were doing with the gallery. It was ad hoc, episodic. There were a lot of things about the commercial world I just wasn't completely comfortable with.

So about nine months later, Martha Baer, who was head of Christie's contemporary art, called me. A couple of people had recommended me to her. She was looking for an assistant in the contemporary department at Christie's. I interviewed. I got the job. It was out of the frying pan, into the fire. I spent about a year at the gallery, and I got to do a couple shows there. I had done a show, a group show that included Vito Acconci, up at MIT just before I left. It was a group show with David Ireland, from San Francisco; Vito Acconci; and James Surls, called "Visions of Utopia." We commissioned each artist to do new pieces for the gallery. I got to know Vito. His career had been on the rocks. He'd been with Sonnabend, wasn't working with them anymore, was just in this in between—He was reinventing himself as an artist, doing these crazy constructed, interparticipatory artworks. I got Irena and Laura to agree to do a solo show with Vito. It was literally—I rented a truck and a couple guys, and we drove over to the studio and with a couple of guys from his studio, loaded everything onto the truck, came back and installed it. We did everything. My partner Richard made dinner for the opening afterwards. It was really hands-on. But it was a great experience. It re-launched Vito. I was really proud of that. I did a show with a performance artist named Stuart Sherman, of his sets for his performances. So I got a couple things done there I had wanted to do. Then went to Christie's.

01-00:17:58

Christie's is like an Olympic marathon training for the art market. You are working fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. You are seeing everything from the sublime to the ridiculous. People bring things in off the street. I was organizing the day sales, helping Martha with the night sales, and working on big estate appraisals. You could get a call one night at five o'clock and you'd be on a plane the next morning to Dallas, Chicago, or whatever, looking at somebody's collection, and then coming back and having to put values on everything. It was just like this *incredible* marathon training of really sharpening your eye, looking at objects, and then trying to create an index of value by market, putting a dollar figure on that object according to the market. It was a fascinating experience and I learned a lot. I learned a lot about the way the market operates; about values; about perceived value versus what art historical value might be in relationship to an object, versus your own subjective recognition of the character of a work. I spent about nine months at Christie's, and I realized I really needed to go back into non-commercial work. I think if you're in the commercial world, there has to be something about making a deal, about the business of it. You have to be excited about that. I just wasn't.

About this time, a guy named Charlie Wright, who'd become the director of the Dia Art Foundation, called me. Dia had gone through an extraordinary, difficult transition with Heiner Friedrich, the founding director, being forced to leave. They went through a major financial reorganization. Charlie had come in as the director, after an interim director, and he was trying to figure out how to move Dia forward. They had kept one building they owned in Manhattan, on 22nd Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues, and the collection had been stored there. Charlie wanted to just do a rough renovation on that building and then do some exhibition program there. We spent about four months talking about Dia and about that program. Dia had always been very important for me. I tried to go see as many of the Dia installations as I could, including going out to Bridgehampton to see Dan Flavin and up to Winchendon, Massachusetts, to see Fred Sandback, and seeing the things in Manhattan. I'd always loved the idea of Dia; it was a very special place. So we talked a lot about it and came up with this idea of opening 22nd Street and doing year-long exhibitions and commissioning artists to do projects specifically for the building. We invited a group of advisors to help us begin to formulate a program. That included Harold Szeeman, Kaspar König, Richard Bellamy, Yvonne Rainer, and Kathy Halbreich. We spent a couple days with them, talking about Dia and about artists. Out of that, we got ideas for the first artists we might want to work with. We opened the building with three shows with Joseph Beuys, Imi Knoebel, and Blinky Palermo from Dia's collection.

Heiner had done a show with Palermo in SoHo that I had seen in the mid-seventies, early on. Again, work that I loved and again, didn't have any language for at the time. I loved Palermo. For me, seeing the big Joseph Beuys retrospective in 1979 at the Guggenheim was again, one of those incredible turning point experiences. I'd come down from Boston and started uptown at the Guggenheim. I didn't know much about Beuys. I got about a third of the way through the exhibition and was completely flummoxed. It was the first where I felt like the work was completely impenetrable. I could not understand it at all. So I, for one of the first times, I rented a headset. The tour. Because usually, I just wanted to try to figure it out on my own. It was an amazing tour. If I recall correctly, Caroline Tisdall did the audio tour. I went about halfway through the show and it was just like the whole thing had opened. It was one of those life-changing experiences. It totally changed the idea of what art could be and what art meant philosophically, culturally, socially, formally—every level. I remember after spending a good part of the day at the show, I thought, I can't look at anything else. Just to see a simple painting hanging in a gallery just seemed somehow irrelevant or superfluous at that point. So the chance to work with the Beuys works at Dia was a wonderful, fantastic experience.

Charlie and I went over to Documenta in '87. Beuys had died the year before, but they were just finishing the *7000 Eichen* project, the tree-planting project. We met with the FIU, Free International University people, to talk about continuing the tree-planting project then in New York, when we opened the Dia building.

01-00:23:43

Probably the other big event for me was in 1984, when I first started working for the gallery. Irena and Laura had a lot of money behind them at that point. There was a big German show, a big survey of postwar German art opening in Düsseldorf called “Von Hier Aus,” From Here On. They thought it might be good for me to go see that show, which was very generous of them. I got to spend a few days in Düsseldorf, and I saw the show. Again, it was just amazing to encounter all these things. I went to some of the German museums around, Mönchengladbach, Krefeld, Düsseldorf, and also the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. The Ludwig Museum had a completely different narrative of postwar art from what I had grown up with at MoMA in New York. By “grown up with,” I mean in my twenties, early thirties, going down to New York all the time. It was just, again, amazing to see a completely different reflection of what art was in the postwar period. All kinds of artists and things I discovered that I'd absolutely no experience of before. That trip was really important. I became very, very interested in German museum practice and the way things were shown. Like in Mönchengladbach, the way the Beuys works were shown, or Richard Long.

Earlier, I had, while I was still at MIT, had gone to see Count Panza's collection in Varese. I just did it on my own. I can't remember if I called him up or sent a letter out of the blue. He was very warm and cordial, and he invited me to come. I went up from Milan. Seeing Panza's collection in Varese was amazing. I was there all by myself. The caretaker took me around. But seeing Flavin, Turrell, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman, all these amazing things. Again, I didn't understand all of it. I'd have to say. Particularly Bruce Nauman was completely baffling still, at that time. So those were some of the pivotal early experiences. Seeing the Beuys show, going to Varese—I think that was in 1980—seeing “Von Hier Aus” and the German museums in 1984. When I went to Dia, it was with all that in the back of my mind. It was really exciting.

01-00:26:33

The first shows we did were the Germans. Then the next year we invited Bob Ryman to do a show of new paintings. That was a marvelous, wonderful experience, working with Bob. I was almost five years at Dia, and it was my growing up experience, really. Also Dia had a great collection of Warhol, who I also loved. One of the first things I did at Dia, we had a little space down in SoHo and they were planning a series of three Warhol shows. There was going to be a show

of Warhol's skull paintings. Warhol was designing a new wallpaper to go with it, and he died. I got caught in the middle of this and ended up having to install that on my own, and I was absolutely terrified doing an installation of Warhol after he died, in SoHo, in New York. But it turned out really well. It was exciting.

Cándida Smith: It sounds like you started out with a voracious appetite for visual culture. Not necessarily initially differentiating between the good, the bad, and the ugly.

01-00:27:58

Garrels: No, just seeing everything.

Cándida Smith: So is how you developed your own preferences, taste, a personal taste, if we want to call it, is that connected with this question of encountering things that are baffling, for which you don't have a language, and then figuring out how to develop a language?

01-00:28:23

Garrels: Definitely. That's how I came in, starting with the Rothkos, with the Beuys, going to Varese, seeing Bruce Nauman. Yes, things that challenged me. That's why when I first went to Italy and I saw the Renaissance painters, and Bernini and Caravaggio, that I realized that figurative art could also have these kinds of epiphanies. I wanted to know more about the circumstances of that art. Which is why I then went to study art history. So it's a combination of that. The art history program at Boston University was a very traditional, formal art history program at that time. It wasn't heavily involved in theory or philosophical approaches; it was very much grounded in a traditional looking at an object, formal analysis, contextual analysis about society and culture at the time, biography of the artist. I come from a very traditional background.

The other thing I might mention is my grandmother was a Sunday painter. When my step-grandfather retired from farming, they got a trailer in St. Petersburg, in the fifties, and my grandmother started painting. She started doing watercolors and then she started oil painting. She had a little room in the house that was her sewing room, but it was also her painting studio. That's where I would take my naps in the afternoon when I was visiting. So I suspect that somehow, this idea of art or painting, whatever, must have made an impression, as a kid, like that. Basically, I come from a very, very, very traditional background. But I rebelled against that, and then I was captivated by these new experiences that I didn't have language for.

Cándida Smith: To what degree was the language that you developed your own, and to what degree did it come out of the critical debates of the time, of the seventies and eighties?

01-00:30:42

Garrels: It's a combination of both. I would read. I started looking at the art magazines around 1980, started subscribing to *Artforum*, *Art in America*. I wouldn't say that I was thorough or rigorous reader. I would pick and choose what was interesting to me. I would say I was more interested if a particular author was interesting to me. I loved Michael Baxandall, his approach to the Renaissance; I loved John Berger; I loved Leo Steinberg. I tended to be interested in, again, writers who were still very grounded in the physical object. But on the other hand, I had been reading phenomenology through social sciences and social theory and history, so I had a grounding in that—social psychology. It's been a question for me all along, is that as art history or art criticism or art theory moved more and more toward some of that philosophical, sociological background, I realized that I was coming from the other direction. Because the formal language was what was new for me.

Cándida Smith: So the questions of the death of the subject, the death of the artist, the author—

01-00:32:21

Garrels: Had no resonance. I went to visit Sherrie Levine. I think it was right after I moved to New York. She still had her walk-up studio in Little Italy. I think it was on Mulberry Street or somewhere there. I spent the morning with Sherrie, and I realized I was really interested in her objects; that she makes beautiful objects. Yet she had this wonderful ironic skepticism about her objects. I have to say, I wasn't convinced by it. I felt that there was just too much interest in the object, actually, in the detail.

Cándida Smith: The process, the constructive process?

01-00:33:16

Garrels: Maybe some in the process, but I don't think she's so interested in the process, but she's really interested in how something looks. It's the same thing with Joseph Beuys. I think at the end of the day, Beuys's work is very formally dependent. Every decision about a material, about relationships, I mean formal relationships—That was the thing in 1979, that art was working on every level. I think similarly with Nauman. He has an extraordinary finesse, in terms of, again, objects or the kinds of situation or context he creates in the work. It's still grounded in the physicality or the experience of the work.

Cándida Smith: With Beuys, there's a whole substrate. His ideas of the shaman which, to some degree, rubbed people in the eighties in the wrong way.

01-00:34:23

Garrels: Particularly here in America, I think there's a real skepticism about that romantic mythologizing.

Cándida Smith: To me, that suggests he's still very much interested in the sublime as—

01-00:34:39

Garrels: I think he is. I think he was.

Cándida Smith: Yet, of course, going from Hal Foster on, the sublime is the big no-no.

01-00:34:47

Garrels: I have to say, another important experience for me was I was working at Dia, and one of the artists we really wanted to do a project, a show with was Sigmar Polke. It was interesting because it was exactly the same time that John Caldwell was trying to get Sigmar to agree to do the retrospective at SFMOMA. John and I would be at every opening together in Germany or Europe, whenever Sigmar had a big show. That's one of the things you had to do was you'd show up at the show, be there, there would be a dinner afterwards. At that point, Sigmar was drinking a lot, and you'd end up sitting in a bar all night with people talking and smoking. John and I went through this, I don't know how many times, courting Sigmar. Sigmar was trying to decide if he would do the project at Dia or he would do the retrospective at SFMOMA. He had a big show open in Paris at the Musée d'Art Moderne, and we were there for the dinner and all this.

Sigmar would always show up the next day at the museum, and inevitably, he'd be in the cafeteria or the café, having coffee. He had a whole group of groupies who would show up and everybody'd be talking and drinking coffee and all this. So I went out to the museum the next day, and there was a strike. The museum was closed. Actually, the subway wasn't working. I don't remember how I got out there; I think I took a taxi. I didn't realize, of course, the museum would be closed. I thought, oh, God, how will I ever find him again? Because you can't call Sigmar, you can't make a connection with him. I was just crushed. I thought I'd come to Europe, I'd come to Paris, and I was going to be a failure; I wouldn't even be able to see Sigmar. There was a light rain. I remember walking from the Musée d'Art Moderne to the Musée d'Orsay—I discovered, of course, that was closed, too—and walking down a little street behind the d'Orsay. I was just in this *terribly* depressed mood. It was raining and I just thought I'd totally failed. Walking down the street, I noticed this little storefront. It was a gallery. These two people were in the back arguing *vociferously*, a

man and a woman, older. Just *yelling* at each other. They were absolutely fascinating. Then they disappeared. I got up my courage and walked into the gallery. I can't remember all that was there, but it was very traditional French modernist work. Then there was a stair in the back going down to a lower gallery. I walked down. It was a basement gallery, and it was filled with all the readymades and altered readymades of Marcel Duchamp. Again, it was one of these epiphany experiences. That suddenly, these works were not in a white cube. They were embedded in a specific place in Paris, and you suddenly thought, what would it have been like to see one of these in 1917, 1914 in Paris? The smell of the air, the texture of sound of the street, of all of it. I realized these works were so specific to a time and a place and so redolent of experience that they were not simply ideas. It was a revelation about Duchamp. I have realized over and over again you can not take artists at face value in their own attitude or language about their art. Artists don't tell us all their secrets.

Cándida Smith: If they even know all of them.

01-00:39:06

Garrels:

They may not *know* their own secrets. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (From A to B and Back Again)*, Warhol is actually—he's like a Zen master. They're these pithy statements that you—or like a Greek philosopher—that when you think about them and spend more time with them, they open up and reveal themselves to be much more profound and complex. I think that's the nature of Warhol. I think Warhol is one of the great artists of the twentieth century. He loved to mislead people. I think artists love to make mischief. They love to see how you react. They love to see if you're going to take them at face value or push a little harder, a little further. They're interested in sparring with their public—or with a curator or collector, whoever. There's a gamesmanship to some of it. I think with Duchamp, there's still a fascination with whatever those physical objects are. I was just in New York last week and I had a meeting with Mel Bochner. Kathy, one of the early shows she did at MIT, in 1980, was a two-person show with Mel and Richard Serra. I really helped her on that show, totally. That's when I first got to know Mel and first got to know Richard. So I have known Mel for a long time. We have never been close, but we have always had a nice rapport and kept in touch. So I went to Mel's, too, because I really think one of the artists missing from the SFMOMA collection now is Mel Bochner. I went to Mel to talk to him about maybe trying to get a work for the collection here, and we spent the afternoon in the studio together. I have been now reading all the stuff I hadn't read about Mel. It's so clear. Mel Bochner is one of *the* most conceptual of the conceptual artists. Yet when you read it—and maybe now it's in retrospect but—the fundamental basis of his work is that there has to be a material condition or support for

the work of art; that it is not just a text, but that in fact, the work of art exists in a space on a wall, on a floor, with a material.

Cándida Smith: Site-specific?

01-00:41:43

Garrels: Not necessarily. Mel is not really a site-specific artist. He sets up a situation that then is created in a space. That can move around. Mel has done works on walls and probably made for a wall, but they're not really site specific. Very similar to Sol LeWitt. Very similar attitude. And Sol and Mel were very close.

Lawrence Weiner is another. I did a project with Lawrence at Dia. Lawrence is a great formalist. The colors he uses, the scale, size of lettering, the way the lettering works with a particular site—it's a very formal work. [Five lines of this section of the interview have been sealed.] So I have to say, I'm still attracted to those artists where, again, the physicality, the formal ideas of the work are somehow intrinsic to what that work is.

Cándida Smith: One of the things I want to follow up on as well is you mentioned you weren't so comfortable in the market-oriented places or the nonprofit venues. Of course, they're dependent on money issues, as well.

01-00:43:37

Garrels: Absolutely.

Cándida Smith: But how did that relate to the anti-market, anti-commodity aspect of seventies art?

01-00:43:53

Garrels: What artists discovered at that time was basically, the market can find a way to embrace almost anything. That was one of the great things about Dia, was that the idea of it was to allow an artist to develop their ideas in the purest way possible, without regard to any constraint. It was an ideal situation, in many ways. I could talk at some length about Dia and the issues of that philosophy and where it led and what problems resulted. Another institution I loved in New York at the time was P.S.1, which opened in 1976. I saw the first show there. That was one of those early experiences for me. Again, the idealism of that institution. So actually, P.S.1 and Dia, for me, were two of the fundamental touchstones. The market is fascinating because it provides a quantitative index to an extremely subjective set of experiences or values. It's interesting how consensus develops. That for a long time, there was very little market for Warhol. When he died, the market was terrible. But over the years, it's just grown and grown and now he's incredibly valued in the market. I have to say for me, getting into and interested in the work of Jasper Johns took a lot longer.

Cándida Smith: For you personally?

01-00:46:01

Garrels:

Me personally. It didn't speak to me immediately. It was only over years of then seeing something. It's like an irritant or something. There's something there but you can't quite get it. Actually, for me, Johns got particularly interesting when he did the four seasons, the *Seasons* paintings at Leo's [Castelli] in '86 or '87. Everybody in New York hated them. Well, that just made them all the more interesting to me. Because they became more confessional, they became more romantic. Again, for Johnsians and people who didn't like them, it felt like Johns had turned his back, in some ways, on some of the fundamental character and issues of his work. I'm a bit fascinated by that, too. I fell in love with late Willem de Kooning in 1984. I saw the show at Xavier Fourcade. I'd come down from Boston. There was a show of these late paintings. Again, most people hated them. They thought they were too lyrical, too romantic, that they had nothing to do with the fundamental character of de Kooning as an artist. I was just smitten by them. They were *so ravishingly* beautiful, so open and free. Just mesmerizing paintings. It's like with Philip Guston, the way people hated Guston when he shifted into the figurative style in the late sixties. The only artist who championed Guston at that point was de Kooning. De Kooning was an artist who was unafraid to keep changing. I'm really interested in artists who are not afraid to make mistakes, artists who are not afraid to challenge their own work. That's part of the reason I love Sigmar Polke. He continually baffles his critics, he continually experiments. He's not afraid to make mistakes. Sometimes he makes terrible paintings. That's what keeps him fresh and alive and interesting. So artists who keep going. A lot of artists can have a career for five years, and then they either end up repeating themselves and they just go back and just keep mining the same ideas, same styles, or they give up after five or ten years.

Cándida Smith: This all sounds very personal, focused on the individuality of artists.

01-00:49:02

Garrels:

I am, I'm very interested in the individuality of the artist. There's no question about that.

Cándida Smith: That would suggest to me you were not terribly interested in identity politics art, whether it was gay or women's or black nationalist or whatever.

01-00:49:18

Garrels:

Well, no, except that none of us can get free or clear of our biography, of our identity. I'm a gay man. You realize you have a certain relationship in society because of who you are. Whether that means being a woman or being a black man or being a gay man or whatever.

The specificity of cultural background. I have to say, when I went to Germany for the first time, in 1984, I suddenly became aware of my own family background, which is very German on both sides. But in the United States, most Germans gave up their cultural identity. After the First World War, nobody spoke German and by the Second World War, nobody even spoke of *coming* from Germany. So my family, there was absolutely no sense of any cultural background whatsoever; we were just Americans.

I went to Germany in 1984, and it gave me a chill that I knew how people were thinking, that people looked like my aunts and uncles. I suddenly realized I have a lot of German cultural baggage that I was completely oblivious of and unaware of; that there is no such thing as simply an “American.” We are and we aren’t. You have to become self-conscious of what that gives you, how it shutters your vision or your experience. For me, it’s like becoming sensitized to the fact that other people bring very different experiences to whatever it is. So in fact, I’m fascinated by the other. Because I grew up in a very homogeneous environment. We had Swedes who lived two miles up the road, and they were considered exotic. I had a cousin who married a Swede and that was a big deal, in the fifties. Because I grew up in this homogeneous environment, I have been completely interested, and always have been, in the world outside and people from different cultures and different backgrounds and what they bring to it and how they see the world and what that gives us—me personally and as a culture and as a society. So in fact, I had been very interested very early on, in the eighties, with feminist work and black artists and Latino artists and gay artists. Maybe that was the thing with Jasper, I don’t even know. I hadn’t thought about that. Those works in 1986, the *Seasons*, did have a more confessional quality to them. He was letting things out. Maybe that’s when I began to identify with the work and become interested in it, as I saw that biography begin to be more profoundly exposed or available. No, but I have early on championed a lot of black, Latino, gay artists. It’s still something I’m very conscious of.

Cándida Smith: This is very helpful in placing you as a person in this larger topography. So, then, there’s this other looming question. You’re at the Dia, you’re at the center of the center, if you’re in a certain part of the art world. Then you move to Minneapolis. That seems like a puzzle to me.

01-00:53:22
Garrels:

Well, the puzzle there, the key there is Kathy Halbreich. Kathy became the director of the Walker. She’d just become named director of the Walker and we both came out to San Francisco for the Sigmar Polke retrospective opening. We went over Berkeley together. Sidra Stich

had done a show. I can't remember if it was her "Made in USA" show or if it was her surrealist show, but one of her major shows. Kathy and I went over to see it together, and we went to have lunch afterwards. And Kathy said, "Would you ever consider coming to the Walker?" I said, "I don't know, I might." I'd never been to the Walker. It was just this legendary institution.

I flew out. The Walker is an amazing place. When you're there and see it, it totally meets and lives up to its reputation. I adore Kathy. I have huge respect for her. Also I have to say, at that point, I'd been at Dia about five years. We'd been doing basically three projects every year, commissioning an artist or doing a focused exhibition from Dia's collection, and I'd done a lot of the things that I really had wanted to do. The idea of being able to work with a collection, where the collection was not static but could grow and where I could do small projects as well as big projects, also think about doing a thematic exhibition rather than monographic projects with artists, it opened up other kinds of possibilities for me as a curator and just for my own development and thinking.

Cándida Smith: A deeper historical, chronological—

01-00:55:25

Garrels:

Deeper historical, chronological—multiplicity of approach. Again, scale. You could do a small show. Also to do something with a really young artist. At Dia, when I got there, I really pushed the envelope; I invited Jenny Holzer to do her first project, and Tim Rollins and K.O.S., Francesco Clemente. There was a whole new generation of artists that we got involved at Dia, some of which were my initiation. Two of the last projects I had started there were inviting Katharina Fritsch, who I had first seen in the 1984 show "Von Hier Aus" in Düsseldorf, and inviting Bob Gober to do projects. So at that point, those were young emerging artists to do these massive projects at Dia. Just as Jenny was. So the idea of maybe doing small projects with even younger artists was also enticing to me, getting away from the Dia model.

Cándida Smith: Did you have any hesitancy about leaving New York and going back to the provinces?

01-00:56:33

Garrels:

I didn't, at that point. No. In fact, we were personally—My partner was writing plays and working at a restaurant, and we were living in this horrible little apartment in Hell's Kitchen. I was paid very low. Not that the Walker was offering so much money, but it was still more. I think we were a little bit burned out on New York at that point. Just the idea of maybe having a better place to live, and Richard could quit

working. I told him we'd have enough money that he could just write full-time. So there were personal decisions in it, as well.

Again, Kathy is really my mentor. I have to say, I'm an extremely lucky person to have just stumbled into working with Kathy at MIT. I learned my fundamental values from Kathy—about her engagement with artists, about I think listening to artists first. Kathy only has a BA. She was a studio fine arts major at Bennington College. I guess we're sympathetic people to each other. But her openness, her rigor, her freedom, but her attention to detail, her love of the open imaginative possibilities of art. All of that, I think. Her interest in the language that surrounds art, too. I just feel like I was incredibly lucky. So when Kathy went to the Walker and asked me to come out to be the senior curator, it was enticing. The Walker is one of these touchstone institutions. I knew Martin Friedman's program. It was just one of those places that you have to take into account. So to be invited to work there was exciting.

[End Audio File 1]

[Begin Audio File 2 02-09-2009.mp3]

02-00:00:03

Garrels:

I should talk a little bit about Dia. You mentioned it being at the center of the art world in New York in the eighties. Well, Dia was a very funny place. It had literally completely unraveled in '84. It had overextended hugely. The finances were in total disarray. They were facing investigation by the attorney general. Because of the collapse of the oil market. It was all based on income from petroleum stock. So the family, basically Dominique de Menil, took control and brought in old family lawyers and friends to take control of Dia and avoid public embarrassment.

By the time I got there in '86, Charlie Wright had become the director; there had been an interim director. I think we had five people working at Dia. In its heyday, Dia had over 300. There was a small operating budget. So I came in, I literally did everything. I was the curator, I was the registrar, I would do the public relations, I was working on publications. I didn't have an assistant. Thank God I typed so fast. When we opened the building on 22nd Street, I literally hand-typed every invitation. I made up the invitation list. We invited 1,000 or 2,000 people. It my idea of everybody in the art world that should come. I literally sat there at night typing the labels to go on the invitations. That's how we started. If we did a public talk, I would get the projector. If we had a reception afterwards, I bought the wine. Whatever. There were literally five of us at the beginning. Then gradually, we got a publications person. We had a secretary; an

accountant; the building manager, Jim; an administrative assistant, Charlie; and me. At the beginning, that was it. When I got to the offices at Dia—when I started there, they were on Mercer Street—it literally felt like the inhabitants had fled in front of an invading army. There were boxes sitting open, file cabinets that were half empty. It was just total disarray. It was *crazy*.

There was one night I was working late, and I just started pulling open flat file drawers, and discovered all the Leonardo codex drawings of Beuys. There was nobody to tell you *anything*. I opened the drawer and, oh my God!, here are the Beuys drawings! I was like, wow! You know I loved Beuys and this was like Ali Baba’s cave opening up for me. I called my friend Ann Temkin, who was then an assistant curator at MoMA, and I said, “Ann, you won’t believe it! You have got to come down here right away.” There they were. I’m sure *somebody* must have known they were there, but nobody had told me. That was the situation. It was just total chaos.

We got 22nd Street open and gradually, began building up the organization and the institution. By the time I left, I had an assistant, there was a secretary, there was a publications person, there was somebody doing registration, we hired a part-time registrar. All the experiences I had had at MIT doing clerical, doing registration, doing curatorial, all came together on that. So when I got to the Walker, that was the first time I had worked in a full-blown, mature institution with a full-blown collection and began working with a board of trustees and an acquisitions committee. It was the first time I had worked in a museum.

Cándida Smith: Was that a difficult transition for you?

02-00:04:54

Garrels:

No, not at all. Because again, the Walker, as a museum, has always been one of the most artist-oriented institutions. The board there sees its primary role as an institutional role, not as programming or being involved in the institution. Very few people in Minneapolis are collectors. They support the institution because they believe in the importance of the museum to the community. It’s not a “museum”; it’s called the Walker Art Center. From the beginning, back in the thirties, it was a WPA center. Then Martin Friedman invented it as the institution we know. He saw it very much in the old idea of MoMA at the very beginning, that it would have visual arts, film, performing arts, design—visual culture in all of its manifestations. Yes, it had a collection and did exhibitions, but that was just one part of its role as an institution. So the Walker, in many ways, is not quite the traditional museum, still, even though it does function as a museum.

Cándida Smith: What about in terms of, as a curator, your expectations of what the public would be interested in, what the public can handle, what the viewers that you think are going to come what they should be able to handle? Did that shift as you moved from the Dia to the Walker, or from a semi-alternative space to more established, community-based institutions like the Walker or SFMOMA?

02-00:06:44

Garrels:

Not really. I have to say, I realize that a lot of the things I'm interested in and that the art world is interested in, the general public finds baffling or uninteresting. My mother was always a gauge, being a farm woman from Iowa. I remember when we opened the Dia building, she came to visit me in New York. We hadn't opened, but we had the Beuys and the Imi Knoebel and the Blinky Palermo shows up. We start at the top, with Blinky Palermo. She looked at it patiently. We went down to the next floor to see the Imi Knoebel, and she looked patiently. We got down to the second floor, which had the Joseph Beuys, and she finally lost her patience. She said, "Well, Uncle Wilbur always used to say, 'Some people have more money than brains.'" She found the Beuys stacks of felt completely outlandish. I can understand that, having been completely baffled by Beuys when I first saw him. So I guess what I'm interested in—and this is a position I share with Philippe de Montebello—that you try to present an exhibition at the highest level of quality and maintain the value of what you believe in, and then try to make that as open and as accessible to as wide a public as possible.

Now, on the other hand, I'm also interested in artists who are interested in popular culture. I think the public generally is more interested in images than in abstraction. They're more interested in psychological content than formal content. I'm interested in those things, too. When I went to Rome, it was one of those epiphanies, discovering the Italian Baroque. Discovering Bernini, discovering Caravaggio. They're as theatrical and as popular in their appeal as any artist. Certainly, in their time. Maybe that's part of the reason I'm interested in an artist like Kara Walker.

When I came here to the Bay Area, I discovered a lot of artists I didn't know, like Robert Arneson, like Jess. I admire the work tremendously. This question of what would be popular is so hard to predict. I did the Sol LeWitt retrospective here at SFMOMA without any regard for it being popular, but it proved to be quite a popular show. René Magritte is not an artist who affects me in my soul, in my gut, but he's an absolutely fascinating artist. So when I was here at SFMOMA, for me, it was clearly obvious that was a big, big gap in the collection. When the *Personal Values* painting came up on the market, when Magritte's lawyer died and the estate came up for sale, it seemed like a great

opportunity to get a Magritte for the museum. Phyllis Wattis, who funded that, had no interest in that art, either. She loved abstraction, just like I do. But we both recognized that was a great painting and a very appealing painting, and we were able to get it for the collection. It's become one of the touchstone paintings that people love to come to SFMOMA to look at.

Cándida Smith: The shows at the Walker that you began to organize when you arrived there, they include both big shows and small shows?

02-00:11:22

Garrels:

The first show I did there, there was a major gap on the schedule. Kathy offered me the job, talked to me in November, and I can't remember exactly when I accepted it. Maybe it was in January or February, something like that. I moved to Minneapolis in May, and there wasn't a show for the next year, a major show. I came up with this idea of doing a show looking at photography in contemporary German art. I knew a lot of the artists. I had been going to Germany because of my connections with Dia. It seemed like a topic that was rich, that nobody had somehow touched on. So literally in nine months, I organized a big, big, big show called "Photography in Contemporary German Art, 1960 to the Present," beginning with Joseph Beuys and Bernd and Hilla Becher, because I had done a show with Bernd and Hilla at Dia. Those were my two touchstones, in terms of threads through photography in post-war German art. Then including Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke and on to the next generation, the Becher students. I think there were nineteen artists and it ended up being like nineteen small one-person shows, all brought together.

As I was developing it, there seemed to be a lot of interest. I had colleagues from museums around the country calling me to see if it might be shown at their museum. So it ended up with this amazing tour. It went to St. Louis, it went to Dallas, it went to the Guggenheim Downtown in New York. When it was in New York, a number of people in Europe saw it, and the director of the Louisiana Museum in Denmark asked if we might bring it to Denmark, a man named Steingrim Laursen. Lars Nittve, who had been the director of the Kunsthalle in Malmö, had seen it and recommended it to Steingrim. Then I was at Documenta, and Marc Scheps, who was the director of the Ludwig, said, "Oh, we have got to bring this show to Germany. Nobody in Germany would do this show." He was right. The factions in Germany are so polarized that you would have had to have been a mad person or a total masochist, in Germany, to have done this show. So it went to Cologne, to the Ludwig Museum, and it was much more complicated that I realized. I didn't realize fully the depths of partisanship in Germany. Then it ended up going to the Museum für

Gegenwartskunst in Basel. So the show just kept going, and changing as it went along.

02-00:14:21

Then I did a little show. I came out here to San Francisco, actually. I can't remember what show I came out to see. Or maybe John Caldwell had invited me to do a talk for the collectors group out here; I think that might have been it. Typically, I try to see everything. I went to New Langton Arts, I went to the Mexican Museum. I just tried to see as much as I could. There was a *really* terrific show at the Mexican Museum, of Guillermo Gómez-Peña, an installation. So I ended up inviting Guillermo, who at that point, had begun collaborating with Coco Fusco, and I asked them to do a project at the Walker. They wanted to do a project around the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America. That was just a one-gallery show, but turned into this quirky, wonderful, intense project. So those were the two major projects I did at the Walker, as well as then overseeing some other shows that were on the schedule. I was only there two-and-a-half years. It was much shorter than I, of course, ever would have anticipated.

Cándida Smith:

Let's talk about your coming to SFMOMA.

02-00:15:53

Garrels:

Maybe I should say one more thing about the Walker, which was before I got to the Walker, before I had accepted the job, and it was in the winter. The retrospective of Sigmar Polke from San Francisco was opening at the Hirshhorn, and it opened in February. I went down for the opening, and Sigmar had just finished a new painting that hadn't been in San Francisco. He literally finished it in the galleries. I know he had come with his paintbrushes and some paint and was still adding little things. The night of the opening, I saw this painting. It was called *Mrs. Autumn and Her Two Daughters*. I saw the painting, I said, "This is the painting for Minneapolis." Because it was the allegory of the invention of snow, the creation of snow. So I called Kathy in Minneapolis and I said, "There's this *amazing* painting by Sigmar." It was on reserve for the Hirshhorn and then they ended up passing. Kathy flew down from the Walker with two trustees, and I took the train down from New York, and we saw this painting. We all loved it and agreed it would be exactly the right painting for the Walker. Martin Friedman had started collecting Germans by collecting a big major painting by Anselm Kiefer. So there was already this recognition of this post-war development of new painting in Germany. That was the first acquisition. I literally arrived at the Walker and presented that, and it was acquired for the collection. So for me, that was very exciting. One of the things at the Walker I cut my teeth on was thinking about a museum collection and beginning to develop a museum collection. Of course, the Walker has a wonderful collection to build on.

Cándida Smith: Were there other major acquisitions at the Walker that you were particularly proud of?

02-00:18:03

Garrels:

Because I was doing all this work with the German photography show, a woman from Vermont called me out of the blue and said there was a collection of the multiples of Joseph Beuys that was going to be sold, and she was acting as the agent for it. It was a very private, unknown person. He lived in Baden-Baden. The Walker has one of the great graphic arts collections. It has all the graphics of Jasper Johns, for example. I thought we'd never be able to buy a major sculpture of Beuys for the Walker, but by acquiring this comprehensive group of multiples, which included graphics and sculptural objects and the entire diversity of kinds of materials, objects, ideas of Beuys, we could represent Beuys in a major, significant way. But not through the idea of a single great object. I flew over and looked at the collection, went through it, and it was astonishing. We did end up buying it. It was quite an expensive purchase for the Walker. As I recall, I think we finally got the price down to \$1.5 million. That was a *huge* purchase for the Walker. We did a contract, where the board agreed that we could borrow the money against future funds. The Walker had an endowment for purchases. So we could borrow against the endowment and pay it back over five years. So that I think every year for five years, we took \$300,000 out of the budget at the beginning of the year to pay back the Beuys multiples. When I left the Walker, my successor, Richard Flood, jokingly, but with a little bit of peevishness, said, "You have tied my hands for the next three years." That was one of the great acquisitions at the time. We were also collecting really young contemporary art, too, at the same time.

Cándida Smith: So let's talk about the circumstances surrounding your coming here, the way in which you came to be aware that you and the position might be a good fit. I'm interested in how you assessed the institution at that time and the opportunities it presented to you. Also the promises made to you, knowing full well that, probably, no promises made at hiring ever fully are complied with, just because circumstances change.

02-00:21:15

Garrels:

John Caldwell was not a close friend but a good colleague. We knew each other pretty well. We had started spending evenings together in Germany as we were both courting Sigmar Polke. I had a lot of respect for John. He was a passionate, passionate curator, a man of incredible conviction and foresight. He believed in contemporary art as only a full evangelical can. I come from a Protestant background. Not exactly evangelical, but toward that side. When John discovered contemporary art, he discovered contemporary art late in his life. He was trained as a

nineteenth-century art historian. He was at the Met. He did not come out of a contemporary background. It was relatively late for him that he discovered contemporary art, just as Jack Lane. When Jack and John basically re-launched the Carnegie International in 1985, it had been a very sleepy, parochial exhibition for a long time. In 1985, Jack and John reinvented it. They had been inspired by the great shows in Germany in the early eighties, like “Westkunst,” “Von Hier Aus.” They had discovered post-war German art together, and they discovered minimalism. They re-launched the Carnegie as a major international exhibition in 1985, and then again in 1988. I really followed what they were doing very closely.

Then both came out here, and Jack and John reinvented SFMOMA. Jack and John’s first big acquisition—it was really Jack’s acquisition—was the big Kiefer painting. John came with a very avant-garde, very contemporary program here. Then John died of a heart attack, very unexpectedly. Everybody was shocked, saddened by it. John died in March. If I recall correctly, it was in July, I got a call from Jack, asking me if I would consider the position, John’s position out here, as curator of painting and sculpture. Jack was like, “Let me fly to Minneapolis. Let’s have lunch. I would love to talk to you about this position.” That was fine. Jack flew out and did a full-court press. It’s nice to feel wanted.

I had no idea. I loved working at the Walker, I loved Kathy. It was a great place. My partner Richard was less happy with Minneapolis. He’s an East Coast, Long Island, New Yorker. He had never been in the Midwest, found it a little different and difficult in some ways. The weather, not so great. So I flew out. Jack gave me a tour of the new building, which was still under construction. Trustees were incredibly warm. I was very impressed by their engagement, by their commitment. I remember Mimi Haas taking me out to lunch, and I met Elaine McKeon and other trustees. There was a real sense of community here, a community around the museum, a community of trustees that really wanted this place to be a lively, engaged institution. Of course, that was Jack’s commitment. So there was a bit of a back and forth.

I was really torn about leaving the Walker, about coming to San Francisco. I remember I would pore through the catalogs of the two collections, comparing them. Well, the Walker has this; SFMOMA has this. It’s missing this; it doesn’t have that, da-da-da-da. They were building the new building, which was quite exciting. So it was a combination. Then also I have to say, Elaine, who’s really smart and shrewd, she started calling Richard, my partner. He got very interested in moving to San Francisco, as well. So it was a combination of feeling like here was a director who really was committed to a

program of real integrity, of innovation, of international profile; of a community of trustees that were extremely committed to the institution. It just felt like a very vibrant, dynamic situation.

Cándida Smith: Did it seem like you were going to have a greater scope of opportunity for the kinds of things you wanted to do?

02-00:27:34

Garrels:

No, I don't think so. I could be ambitious. Like the things I was doing at the Walker, I saw that I could continue those. The Walker is a more self-contained institution. It's an institution where it really is a community unto itself. Whereas SFMOMA felt like it's an institution that was part of a much broader community, and it engaged that community on many different levels. I remember Jack was talking to John Weber about coming here as the head of the education department. John was a curator up in Portland. I remember we went out to lunch together and we were exploring: "Well, do you think you're going to do it?" "Do you think *you*'re going to do it?" John was really obviously interested in the relevance of the institution to the community. That was very appealing to me. I do have this Protestant evangelical side. Because art has meant so much to me in my own life, I really would love to be able to share that with other people. It's wonderful to see somebody else get excited about those things that we're excited about. So John had this commitment to engaging the museum out in the community. I think for both of us, it was important that we were both coming here, at the time. I felt that the trustees here, the collectors, were just so passionate about the museum and about their collections, too. I have been fascinated by collectors, starting in New York. I'm really interested in people who take this into their personal lives. People have a lot of options about what they can do with their money and their time. So somebody who decides to spend a lot of their time and a lot of their money dealing with art, I'm interested in why. What they're getting from it and how it relates to their lives and why they want to support the institution. A lot of collectors are really fascinating people. There was just a great community of collectors out here.

Cándida Smith: What was your assessment of the collection when you arrived in 1993? As you were considering whether to arrive.

02-00:30:41

Garrels:

Well, it wasn't the most important thing. It's similar to the Walker; the exhibition program was really the most important part of the museum's profile. The collection wasn't the determining factor. It was having better galleries, more space to do exhibitions that was probably the most propelling part of coming here. There was a nice collection with some nice things. Jack was clearly committed to strengthening

the collection, by buying the Kiefer. That was the foundation stone that was put down for going forward, building collection.

Cándida Smith: The Polkes were already here, as well?

02-00:31:24

Garrels:

The Polkes had come. Jack and John raided the 1988 Carnegie. They picked the cream of the crop out of the '88 Carnegie. They brought trustees from SFMOMA for the opening. They bought the Rebecca Horn, they bought the Polkes. There was more than that. It was clear there was a real commitment to build. We were bringing the Jeff Koons show to the Walker that John had organized here. I know SFMOMA had acquired the [Koons] *Michael Jackson [and Bubbles]*. I didn't know all the back stories at that point. I didn't realize just how complicated and difficult some of those acquisitions had been, like the *Michael Jackson*.

Cándida Smith: How did you identify the peer institutions in 1993? Was this a lateral move for you, more or less?

02-00:32:39

Garrels:

I saw it as a lateral move. The building was appealing, the community was appealing, the city itself, being in San Francisco. I had been here a couple times. John Caldwell had invited me out a couple times to give talks. It's an incredibly beautiful, captivating city and landscape. My partner Richard was really fed up with Minneapolis, the winters and lots of other things. So the city itself was part of the appeal. But I saw it as basically a lateral move.

Cándida Smith: As you would look at the museum world at that time, what were the other institutions that you felt were comparable in strength, maybe the institutions with which SFMOMA might be competing?

02-00:33:38

Garrels:

Peers? Certainly, the Hirshhorn, MOCA in Los Angeles, the Whitney in New York. MoMA's in a class by itself. Then you get smaller institutions like the MCA in Chicago. Or you get a bigger institution like the St. Louis Art Museum, which at that time, had a very active contemporary program; or Dallas, which had some contemporary activity. Or the big historical museums that also had some engagement with contemporary art. Then there were smaller solely contemporary institutions like the MCA in Chicago. I would say the peer institutions are Hirshhorn, Walker, MOCA.

Cándida Smith: To what degree did you share Jack Lane's institutional goals for where the SFMOMA was going to go?

02-00:34:50

Garrels:

I was interested in collection building at the Walker. Clearly, that was *very* important to Jack. So it was something I was interested in becoming more involved with and engaged with. John had done a very good job of that, working with the collectors here, in tandem with the museum, trying to buy works out of exhibitions, placing works in collections here. When I got here, I ended up getting more and more and more involved in collection. Jack and I shared, generally, a lot of the same values and commitments. Although, probably my tastes are more eclectic than Jack's. That was fine with him. I was able to do that through the "New Work" shows. That was where I could show a Kara Walker or Andrea Zittel. [Two sentences here have been sealed.]

Cándida Smith:

What about the perspectives of the trustees as you're coming in? What are their goals for the museum? Do they have well defined goals, in terms of the kinds of art the museum should be collecting and exhibiting?

02-00:36:39

Garrels:

Jack and John had established a very international outlook. I would call it a rigorous, avant-garde approach. Jack had an idea that museums should show the, quote, "best" work of a time, and try to collect the masterpieces. [A portion of this section is sealed/]

Cándida Smith:

As you get here, one of the first things you're going to do is be opening up the exhibition program a little bit more than—

02-00:39:30

Garrels:

A little bit more. I was also right in the middle of moving into this new building. I got here a year before we opened. All of our attention was focused on getting into the building. Getting the collection up, retooling the museum. Everybody thought we were moving into a much bigger, better facility. I don't think anybody truly realized how transformative the move would be to the very character of the museum; that suddenly we were a public institution, in a way that we were not in the War Memorial Building. The War Memorial Building, people went who already were really interested in what was going on there. It was a small group of people, relatively speaking. It did have a very clubby feel to it. When we moved down here to South of Market, suddenly were right in the middle of the city, a big, prominent institution. A lot more people were interested in the institution and curious about the museum. It did become a bigger, more expensive operation. So the concerns about how many people were coming in, how many people were going to buy things at the store, how many people were going to become members suddenly became important issues for the institution, in a way that they hadn't been in the old building. That was fine with me. More people would see what we were doing. We had to have a bigger public. We had be more part of the

conversation here in the city; hopefully, in the region. I didn't feel that we had to compromise the program in any way. Also I had maybe a more eclectic, broader idea of what the program might be than John did.

[Several minutes of the interview are sealed.]

Cándida Smith: I'm also interested in how you thought through the process of how you were going to hang the second-floor galleries. What were the opportunities, the problematics? What stories could be told with that space?

02-00:44:35

Garrels:

There were things already built in. It was very clear the second-floor end galleries would be devoted to the architecture and design department. So what would be the painting and sculpture department presentation of collection was the second floor to the end of the grand filade on the front of the building. That was already set. The very first galleries are smaller in scale, lower ceiling. So those were definitely the galleries for the early modernist work in the collection. There had to be a gallery dedicated to Clyfford Still, there had to be a gallery dedicated to the Anderson Pop Art collection. So there were already pretty strong basic elements. In the initial program, the last three galleries were supposed to be dedicated to California art. There wasn't much leeway in between. The collection was thin. So we decided it was going to be a chronological installation with clusters around the first gallery, where there's a pretty good collection of Matisse and fauvism; that had to be the first anchor, the *Femme au chapeau*. So a pretty traditional installation.

Obviously, the collection didn't have the scope of other major collections, to present it in the same way. I think that was what was obvious when we opened the building. The museum was criticized for having this big, new building and a relatively modest collection. If you will, a thin collection, a spotty collection. That the collection wasn't worthy of this new building that had been built. The collection was much of the reason the building was built; in the old building, the exhibitions had totally overtaken the facility. Very little of the collection was shown at any one time. There were a lot of trustees who were building major collections, and everybody felt that if a new building wasn't built, there would be no chance to build the collection here. The collections the trustees were building would end up disappearing, dissipating. So a lot of the impetus for this new building was collection.

The other part of it was that the old building didn't meet current museum standards, didn't maintain the level of climate control. We

had leaks in the skylights. It was becoming increasingly difficult and problematic to get loans for exhibitions or to get the major exhibitions that people wanted to see here. Those exhibitions weren't going to come to San Francisco, they were going to go to Los Angeles because San Francisco didn't have the facility. So there was a competitiveness between San Francisco and LA on the part of trustees that felt like SFMOMA was really falling behind and had to have a new building.

Then of course, when we opened the building, there was much more attention on the collection because now people could see it. People were aware right away that there were a lot of thin spots in it.

Cándida Smith: How did you feel about the requirement to have a Still room, a dedicated Still room?

02-00:48:19

Garrels:

I was absolutely fine with it. [A sentence is sealed.] I have to say, Still is a great abstract painter. It's one of the signature parts of this collection. SFMOMA and the Albright-Knox have the two greatest Clyfford Still collections in the world. That's one of the distinguishing parts of the SFMOMA collection that makes it special, that makes it unique, that makes it a place of pilgrimage. So I had no problem with that at all. I felt it deserved that, that it should be a part of the signature part of the museum.

Cándida Smith: What about the three galleries dedicated to California art? How did you feel about that?

02-00:49:20

Garrels:

When I first got here, I didn't know California art that well. Growing up, my art years were on the East Coast. As I said, when I went to Europe in 1984 and saw a totally different narrative at the Ludwig Museum, which really showed a lot of European art that wasn't part of the New York approach, it demolished for me this sense of New York hegemony. I realized it was a much more problematic perspective. So coming here, I was curious about California art. I didn't know much about it. I mean I *really* didn't know much about it. So discovering the conceptual performance work that was going on in the Bay Area in the seventies was interesting.

When I first got here, the first show in the old building was the Robert Ryman retrospective, which I had booked into the Walker. Of course, I had done the show with Bob at Dia. Ryman is one of my favorite artists and painters, coming, really, out of that legacy of Rothko. Then the next show—and I think it was opening three weeks later—was a Jess retrospective. I had heard of Jess, but I did not know the work. I immediately started looking at the catalog and reading it. Paule

Anglim volunteered to take me over to meet Jess, who was still living in his house in the Mission at that time. Paule picked up sandwiches. We went to Jess, to the house, and we had lunch together. I was completely bowled over. The house was amazing. It was a great Gesamtkunstwerk, an overall total work of art. It was an environment where the artwork extended out of the environment, where it extended out of his lived life. It was one of those wow!, ah-hah! moments, an artist I didn't know. Of course, then hanging the show, I got more and more and more involved in it, and I fell completely in love with Jess as an artist. He was very shy. I tried to get him to talk to me about the ideas for the show or how it might be presented. He had absolutely no interest. He would not talk to me about it. So I was terrified. Here I was hanging an artist whose work I didn't know that well, in his hometown, and we had much smaller space in the old building than probably should have been allocated. The show was organized by Michael Auping, at the Fort Worth museum. So I decided to hang it a little bit salon-style because I didn't want to eliminate that much. It felt like the work was sympathetic to a non-modernist treatment. I felt very good about it. I think people responded well. I finally got Jess to agree to come over to see it, but he would only come at nine o'clock in the morning, before anybody else had arrived in the building. He came to the staff entrance, he didn't want anybody to know he was coming. He went through the exhibition, and he loved it. So I was thrilled. He was *very* happy with the show. It was exciting for him to see all of his work again.

I had the Ryman show up on one side of the museum and Jess up at the other. I realize maybe that frames my own idiosyncrasies. Ryman represented the New York hardcore avant-garde, post-war painting, minimal/conceptual tendencies. Jess, to me, represented some of the best of the very individualistic, eccentric, unique to Northern California. I think I realized at that point that that had to be part of this museum's mission, that both of these things somehow had to go on simultaneously here. I think I'm part of a generation with the idea of the specificity of place, that the local is global. We were discovering all kinds of artists.

In 1989, there was a show at P.S.1 called the Brazil Projects. It was the first time most people in New York or in the art world had seen the post-war Brazilian avant-garde. It was organized by a European curator named Chris Dercon. It was an, again, epiphany. Who were these artists? Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Mira Schendel. I had never heard of any of these people. It was amazing work. When I got to the Walker, Chris Dercon had left P.S.1 and he had become the director of a new space in Rotterdam called Witte De With Center for Contemporary Art. His first opening exhibition was a retrospective of Hélio Oiticica, this great Brazilian artist. I knew he was organizing the

show. I said, “Chris, do you think we could bring that show to the States?” Kathy and I flew over for the opening, and Kathy loved the work. It was just a revelation. Astonishing, fabulous work. It had a European tour. It went to Paris, it went to Lisbon, I think one other place. Then we brought it to the Walker. It was glorious there. Then it was supposed to go to the Guggenheim in New York, and three weeks before it was to open, before it closed at the Walker, Tom Krens cancelled it. As a result, that show didn’t have one American review. Every critic in New York was waiting for the show to come to the Guggenheim. By that time, it was too late to review it in Minneapolis. It was like if the trees falls, will anybody hear it? Nobody did. But it was a great show. I have to say, the family and everyone who was close to Oiticica who came to see the show thought that was the most perfect and glorious presentation of any of the venues. So I had already discovered, was really beginning to understand that the art world was full of wonderful artists that had not been incorporated into the canon in New York, that were not in the post-war rendering of art, as narrated by the New York critics, by the Museum of Modern Art. So I was already a little bit of a maverick in that way. So coming here, just discovering all these artists like Bruce Conner and Jess.

Then through my friendship with Jonathan Fineberg, Sandy Shannonhouse, who was the widow of Robert Arneson, invited me to visit Bob’s studio up in Benicia. I was just staggered by the work that was still there in the studio after Bob had died. We had wonderful works in the collection, including *California Artist*. So *California Artist* was the way the permanent collection ended when we opened the building. At the end of the grand filade was *California Artist*, staring back. I thought Arneson’s self-portraits were a major subject and among the most compelling and interesting works that he had made. I proposed organizing a show of Arneson self-portraits, because we already had *Smorgy-Bob* [*Smorgy-Bob the Cook*] in the collection, we had *California Artist*. I know a lot of my friends in New York thought I had really lost it. Arneson was not appreciated in New York. You probably know that he made *California Artist* in response to the criticism. He was in a group show at the Whitney, and Hilton Kramer, major New York critic, lambasted California artists as empty-headed. I can’t remember all of the pejoratives he used, but Arneson just embraced those and made *California Artist* in response to Hilton Kramer’s criticism. I thought that was just a great piece.

[This section of the interview is sealed.]

[End Audio File 2]

Interview #2: February 18, 2009

[Begin Audio File 3]

Cándida Smith: I wanted to start today by talking about acquisitions you made during your first stint as Haas Curator, and some of the individuals you worked with to help realize these acquisitions. If you were to think of the four or five acquisitions that you made in the nineties that were most meaningful to you—maybe not even necessarily most important, but most meaningful to you—what would they be?

03-00:01:17

Garrels: I have to say, I was walking through the galleries last week and there are these markers along the way, if you go through the galleries. You walk into the first painting and sculpture gallery and there's the *Femme au chapeau*, which is maybe the single greatest painting in our collection. It's certainly a foundation. But now to the left, there's the gallery focusing on other modernist work, and there are the two Mondrians. I would say those are certainly among the most important, and most meaningful for me, too. Then going on, one sees the Magritte and then the Rothko. Then two galleries on over is the big Warhol, *National Velvet*. I would say all of those would certainly be among the things that were most significant for me. I think they have transformed the collection. When you're in there, you look at those paintings and think that these are, as Phyllis Wattis would say, "worth a detour."

Cándida Smith: In terms of acquiring these works, was it fortuitous or was it strategic planning on your part?

03-00:02:43

Garrels: Each one has its own history, its own story. The first work I acquired when I came here as curator was the Warhol, *National Velvet*. That started even before I got here. It was a very special situation. The Warhol Foundation had decided to offer some works from the foundation's holdings to museums across the country at half of the value of their appraised market value at the time. I was still at the Walker Art Center. At the Walker, we were offered some works, we made a selection. At the same time, there were things being offered to SFMOMA, which included *National Velvet*. Jack Lane and I went to look at the piece, the painting, in a warehouse in New York, and were convinced we had to try to get this painting. It was appraised at \$1.2 million, so it meant we would have to come up with \$600,000. Which, at the time, was the most expensive painting to be acquired by the museum.

I think it was the first acquisition meeting we had. It was in the old building. We brought the Warhol out. I have to say, we had to do some

jockeying because the Museum of Modern Art in New York also wanted this painting. In fact, I think at one point, they had it hanging at MoMA in New York. So we had to do a little politicking on the side. I called Walter Hopps, who I believe was somehow involved in this, and tried to make a strong case for this painting coming to San Francisco. Of course, Walter was sympathetic to California museums and SFMOMA. We lobbied with everyone we could.

There was the self-portrait that Hunk and Moo [Harry and Mary Margaret Anderson] gave, and then there was a group of small self-portraits, but there was very little in the collection. There was very little Warhol in the Bay Area at that time, very few works. Part of the goal of the foundation, with this program, was to place Warhol in major museums, to bolster his acknowledgment as a major artist of our time. I think that was what persuaded them finally, was that having really a major masterpiece in San Francisco, in Northern California, was going to be more important than adding to the holdings of MoMA, which are wonderful. It certainly would have been a great painting there, too, but that's why it came here. I remember we had it up in the old galleries of the old building, and I will never forget Don Fisher looking at that painting and stepping back and turning to me. He said, "He's pretty good, isn't he?" So I think that's when Don really focused on buying Warhol, right after that, and Don now has one of the great private collections of Warhol. So I think the foundation more than accomplished what they had hoped to do with this.

Cándida Smith: In terms of acquiring that painting, did you rely on a handful of supporters to provide the money?

03-00:06:22

Garrels: We had some accessions funds and I think we got contributions from several people on the committee. It was a little bit of this, a little bit of that, packaging it all together, but it was definitely a big stretch for the museum. Maybe it was in part a vote of support for me coming as a new curator on staff; but also Jack was very committed to getting Warhol into the collection.

Cándida Smith: At this point, you weren't aware of there being any concern about the price being paid?

03-00:06:56

Garrels: No, I think people understood. As I said, it was appraised at \$1.2 million. It was a very special situation, buying it at half that price. Of course now, if you put that painting on the market, or if you had put it on the market last year, it could have been a \$30 to \$50 million painting.

Cándida Smith: What about the Piet Mondrians?

03-00:07:22

Garrels:

The Mondrians. Well, Phyllis and I, Phyllis Wattis, we both love abstract painting, and we often talked about Mondrian. After the new building opened, it was clear that the collection had a lot of weak spots. The museum was criticized quite a lot in the press, and just around town, that the collection wasn't equal to this new building. Phyllis really took that to heart. She said, "We have got to do something to build up this collection." She said, "Make me a list and a plan, and let's see what we can do." So I made a list of a few key pre-war things, just a handful; most of the focus was on post-war. Mondrian was certainly on that. Absolutely fundamental for the development of abstraction, geometric abstraction. We talked about it off and on. At one point, Phyllis got quite ill. It seemed imperative that we had to really do something quickly. So I had been aware that there was a painting that had been owned by the Tremaine Collection in Connecticut. It had been in an exhibition at the Pace Gallery in New York. So I called Douglas Baxter, who was the director of the gallery, and asked him if that painting might be available. He said it was. It was owned, actually, by a gallery in London, but they had the painting flown back to New York—this was in just days—and I went in to New York. Our conservator at the time, Will Shank, went in, and I can't remember who else on the staff. Jack had already left. But we looked at it. It was a really interesting painting because it was a painting that Mondrian had painted originally in '36, I believe, when he was in London, and then brought it to New York and reworked it, adding more elements to it. In fact, the painting as it originally had been painted was shown in a show at SFMOMA, in its first version. It had some historical significance to the collection and to the museum, in an interesting way. We had the painting brought out, Phyllis looked at it and loved it, and we bought it. This happened, really, in a matter of days, because we really were worried that Phyllis might not make it. She really wanted a Mondrian for the collection.

Phyllis recovered fully. A couple weeks later, she was in good shape. We had it and we had it up, and Phyllis said, "Wouldn't it be good if we had a second one? It seems a little lonely." I have always been intrigued by the unfinished New York pictures. I will never forget my first trip to Germany in 1984. At the museum in Düsseldorf, the Kunstsammlung Westfalen, they have one of the taped paintings. Also one of the other New York paintings. It always made such an impression on me to understand Mondrian's process that the painting becomes so alive when you see what was going into it. I knew Sidney Janis Gallery still had one, I think probably the last one of those paintings that wasn't in a collection. I think there's one at the Pompidou and the one in the Düsseldorf. I called Carroll Janis and

asked if they might consider selling it. Because they had been holding it since Mondrian's death, so what is that now? Fifty years plus. I went in and met with Carroll, and he put a price on it. I went back to Phyllis and she said, "Yes, let's do it." So we ended up with the two Mondrians.

Cándida Smith: Money was not a problem in that case.

03-00:12:14

Garrels: [Two sentences here are sealed.] These were things Phyllis loved. She was just so excited about it, that the museum could have a Mondrian. So no. She didn't bat an eye.

Cándida Smith: You mentioned that when you got the first one, the painting looked a little lonely. I suppose the question that pops into my mind, then, is the question of how far one contextualizes the work that you have. Because what is the right context for looking at Mondrian works? Do you need more Dutch painting? What is it that you need in order to understand his historical place? Or is that even a real question for a museum of this nature?

03-00:13:18

Garrels: We have a very small collection of early modern work, really beginning with fauvism. Then we have one wonderful cubist painting by Georges Braque. We have the Brancusi. There are a few things. We have got a wonderful Franz Marc, which is a very interesting painting because it bridges between basically cubism and expressionist work. We have these few markers along the way. For me, Mondrian is crucial because you see that next step from cubism into absolutely pure abstraction. It's more about the way it sets the foundation for looking at post-war geometric abstraction. Looking at an Ellsworth Kelly, looking at a Donald Judd—those artists of the fifties and sixties and seventies who are really fundamental and crucial to the collection. I was really seeing the painting more about the way one could begin to see the art of our time, rather than contextualizing it within a historical continuum—although I think it makes an important marker in the development of abstraction.

Cándida Smith: Magritte is another important marker in the history of modern painting, though not one that's typical for what you have in the collection. What about *Personal Values* and how that came to be acquired?

03-00:15:12

Garrels: Well, there's a nice, small core collection of surrealist work. We were given, at the time before the new building, a wonderful Dali, 1927, from the Schremms. There's a wonderful Yves Tanguy, and then the more expressionist Surrealist like Matta [Roberto Antonio Sebastián Matta Echaurren]. We had really a nice collection of Joseph Cornell.

But Magritte is one of those iconic figures. Again, he's so important for contemporary art. I think he's really fundamental for somebody like Jasper Johns. So again, it was both how it fit within a historical nexus, but more important, about how Magritte sets up a lot of post-war [art]. So whether it's Jasper Johns or Vija Celmins or John Baldessari, he's a really fundamental painter for contemporary art. Magritte was not an artist that I felt personally really closely engaged with. And Phyllis, the same. This particular painting came on the market. It was being sold by the man who had been Magritte's attorney in New York. It's one of the iconic Magrittes. So when it came on the market—it was at Christie's—Phyllis and I had a conversation about it. I saw it in New York and was even more struck by it when I saw it. It's *beautifully* painted. The colors are fantastic. It's not just got great iconic imagery, but is a really complicated, beautifully painted painting. So we had the painting flown out—at that point, Phyllis didn't leave her apartment too much—and brought it out, and she was just delighted with it. Again, I think the color was appealing to her, and it's just one of those classic, iconic pictures. We thought, we're only going to have one Magritte in the collection. We didn't have any Magritte before. Magritte had been on my list, along with Mondrian. but I wanted a post-war Magritte. The earlier pictures are darker. They are more psychological. The colors are more muted, more tonal. The post-war pictures, there's more light. *Personal Values* is the same time as the—I have forgotten the title now, but the great series of paintings of the townscape at sunset, in the twilight. It's a forerunner of a lot of contemporary artists' work. So this particular painting really struck both of us as *exactly the right one* for this collection. We would never get a second one, so let's really make a strong effort to get this one. So we strategized.

I went back to New York to see the sale up in the auction house. There was definitely a buzz about this picture. It was creating a lot of interest and excitement. You talk to the people at the auction houses and they were saying there was a lot of interest. Phyllis and I, we had dinner the night before the sale and talked about our strategy. I told her, I said, "I'm sure we have got to go to at least \$6 million on this." We thought, "Well, let's do \$6 million and maybe we'll do a little more." We were in the trustee conference room. Elaine McKeon, who was the chair of the board, was there; Brooks Walker was there; Lori Fogarty, who was the acting director at the time; and I was on the phone. Bidding at auction, there's a strategy, you have got to figure out if you want to be on what they call the even leg or the odd leg. Do you want to be bidding \$5.9 million or do you want to be bidding \$6 million? Which do you think is going to be the psychological threshold? If you have to stop, where do you want to stop? Where do you think another bidder might stop? In this particular case, we were on the odd leg. I think we paid \$6.5 million, and I can't remember if that was with the premium.

I think it might have been. But we were right at our limit. Gosh, I can't remember now. But we got the painting. We discovered later that the underbidder was the Museum of Modern Art in New York. They had had an agent bidding for them in the auction house itself, at the auction, and they had authorized that agent—I think that agent only went to 6 or 5.9. We went one more. So we went over their threshold, and their agent was not authorized to go beyond that. So we got the picture.[Two sentences here are sealed.]

Cándida Smith: Do you think Phyllis would have allowed you to go higher than your limit, once you got into the moment of the bidding and the competition?

03-00:21:56

Garrels:

We were pretty deliberate. We were right at what we had decided to do. I can't remember. We might have gone one bid more. We did that with Eva Hesse, which was a crucial acquisition, because it was the first big acquisition we made. We bought it at auction, again, bidding on the phone in the trustee conference room. That one, we *really* strategized over. Again, going back to New York. Obviously, there was a lot of interest in Hesse at the sale; it was from the Gans collection. On that one, I met with Phyllis the night before the auction and I said, "Phyllis, we might have to go to \$2 million." We thought we had go 1.5, and I said, "I think we might have to go to 2." I decided to be on the even leg, so that we got into bidding at like 1.4, 1.6, 1.8. I looked at Phyllis, just to make sure she was comfortable going to 2, and she gave me the nod. We went to 2 and that was it, it stopped. In that case, it was the Whitney Museum that was the underbidder. Or one of their trustees, who was bidding to buy the work for himself, but as a promised gift to the Whitney. I really had a really strong sense on that particular work that \$2 million was the threshold, that nobody was going to go beyond 2. Which at the time, was a very high price for Hesse.

Cándida Smith: This was all possible because of Phyllis Wattis's personal commitment?

03-00:23:39

Garrels:

Absolutely. She felt so strongly that we had to build this collection. I would go over and have drinks or dinner with Phyllis every week or two. We would talk museum business and about the collection from five to six. Then at six, she would get her Scotch, and we would just talk about whatever, anything under the sun. Always the first question from Phyllis was, "So what's new? What have you seen that's new?" She was always interested in ideas, what was going on in the world, what was going on in technology. She got email very early. She was one of the first people I knew who had email. She was already in her late eighties. This was before I got here, but I remember in the late eighties, she fell in love with David Byrne and the Talking Heads. She was interested in avant-garde opera, music. She was interested in

things that challenged the old way of thinking or looking. I think it's what kept her fresh and vibrant and alive for so long. She was just so eager to know about the world, to think about what was coming next.

Cándida Smith: The Rothko? Was she central in getting the Rothko, as well?

03-00:25:22

Garrels:

Well, the Rothko's a little different because we decided when Jack Lane was here to deaccession a Monet from 1873. It had been a gift of the Crocker family. The *Seine at Argenteuil*. It was a painting that never, ever hung. It was just in storage. We had no context whatsoever for it. The collection really is a twentieth-century collection, beginning really at 1900. There were these handful of earlier eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pictures that just there was no place for them here. Jack had been considering deaccessioning the Monet for quite some time. We finally did get into a full review of it, presented it to the board, the acquisition committee and the board, and they voted to deaccession it. It sold at Christie's and did *very* well. I believe it sold for about \$8.8 million, something like that. Then Jack resigned and we had this fund.

From the very first time I got here, I realized that one of the key things that was needed for the collection was a great Rothko. It's a troubled history, with Rothko at SFMOMA. The museum gave Rothko his first one-person museum show—I believe in 1946, maybe '47. The museum acquired a great surrealist Rothko called *Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea*, which would have been the great complement to our early Pollock, *Guardians of the Secret*. Not the full-blown mature style of either artist, but the best while they were still linked to surrealism, the absolute best examples.

But in the early 1960s the director at the time, George Culler, felt the museum needed a mature-style Rothko, of the floating color fields, and he approached Rothko. I believe this is the language. He asked Rothko if he would be willing to trade that painting for a more typical Rothko. As I understand it, Rothko was quite taken aback. He did trade, but he gave a nice, typical Rothko. I would call it a B-plus. Not great scale. It's a very nice painting. It's a good Rothko, but not a great one. It just got lost in the galleries.

[Nine sentences here are sealed.] So there's a troubled history, SFMOMA with Rothko. But Rothko is so fundamental to the Bay Area and to this museum's history. For me personally, Rothko was one of my first moments of epiphany with contemporary art—with art in general—with the Phillips Collection. I felt we had to ideally find a painting that was commensurate with the quality of those paintings at the Phillips Collection. So from the moment I got here, I started

looking for a Rothko, a great one. I saw a lot of paintings. I never saw one that gave me that moment where you just stop and hold your breath. It was always like, nice, fine, okay. I have to say, you listen to dealers and they tell you, “Oh my God, isn’t that a fantastic Rothko? Isn’t that beautiful? Isn’t this a great one?” Da-da-da-da. But finally in my gut, if it didn’t happen, I couldn’t trust it. Everybody knew we were looking for a Rothko.

I was in New York. I was in the galleries in Chelsea and I was coming back to San Francisco that evening, and I got a call in the afternoon. I don’t remember now who called me, but it was from Sotheby’s, and said they had just gotten in a great Rothko that would be in the next sale. They had just uncrated it. I said, “Well, can I come see it?” I said, “I’m leaving tonight.” They said fine. I jumped in a cab and went up to the auction house, to a viewing room, and saw this painting. This was the one where my mouth dropped. I just stood absolutely still. It was that moment, that feeling of transformation. I flew back and talked to Phyllis about it. She couldn’t travel, but in principle she was interested. I got reproductions for her. I talked to Elaine McKeon, who was chairman of the board, and Lori Fogarty, who was the acting director. Elaine and someone else came back to New York to look at the painting with me. Maybe it was Lori. We had a handful of people in the executive committee look at the images. Phyllis strongly encouraged us to do this. She felt it was the right thing to do, using some of the Monet money. So with Phyllis’s encouragement and endorsement, everybody had the courage to go ahead even though we didn’t have a director at the time. This was a *painting*, nobody had seen a painting like this in a long time.

[Six sentences are sealed.]

So we did go ahead. Again, we were sitting in the trustee conference room, bidding on the phone. I think on this one, we did go to \$6 million, which at the time was a record for a Rothko. I was just so absolutely convinced that this was one of the greatest ones that would be on the market for a long time, was the perfect one. If you could have one great Rothko, this could be the one. We got it, and I think it’s proved to be an extraordinary Rothko. If that painting were on the open market today, it probably, as of last fall, would have been a \$60 million picture. At the time, there were some people, I know, in the community who felt like we were being extravagant with the museum’s money. This wasn’t Phyllis’s money, this was museum money. We ended up, I think it was, \$6.5 million. We still had, I don’t know, about \$1.5 million left. With that, we bought a really early Brice Marden, a painting that had been in his first New York show. Those were the two pictures that we got out of the Monet money.

Cándida Smith: Were you also looking for, say, an equivalent Pollock?

03-00:35:05

Garrels: That, we knew was impossible. It just isn't out there. A Pollock, already at that point, would have been double, triple, quadruple that price, if you could have found one on the market.

[The next thirteen minutes are sealed.]

Cándida Smith: Several people have mentioned that this period, the interregnum when Lori Fogarty was acting director, was a really critical period in terms of acquisitions. It seems like you're confirming that.

03-00:48:07

Garrels: That was just about the time Phyllis really made the commitment. I'm sure we had been talking for many, many months. That conversation probably started in '96. The building opened in '95, so maybe it was like fall of '95. I think by '96, we were really talking about it. I can't remember—I have to go back and look at the files—when I gave her my first strategic plan for key gaps to be filled. But it was right at the moment Jack was leaving. We did sell the Monet while Jack was here, but we didn't spend any of the money until Jack left. Yes, that year when Lori was acting director. We were working very closely together and working very closely with Elaine McKeon, who was chairing the board at that time. Really, the three of us—with Phyllis—were really moving forward. It was a great working relationship between all of us. Lori adored Phyllis, and Phyllis adored Lori. It was a great magical period.

Cándida Smith: You had tons of money at your disposal, it sounds like.

03-00:49:31

Garrels: Well, Phyllis, she was really willing to be aggressive, to buy great things. Her question always was, will this be “worth a detour”? Is this something that makes this museum a place people will want to come to see that painting? One of her great epiphanies in her life, for art, was in 1964, she and her husband had gone to Germany to pick up a new Mercedes. They had gone to Stuttgart. Phyllis said she was reading the *International Herald Tribune*, and she saw a little ad for Documenta, the big show that occurs every five years in Kassel, Germany. They decided they would get their new car and drive up to Kassel and see Documenta. She loved it. It was a classic modernist Documenta. She saw Henry Moore, Max Bill, [Alexander] Calder, [Isamu] Noguchi, and so on. I think one of the very first things she bought for her collection was a Max Bill that she had seen in Documenta. I'm not sure when she bought it, but she still had the catalog and she had it marked. I don't know where that catalog is; I would hope it's still in her library or her holdings.

Her husband didn't have any interest in art. He was an engineer. He distrusted art dealers. So it wasn't until he died, in 1971, that Phyllis began to look a little bit at art and get a little more involved in art. She had been part of the Women's Committee here, I think going back to the fifties. She had done watercolors, I think, in the fifties, too. But she had been, I think, a great mother and a traveler and had taken care of her family and her husband and all the things it was appropriate for a woman of her generation to do. They loved to travel. Her husband was an engineer, and they traveled all over the world. It was really in the seventies that she started getting more interested in art, after her husband died. In the eighties, she was a spearhead for this new building. I think she made the first big gift for this new building. She thought the museum should go in South of Market. People of good society in San Francisco just didn't go south of Market Street.

Cándida Smith: Many people avoided South of Market.

03-00:52:37

Garrels: But Phyllis shopped at the Emporium, which was on the south side of Market Street. She regaled me with these tales. She was just determined that this was the right place for the museum. Again, she had the courage and the foresight to see that this was going to become a new focus for downtown San Francisco.

Cándida Smith: Professionally, you have worked, I'm sure, with many trustees, with many trustee collectors. They come with varying degrees of understanding of art history, and they also have their particular personal tastes, which probably don't coincide with yours all the time. What's the secret for negotiating these differences in aesthetic taste and preferences and knowledge of the material? How much do you have to educate people? Or is that really even part of the job?

03-00:53:53

Garrels: It's funny, a curator's a very odd job. You want to think that you're a connoisseur; you want to think you're a historian, a scholar; those things one traditionally associates with museum culture. But in reality, a curator is also a negotiator, a politician, an educator, administrator, a therapist. You need to hear people's stories. You need to get a sense of where they're coming from, what they're looking for, what has meaning for them, what frustrates them. I see myself as a catalyst, an enabler. Talking to people and talking with them, and talking through issues with them. Sometimes it's talking about an artist or about a particular work of art or about an exhibition.

[The next few minutes of the interview are sealed.]

Then those discussions in accessions meetings, which are the formal forum to talk about the collection. Or we have the auxiliaries like Director's Circle and Collector's Forum. Bringing people in to talk to people here and give them information. We always have the Director's Circle trips, where we spend ten days going somewhere. Seven to fourteen days, whether it's going to Germany or Switzerland or London or wherever. Last year, the group went to China. I didn't go on that trip. You spend a lot of time with people, you see a lot of collections, you meet museum colleagues. I see these as intensive seminars, a way to reach people, talk to them, develop those conversations, impart information; hopefully, get them to see collections that can inspire them; meet collectors who have the excitement, commitment, passion, engagement with their collections that will inspire people here to think about their collections in that way.

Cándida Smith: From what you have said, you have fairly capacious tastes.

03-00:59:10

Garrels: Yes, definitely.

Cándida Smith: Or catholic tastes. But nonetheless, there are, no doubt, limits. I know from the history of the museum, there have been, in the past, problems where trustees tried, shall we say, to impose their enthusiasms on the museum. Also I know of similar problems with some of the Los Angeles museums. What do you do when you genuinely don't like an artist or work that a trustee is enthusiastic about?

03-00:59:49

Garrels: I have not really felt that as an issue here. I feel like Jack Lane really set a very high standard for the curatorial integrity of the program. With Jack here, it was very clear that he and the curator, it had to be their judgment about the importance, the quality of a work coming into the collection or an exhibition that would be mounted.

[The remaining section of audio file 3 of this interview is sealed.]

[End Audio File 3]

[Begin Audio File 4]

04-00:00:05

Garrels: What's important within art, within culture, changes over time. It's impossible to be completely predictive. History's full of those cases. Caravaggio was dismissed for centuries. It wasn't until the 1951 show in Milan that Caravaggio was rediscovered. The late paintings of Philip Guston were dismissed by most people at the time they were made. So I have to say, again, my own discoveries over time, like discovering artists who haven't been part of the canon, part of the

mainstream, whether it was a Hélio Oiticica from Brazil or coming here to San Francisco and discovering Jess.

Like when we bought the Magritte painting, a friend of mine, director of the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, Steingrim Laursen, instantly called me. I think it might have been the same day we bought the painting. He was organizing a Magritte retrospective in Denmark at the Louisiana Museum and said he really wanted to borrow *Personal Values*. I immediately got the idea, well, maybe we should bring the show here. I asked Steingrim, I said, “Well, if we lend, would you consider working with us to bring that show here?” I had never thought about doing a Magritte show. I went over and met with Steingrim, and we went through the checklist. It was a lot of European lenders, and it was clear a lot of them were never going to lend to San Francisco. We had to reconstitute the show. We lost about half the paintings from Europe, and then I had to find maybe not quite as many, but about thirty paintings here in the States. I called, actually, mostly colleagues at different museums. My colleagues at the Menil Collection were astonishingly generous. There hadn’t been a Magritte show in the Bay Area since the sixties. In putting together that show, I learned so much. I gained such an appreciation for Magritte. I understood why Jasper Johns, Vija Celmins, and John Baldessari are so interested in Magritte. What I was interested in was abstraction, conceptual art. I had very little innate interest in imagistic work. In doing that show, it deepened my own understanding about art and about the art of our times. So I’m willing to second guess myself as I go along the way. It doesn’t change my personal taste. If I could take one painting home from the museum and hang it in my house, I’d take one of the Robert Rymans.

Then there are those shows you do just out of total passion. For me, that was like the Sol LeWitt retrospective. Sol was one of those artists I discovered early on that changed the way I thought and looked about art and about the world. That was something I really wanted to do. Jack Lane absolutely supported that. Sol was an artist he was quite interested in. That was a massive undertaking. Or Brice Marden. Those are shows where it’s my personal passion. Those probably are the shows that I give more time, attention to, that probably happen on a bigger scale. I’m working on a show now that’ll be the first retrospective of Richard Serra’s drawings.

Cándida Smith: Well, let’s talk a little bit about the process by which you thought through what you wanted to do with the Sol LeWitt show, or Brice Marden. What were the problems or the problematics that you identified? What were going to be the issues, in terms of the artist, the space, the public?

04-00:04:51
Garrels:

Well, with Sol, it was convincing him that there was a need for a retrospective. He had no interest in a retrospective. He was *very* skeptical about what such a show would be or why it should be. I met with him—I don't remember—probably at least three times, talking to him about the show. I don't know what other conversations occurred with what other people to try to convince him that this was the right thing to do. I gradually gained his confidence, and he agreed to do the show. The same with Brice. I had wanted to do the Brice Marden retrospective when I was here the first time. Brice was very skeptical about doing a retrospective. "Retrospective" is a very loaded thing for an artist. [Three sentences here are sealed.]

When I got to New York, that was a case where that was one of the things I put on the table with Glenn Lowry when Glenn approached me about coming to the Modern. I said, "Well, one of the things I would want to do would be a Brice Marden retrospective." MoMA, for many New York artists, is their home. It's the institution that they gauge themselves by. That's absolutely true for Brice. When I went to MoMA, Brice was then willing to consider the idea of a retrospective, if it were at MoMA. I had a very long relationship with Brice. I had organized the show at the Dia Art Foundation of the Cold Mountain paintings, which was, I think, a transformative show for Brice. It was a broader public acknowledging his gestural abstract work. He was an artist who changed his work in the mid-eighties, going from the monochromes into these gestural abstract paintings, and a lot of people dismissed them. He had a couple shows with Mary Boone that were not well received. People didn't understand them. They felt he had turned his back on the more rigorous, as they called them, monochrome paintings. But with the Cold Mountain paintings at Dia, opinion shifted in a major way. People finally acknowledged Brice and the shift. So we had a good relationship. I think he felt confident that we could work together to do the show.

A lot of it is gaining the artist's confidence. Then you begin to talk about it. I have definitely strong ideas about a general way a show should go about. I think a retrospective should be chronological. You really want to understand the development of the artist's ideas. You want to see how one thing leads to another, leads to another; when something breaks; when something reaches fulfillment of an idea; or the best expression of an idea that might have started to develop at an earlier point.

Like with Sol, certainly, the wall drawings are Sol's probably greatest achievement, they're the core of the work; but I wanted sculptures, wanted works on paper, wanted artist books, which he really liked the idea of that. That the catalog should be a very comprehensive catalog

that showed and explored all aspects of this myriad production. For me, I start charting a show in a certain space. What's the first thing you see? Then when you turn the corner, what's the next thing? It's not the same as writing a book. It's about a physical encounter; it's about a sense of discovery; it's about those "ah-ha!" moments, where you say, "Oh, I get it!" You see that and then you turn the corner and then there's that. It's like, "Oh, I connect the dots." You can understand something about the creative process, something about the artist's thinking, something about their logic, see the development. So with Sol here, it was very clear the career breaks halfway. You have got the early work from roughly the early sixties to around the end of the seventies. Then Sol moves to Italy and the work radically transforms. So that was a natural breaking point. So we did the first half of the career on the fourth floor, on half of the fourth floor. Then people went up to the fifth floor, and I wanted that moment of walking across the bridge to an epiphany of discovering Sol as he's now embraced Italy. The color, the texture, the sensuality.

04-00:10:54

The same with Brice. It was amazing. There's this twenty-year period from the early sixties to the early eighties. Then, it breaks and it opens up into this much more sensual, dancing, celebratory work. In this case, I used the first half of the fourth floor, the north side, for the early work—here at SFMOMA—and then the pivot and then the realization of the later paintings. With Brice, he was determined to finish new paintings for the show. So he worked on, for a couple of years, two very large six-panel paintings that were the end of the show in New York, here in San Francisco, and in Berlin. It was one of those moments for him that the show wasn't about just simply—and the same for Sol—about just looking back, but using it as an occasion to push themselves to do something new.

With Sol, he came out, he basically set up a little studio on the fifth floor. He had a table, and he was up there working, drawing, making notations every day. He would go over to Crown Point. He had had a long relationship with Kathan Brown and Crown Point Press. I knew he was going over there, but I didn't know quite what he was doing. He made a whole new series of prints while he was over there. Unknown to us, he made a new print that he gave a copy to everybody who had worked on the show—the preparators, people in the conservation department, my secretary, the PR people. Anybody here who had been somehow involved in this show, he gave one of these prints. It's right back there. That little black and white print is the one that everybody got one. He was an *incredibly* generous, *incredibly* generous man, *incredibly* generous spirit. He loved being here. We had about thirty people at any one time working on the wall drawings. [The next three sentences are sealed.]

I have to say, I have found the community here generally incredibly supportive of our ambitions for both the collection and the exhibition program. Going back to that early question, I don't recall a single instance of having to fight off something. The other situation is that sometimes it's hard, occasionally, to get support for something you really care about. [The new few minutes of the interview are sealed.]

Cándida Smith: With the Marden and the LeWitt shows, what about—You have described the physical experience. What about what you felt was needed for interpretation? Was there a tension between what might be needed for interpretation and that direct physical encounter with the work?

04-00:16:25
Garrels:

Jack Lane set a very high standard, the integrity of the experience of the art itself had to be first and foremost. He actually did not have a huge interest in interpretation. I think that has set a way of working here. I want very much for people coming in to understand or have some access to this work. I don't expect everybody who's coming in here to necessarily appreciate or understand what they're seeing. We have a lot of people that this is the first time they're visiting the museum, people who may not be familiar with modern art or contemporary art. I always am trying to think of how can you give the viewer or the visitor a few keys that might open the door just enough so that they can then begin to think about it for themselves. The physical encounter is very, very important: how you set up a context for a work of art when you come into a gallery; what the kinds of associations, the kinds of conversations that occur between the objects themselves that the visual or physical presence articulates something of the experience. Now, certainly, that is just not going to happen in all cases for everyone. You do need to set something up. We write brochures.

I have always been very involved in writing the text for those brochures. Or putting a text on a wall or sometimes, like in the collection, an extended label, descriptive label about the object that may give people two or three ways to think about it. For example, we acquired a group of eight paintings by Robert Ryman, who is one of the most notoriously difficult contemporary artists for most people to appreciate. Ryman paints abstract square white paintings. They're always white paintings, they're always square. I think Ryman is one of the most sublime and important painters of our time. There was a play in New York called *Art*, that really was a send-up of Bob Ryman and the white paintings. I know that a lot of people are going to walk in and not understand. "Why is this art? Why is this here?" They see it as some scam, a ruse, a joke on them.

But Bob has been very eloquent talking about his own work. I think sometimes—often, in fact—hearing the artist’s words about their work can make a difference. When we hung the Ryman room, we put up a text with a few kind of, I hope, key statements about the artist’s intention, and then some of his own words about his work and his intention and what he hopes one might gain or see from seeing that work. I don’t know if that works. I hope it does in some cases. Probably, it won’t in every case. Peter Samis has been a key person here in developing interactive media technology. We’re one of the first museums in the country to develop this new way of having different levels of experience open. We’re constantly exploring how people might get information. Like now with the Koret learning center [Koret Visitor Education Center] open, people can go in. We’re talking about headsets and and how people can get some insight, some language that might give them a few more ways to think about looking at a certain work.

Cándida Smith: Of course, I remember you said the last time that one of the things that was important for you was confronting work for which you didn’t have language. Yet with the headsets and the wall texts, to some degree, you have to spoon-feed people with language.

04-00:21:28

Garrels:

I try to do it so that it doesn’t get in the way. My preference always would be to walk into a gallery and just see the object. Then you have to figure it out for yourself, you have to explore deeper. Most people are not going to do that. We are a museum for a general public. There are museums that are more specialized. The Dia Art Foundation still is a very specialized place. So we have just installed a room of Sherrie Levine’s work in the gallery. I think Sherrie is an artist that’s pretty difficult for most people. I wrote an extended text and it’s isolated on a wall, all by itself. I think discreet, but it’s there. Somebody walking into the gallery can look at all the work without ever having to see the text. But if you turn around, there’s a text there if you want to read it.

Cándida Smith: As I recall with the Brice Marden show—It’s curious, I don’t remember the other show that was playing at the same time, but I remember that it was very popular. It was a show that attracted a lot of people.

04-00:23:01

Garrels:

I think it was the Picasso and American Art show.

Cándida Smith: Yes, yes. Is that something that you have to think about? Okay, if I’m going to do an “austere” artist, I had better also do something simultaneously that’s going to attract a bigger audience, and maybe they’ll wander into the Brice Marden?

04-00:23:32

Garrels:

Well, that's certainly something Neal Benezra, certainly something the director thinks about. I am supportive of that. You have to sustain the institution.

[The next eleven sentences are sealed.]

My hope would be that you don't compromise your standards when you do that. For example, when we bought the Magritte painting, I definitely brought in the Magritte show with the sense that this would be a popular show—it would also contextualize the painting that we had acquired for the collection—and worked very, very hard to put together a show or to augment, complement the show that had been done in Europe, so that I felt it could be presented here as a serious, semi-scholarly show that wouldn't in any way compromise the character of the artist.

[Eight sentences are sealed.]

We definitely have to do those kinds of shows. There aren't that many artists—maybe a Matisse, maybe Chagall, Picasso, Magritte, Calder. I fought very, very hard for SFMOMA to present the Calder retrospective that was organized at the National Gallery in Washington.

Cándida Smith:

I understand that was a very controversial show within the museum, because it was the first “blockbuster.”

04-00:26:21

Garrels:

I don't know. Jack and I were both so intent on getting that show here. My sense was that it was a big challenge. It was an incredibly ambitious show. It was the most ambitious show the museum probably had ever done. We were working with the National Gallery, which is a far bigger, more sophisticated institution. I think that show was a real coming of age show for the museum. It challenged people. It required people to work at a level that maybe wasn't typical. But people did it. I felt at the end that the show was done with every bit as much level of quality and integrity here as at the National Gallery in Washington. It was a fabulously popular show. But it was also a very serious, substantial show looking at Calder. Again, installing that show, I ended up with a completely different level of appreciation for Calder, understanding him as far more sophisticated and inventive than I had been giving him credit for. Part of that is because the later work of Calder, which maybe isn't his greatest work, in later years began to overshadow the earlier work because the earlier work was seldom seen. The earlier work just wasn't available. It was sequestered in museums or private collections, and the later work was more out and more available. In fact, that show was very important because one

understood the fundamental contribution Calder made to early modernist work.

[About six sentences are deleted here.]

The decision to hire David Ross as the director was unanimously opposed by the entire curatorial staff. The entire curatorial staff made the recommendation to the board of trustees not to hire David Ross. We told Elaine McKeon that and asked her to let the board know. Or the search committee. I don't know to what extent Elaine gave that message to the search committee. It was very clear that Don Fisher was absolutely committed to hiring David Ross as director.

[The next five pages are sealed.]

Cándida Smith: Do you have time to talk about why you decided to come back?

04-00:42:47

Garrels:

Neal called me—as I recall, it was a year ago in December—and said, “Would you ever consider coming back to SFMOMA?” I was very surprised. I said, “Sure. Let’s talk about it.” We spent a couple months talking, for me to understand what his hopes, goals were for the institution. I had known Neal for probably twenty-five years. We have always been close colleagues, but I had never worked with him. I had been watching the museum over the last few years since Neal had been here. I spent a big block of time here when I did the Brice Marden show. I had a *very* strong sense that the museum had really come back around, that staff morale was again up, that there were good people in key positions, that he had built a great team—he had *rebuilt* a great team—and that the board, the community had rallied around him and were supportive, and that the board again had a strong commitment to the institution. I followed Neal’s program, the exhibitions, the acquisitions that he’s done, whether at the Hirshhorn or in Chicago, and I had a strong sense that we had pretty compatible interests. A little divergent. I think there’s certain things he’s more interested in than I am, and probably vice-versa.

I have to say that coming back to work with this collection was a huge attraction for me. A collection, when you spend years with it and working with it and building it, it’s like a family. You become attached. For me, this was a *very* important part of my history and a very important part of my life. I think I really grew up as a curator when I was here, from ’93 to 2000. So to reengage that was great. And Madeleine Grynstejn did a terrific job here as curator. She had been able to do some of the things that I had hoped to do, so I felt like there was still a good strong base to keep moving forward from with the

collection. At the Hammer [Armand Hammer Museum]—I love the Hammer, Los Angeles is a great city, but there are certain kinds of shows of a certain ambition that I couldn't do there. So the chance to think about doing both some small cutting edge contemporary shows, but also some larger, more ambitious, more historical kinds of shows, and being able to do both of those fused here. SFMOMA, for me, was a perfect scale. It has some of the flexibility, the cutting edge character of a smaller institution like the Hammer Museum, but on the other hand, it's got the ballast, scale, and history of an institution like MoMA in New York, to do some really ambitious projects.

[End of Audio File 4]

Interview #3: March 18, 2009**At the SFMOMA galleries**

[Begin Audio File 5]

Cándida Smith: I'm interested in how you view the work. What you see, what you would want other people to see, what's important to you, what moved you when you saw the works. Particularly the ones that you brought into the collection, you had to have a strong attachment to, I assume, other than they fit a hole. I thought we might start with these two Piet Mondrians [*Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 1935-1942; *New York City 2*, 1941 (unfinished, formerly *New York City III*)]. As I recall, you were instrumental in the acquisition of both of these?

05-00:01:33

Garrels: Yes.

Cándida Smith: We discussed that, but I wonder if you could help us see what you see in the pictures, what you saw in the pictures when they became available, why you felt it so urgent to get these two works.

05-00:01:54

Garrels: Well, I don't know why, I have always loved Mondrian. I have to say, not the very first time I saw Mondrian did I love it. I think like a lot of people, I was maybe a little baffled about what that picture was. I think if you stop and spend even just a little bit of time with a Mondrian, there are certain qualities that emerge. They have an incredible sense of balance, of a clarity. Yet at the same time, they're completely alive. I think that's the difference between Mondrian and so many other geometric abstract painters. In Mondrian, the balance of lines, of space, the way the color works, they really have a sense of movement, of being alive, of having a living process still embodied within them. Then when you really get up close to them, you see this incredibly delicate brushwork that just tickles the surface, which echoes the overall sense of movement and liveliness of the overall composition. So there's this combination of classical clarity and of emotional immediacy. That's extraordinary. Mondrian really is a singular artist. He's an amazing artist. He was an artist that I love, and Phyllis Wattis also loved. That was something we shared, that we both were very interested, engaged by geometric abstraction. Phyllis loved the color, and she also felt that dancing quality to it. Just a little story is that Mondrian loved to dance. When he moved to New York he loved to go out dancing and he listened to jazz and boogie woogie music. As we know, there's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, one of the last paintings he did. But he wasn't the ascetic, stoic person that so often people might think of him as.

In this particular painting [*Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*], we ended up buying it very quickly. Mrs. Wattis was quite ill. We talked about Mondrian, and it was clear she really wanted a Mondrian in the collection. I just got on the phone and started calling, trying to find a Mondrian as fast as possible. This particular painting had been in an exhibition at the Pace Gallery in New York. I called the director, Douglas Baxter, and I said, “Douglas, what happened with that particular painting?” It was owned by a dealer in London, and we had it flown over to New York and a team from the museum went to look at it, and we decided to move forward. It also has a very interesting history. It was owned by the Tremain family, who lived in Connecticut. They were very early supporters of modernism. They not only owned this Mondrian, but also the great *Victory Boogie Woogie*, which was the unfinished painting, the last painting in Mondrian’s studio, which eventually went to the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague. This was a Mondrian that had a great history. It was in a great collection. It’s one of what’s called the transatlantic paintings. This painting originally was finished in 1936, when Mondrian was in London. It’s been several years now since I have refreshed my memory about the history of the painting, but I’m almost positive it was included in an exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an early show there, which traveled to SFMOMA in its first incarnation. When Mondrian moved to New York, then fleeing London during the war, he added elements to the painting. There are a number of paintings that Mondrian had started in Europe or had finished, if you will, in Europe, brought with him to the United States, and then added elements, making them more animated.

Cándida Smith: Do you know what?

05-00:07:11

Garrels:

I would have to go back and look at the records to see which elements were added. I think some of these elements along the side here, probably. I don’t know if both of the reds or one of the reds may be filled in. It had been a *very* austere painting before that. There are just a handful of these vertical pictures. Mondrian tended to work much more in a square format. So this is a little bit unusual as a composition.

When we bought this painting, we put it up and Phyllis said, “Wouldn’t it be great if we had two?” That immediately brought to mind this painting [*New York City 2*]. There were some unfinished canvases in Mondrian’s studio, including the *Victory Boogie Woogie*. Then there were three of these paintings. They’re called the New York City paintings. They show Mondrian in the process of working out his composition. He used these colored tapes, which would be pinned and moved; you can still see a thumbtack here. They have since been affixed, later on. But you can see the numerous pinholes in the surface,

as he was moving the tapes and working out the balance of a composition. In my mind, it allows one inside the process, inside the thinking. It just allows this painting to become more lively, in a way, if you think about what different processes it went through. So these two pictures both—Because this one was reworked and this one unfinished, and you see it in its process.

Cándida Smith: I take it for the unfinished painting, there's more to it for you than the pedagogical value.

05-00:09:25

Garrels:

I suspect it's pretty close to a finished work. You can see here he's started laying down the blue, an undercoat of blue paint. I really am not a Mondrian scholar or expert, but this was the last one of these. There's one, I believe, in the Pompidou collection in Paris and there's one in Düsseldorf. This one was owned by the son of Sidney Janis. Janis was the New York dealer who represented Mondrian, supported him when he first came to the United States, which is where the Tremaines had bought this picture. This was still owned by the Janis family. I called them. They had had it since Mondrian died. I asked them if they would consider selling it. They were aware that we had just purchased this picture [*Composition with Red, Yellow, and Blue*], which had come from Janis to the Tremaine family, and they agreed to sell it to the museum. It was done fairly quickly. We were thrilled that the Janis family agreed to finally sell this painting, which they had been keeping for decades.

Cándida Smith: In that case, how do you arrive at a fair price?

05-00:11:00

Garrels:

Fair price. I don't remember now what we paid for this. I'm recollecting maybe \$6 million, which, I don't know, is that a high price? Is it not a high price? This is a unique object. As I said, there are two others that are already in museum collections. This was the last one of these pictures. Historically, it's of such key importance. It's so unusual, so rare. When we bought these two pictures, there was some plan about a way that we might then get a painting from the mid-twenties into the collection. Then after I left the museum, that plan fell apart. That would still be my goal, to get, somehow, a mid-twenties Mondrian into the collection. Then we would really have the complete story. And Mondrian is one of the key foundation stones for modernism. He's the first painter who's purely an abstract painter. There's absolutely no external reference in his paintings. Unlike Kandinsky or Picasso or so many of the other modernists that explored abstraction, Mondrian is the first artist to become completely abstract, so that the work of art becomes completely autonomous. The formal qualities, the psychological qualities, the phenomenological qualities,

the experience of the work itself in its purest state, is distilled into this object. So for me—and I think for Phyllis, as well—Mondrian is the touchstone, particularly for postwar abstraction. I think particularly of Ellsworth Kelly, who is so important for this collection, although the Mondrians were acquired before we got the great group of Kellys.

Cándida Smith: In terms of the frames, who did the framing?

05-00:13:21

Garrels:

I'm sure Sidney Janis did the framing on this one. That's not typical. This is a typical Mondrian frame, with these little wooden pieces built up around the edges. I have to say, I don't know if this is indeed, inside the box, if that's a Mondrian frame or not. So there has been more research done on this painting. After I left the museum, there was a show organized at Harvard, particularly—at the Fogg Art Museum, focusing on these transatlantic paintings. I have to say I have not had a chance to read that catalog or I'm not familiar enough with that research.

Cándida Smith: Do you typically get involved in the issues of how a piece that you acquire is going to be framed?

05-00:14:19

Garrels:

Sometimes. It depends what the history of the frame is, how involved the artist was in the decisions about the original framing. Sometimes a dealer that represents an artist has worked out a particular way of framing with the artist that really becomes part of the history of the work. In other cases, it may just be a frame that a collector has added to make it fit in a certain way in their home, so that the frame itself really doesn't have any specific history related to the painting. So it just depends on the picture.

Cándida Smith: This room is focused on interwar modernism. Could you talk about what you were trying to accomplish with this set of paintings, taking into account the limitations of the collection.

05-00:15:15

Garrels:

This gallery was installed before I came back to the museum, so I really wasn't involved in the particular decisions about the installation of this room. This room is about formal abstraction. The Matisse gallery, the fauve gallery adjacent to it is really about color, brushstroke, and light. The paintings in this room are much more about structure, about layers or interlocking of forms, about creating complexities of space, really coming out of cubism. We do have this one great classic Braque painting that's just a quintessential classic cubist picture. Everything else in the room, in one way or another, comes out of those early experiments in 1911, 1912. The clarification of form, the way form occupies space, with cubism giving up of any

sense of perspective, the traditional idea of looking through the picture frame, but rather looking at the work on the surface as it itself occupies a place, a space.

Cándida Smith: As you're thinking about how you might rotate works in this room, are there directions you might be taking?

05-00:17:59

Garrels:

The museum's collection does not have great depth or breadth, in terms of representing modernism before the Second World War, as it developed in Europe, particularly. But we have a few classic masterpieces, like this Braque, which is just a perfect example of high analytic cubism. It's from 1910. It represents very well the character and quality of the collection that we have, all along the way, key examples. I would even venture the word masterpiece. So like with this Braque representing high analytic cubism, two important paintings of Mondrian, one Brancusi. If you go to gallery to gallery, in every gallery there are one or two really great quintessential examples, masterpieces representing the movements or the artists that were key to that period.

[interruption]

05-00:20:47

Garrels:

This painting's been in the collection for many, many years. It's a great classic example of Philip Guston in his abstract expressionist period. It's from 1955. It's entitled *For M*. M refers to Musa, who was his wife, his muse. Of course, there's no direct linkage, but I would simply say it's an incredibly visceral, passionate, emotional painting, and I think is a great testament to the intensity, the closeness of the relationship between Guston and his wife, who really was a muse for him. She herself was a painter. They had just a tightly woven emotional life. Guston is one of the core group of abstract expressionists. He and Jackson Pollock grew up in Los Angeles together. Pollock was the one who encouraged Guston to come to New York. Guston, in his early work, was dealing with figurative subject, mythological subjects, political subjects, like many of the abstract expressionists. After the war, beginning in around '47, '48, this group of artists began to leave behind any specific reference to subject matter, and it was really the emotional or the existential, the psychological quality of work that became the subject. Pollock and Willem de Kooning are two of most well-known artists representing this, but certainly Philip Guston, along with Franz Kline, and also in this gallery, Robert Motherwell, are three of the other key figures. Guston had, shall we say, a more lyrical approach to painting. The brushwork is less in a huge sweep of the arm, and much more in the wrist, the lower arm. There's a real sense of touch, a floating quality of the

surface. I think one senses more delight in the act of painting. The red-pink often is very visceral; it relates to the body, the idea of a skin. This almost like a spine, maybe, down the back. One can get lost in the surface of these paintings, just the sheer beauty of the paint—the layering, the scraping, the building up—that one feels this incredible pleasure and visceral connection. Also the decisions, how many decisions were made, and maybe some of the struggle of those decisions and coming up with a sense of space and composition that isn't immediately obvious, but it opens up, the more time you spend with the painting. The idea of this central composition is very typical of Guston. Unlike Pollock, which one thinks of as an overall composition, where there really is very little sense of a middle, a side, a top, a bottom, Guston still retains that more traditional idea of composition. This is one of the very best examples of this key moment in Guston's career. It was a gift to the museum in 1972. You just couldn't have a better painting by Guston from this period.

Cándida Smith: As viewers are coming, passing by it, stopping to look at it, what would you want them to really appreciate, in terms of the brushstrokes or—

05-00:26:05
Garrels:

I think with any work of art, what I encourage people to do is to stop and look and just allow one's senses to be open, using the eyes to translate whatever the physical quality of the work is, and begin allowing it to speak. As I always say, just to look at the painting and to listen to the painting. I think maybe it just takes time to learn a little bit of that vocabulary, to understand how a painting begins to speak to someone. But it's, I think, fairly straightforward. Once you begin to attune your ear a little bit to that language, these things open up very readily. Painting is still very much related to a culture of reading, of sitting with a book, and that words on the page come alive. But it's this intense interaction with our own minds, our imaginations, that allows the story on the page to come to life. Painting's very much the same way. But you have to stop and, again, look and listen and engage. We live in a culture that is very much dominated by movement, by media. The screen does all the talking; it does all the moving. It doesn't require us to spend any moment of concentration; in fact, absolutely the opposite. Painting is antithetical to that. So it really means radically shifting gears from the way we approach most things in our world in this day and age. That doesn't mean that painting, just like books, is no longer relevant; it opens up other kinds of experiences that are not available to us out in the world in the usual places. For me, that was one of the great discoveries of discovering painting, discovering art, which, for me, was relatively late. It was in my twenties. It just opened up a whole new world that I had absolutely no idea existed or was possible.

Cándida Smith: Was improvisation an important part of Guston's method in this, would you say?

05-00:28:57

Garrels: The painting develops out of the process of its making. It's not where there would have been a study carefully created beforehand, and the painting then illustrates the study. Or that there would have been an elaborate plan for how much red in that section, how much pink. This abstract expressionism was about the process itself. Or a self-consciousness of thinking and being in the process at the time and finding that intuitive sense of rightness through that process.

Cándida Smith: The palette that he arrived at, it's very—

05-00:30:06

Garrels: Pinks and reds have been important for Guston all through his career. We have a wonderful painting in the next gallery called the *Tormenters*, from 1947, which is an absolutely key picture in the transition from Guston's earlier figurative work into the fully abstract work. What happened with Guston was by the end of the fifties, there was a sense that abstract expressionism was exhausted, that it had been worked through. De Kooning would vacillate; he would go from abstract paintings to figurative paintings throughout his career, back and forth and back and forth. But with Guston, by the late fifties he was frustrated with pure abstraction and struggled for several years in the early sixties with, even unconsciously, reintroducing subject matter. By the late 1960s, by '67, '68, he was fully developing figurative motifs in his paintings, so that the last decade of his life, through the seventies, there's a great period of these extraordinary, playful, emotional, angst-ridden figurative compositions. But it's interesting that the palette pretty much stayed with the pink and the red. I would say that there's an intensity to those colors, an emotional quality, and there's a relationship to the idea of the body in Guston's work. It's not just a more intellectualized attitude toward painting.

Cándida Smith: I'm seeing a pair of slack-covered legs, pants-covered legs with shoes. Am I reading that into it? Is that me or is that the painting?

05-00:32:32

Garrels: I don't know. With these paintings, one can project anything of one's imagination, one's fantasy. They're very open to that. Like looking at a landscape and somehow seeing some figuration in the landscape or in the sky, the same is true of a painting. You can do that. My sense in this painting is there is absolutely no figurative reference, but one could probably see something.

[interruption]

Cándida Smith: Rothko. You talked at length about why you had to get this painting [No. 14, 1960], so perhaps you can help us see what you see in it and why it's so moving to you.

05-00:36:00

Garrels:

Just standing here right now in front of this painting, I find it just such a wondrous and emotional experience. This Rothko, for me, has all of the quality and character of the greatest of Rothko paintings. I think I mentioned my first moving experience with a work of art was seeing a room of Rothkos at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. I was in my early twenties, I had no relationship with abstract art whatsoever. In fact, very little relationship with art of *any* sort. Seeing those Rothkos at the Phillips Collection—I went with a friend who lived nearby, on a Saturday morning and stumbled into a room with these paintings. I had absolutely *no* language to describe the experience I had in looking at these paintings. As months went by and years went by, I kept thinking about those paintings and what happened in that room. What was that experience? As I began to look at art a little more, I kept coming back to those paintings as a touchstone because they opened up an experience that was unlike anything else I had ever had in my life. It put me into a mental state of imagination.

Rothko opened up for me like going into another state of mind, another world than anything that I had ever experienced in our normal, daily, waking-life world. It just allows one to kind of, in a way, go into an almost meditation, a allowing one to hear one's mind, to connect with. It allows one to connect with the immediacy of sight, of looking, of realizing that in the fullest way, one's relationship with the world outside of one's own body, how one's perceptions, how that process begins to work, how it transforms our mind, how the process of looking opens up our mind, our imaginations. So abstraction takes that to the purest state.

With Rothko, in this particular painting, you get these fiery orange clouds across the top. They're overpainted. There's a bruised purple-burgundy that's the background. You see these floating fire-like clouds of orange over that. Then below, this deep, deep twilight blue, which is also about light. One of my favorite times of day is twilight, where you can see light changing in front of your eyes. It's that moment when the light is fading, you can watch the sky and see it transform in front of your eyes. The colors become incredibly vivid and intense. It's a magical time of day for me. It's really my favorite time of day. You get that contrast between the intensity and the brightness of the orange and this deep receding blue. Then when you really look at the canvas closely, you see this little scattering, specks of orange overlaying it, almost like a mist of orange specks. Then on the edges, this red-eggplant color. Orange and blue are complements. They have a

particular relationship to each other. Rothko has just perfectly balanced them. The blue is denser and more intense. It's smaller. The red is expansive, rather than receding. It feels like it could potentially envelop the whole thing. The blue, on the other hand, you know that it's holding.

In some ways, for me, being here in San Francisco, I have to say, I have had another relationship to this painting, which is: here in San Francisco, especially in the summers, at the end of the day, around five o'clock, you see the fog sitting up on the hills just waiting to pounce on the city. They become this halo of golden dark blue masses, frothing, foaming up there. This red is very, very much like that. You just feel like it potentially could engulf everything, that it's held in check by the blue. So it has a sense of, like with Mondrian, this incredible impeccable equilibrium of living, moving forces that have been brought into this momentary balance or stasis. An idea of how we achieve harmony, and how precarious the idea of harmony is.

For me, looking at this painting, one can just become lost in this extraordinary sense of perfect equilibrium, of harmony, of expansiveness. It's like looking behind the retina. It's almost like if you close your eyes and try to look at the back of your eyelid and you see yourself seeing. That comes across in this painting. But it's also just the sheer, voluptuous, sensual delight in these extraordinary, glorious colors. Just what a glorious thing our vision is. What pleasure we can have in vision in its purest form. Rothko's often been linked to the idea of the sublime. The sublime is an idea that comes from the eighteenth century, and it's the idea of nature. Particularly, it was European thinkers, philosophers, artists looking at nature, particularly the mountains, the alps, and finding this natural phenomenon absolutely terrifying and absolutely exquisitely beautiful. The two being merged together. So the idea of an experience in nature transporting us psychologically, existentially, philosophically, into some other realm, allowing us to encounter our sense of being in the world in some more profound way. For me, Rothko achieves that. It's exceptional to find a work of art that can have such incredible pleasure and open up the world in such a profound way, in terms of our experience.

Cándida Smith: Many critics have said that the postmodern involved rejection of the sublime. Do you still look for the sublime in contemporary work as a possibility? Not necessarily as the only thing, but maybe something that still could be done by today's artists?

05-00:45:49

Garrels:

I'm interested in art that, in one way or another, allows us to think about our world, about our existence, either as a personal experience

or our experience as a culture, as a society. So I'm also very interested in art that creates some a reflection on who we are as social beings. Not just our personal existential state, but on the state of our relationships with each other and what that means as a civil society. Before I came into art, I was studying social sciences and was training as a sociologist, and I did a lot of work in anthropology and social history. I still remain very, very interested about how we connect as individuals to each other and how that's mediated by social structures and politics and history. But for me, great art combines as many different aspects of our life into a whole as possible. So I'm always interested in the artists' biography, what their lives were like. How does this connect to maybe what Rothko's personal experiences might have been? What does it say about our society, about American culture at the end of World War II? About the incredible material prosperity that began to emerge? In many ways, these abstract expressionists were rejecting the emphasis on materiality in American culture in the fifties. Maybe in fact, some crisis of faith about the role of religion or belief, when traditional belief systems were being radically questioned. The word in the fifties was existentialism, existential connection. What is the foundation of our existence as individuals in the world? How do we make meaning for ourselves as individuals? Perhaps trying to create that through our experience in the world, rather than, as a traditionalist would do, look to God or an order of the universe that's larger than the individual, and try to find a way that that larger order would give us a sense of place and meaning and value in the world. These artists were saying, we have to look at our own experience and at our own position in the world and create that value for ourselves.

[interruption]

Cándida Smith: You were saying *Femme au chapeau* is probably the single most important work in the collection.

05-00:49:22

Garrels:

This painting is really the touchstone, it's the foundation, it's where this collection really begins. We're a collection of the twentieth century. This is a painting from 1905. When it was first shown, it was among a group of works that the critics abhorred at the time. They were christened the *fauves*, the "wild beasts," that had been unleashed onto the public and out into the world. It affronted all conventions of nineteenth-century sensibility. Academic painting was meticulously painted, had an extraordinary sense of decorum, of balance, of polite society. This picture is loosely painted, roughly painted. It has no relationship to naturalism. In fact, this is Matisse's wife. He painted her sitting in a chair with a hat. The hat was black, so the color is all invented. It's done for formal effect, for psychological effect. It's hot and fiery, sensual and free, with an incredible sense of abandon,

looseness. The model, his wife, you can see her eyes are almost black. They're looking out at us in a totally direct, almost confrontational way. There is nothing demure or restrained. She is probing us. We become implicated as voyeurs, staring back at her. So it becomes, in some ways, a little bit of an uneasy relationship. It's that uneasiness, that sense that we are now in a new world, in the twentieth century, where established values are overturned, are questioned.

Yet it's exhilarating. It's like all those shackles have been thrown off. All the social customs that restrained the possibilities of the individual have been let go. Artists were creating a new art, new lives, a new way of being in the world, a new sense of possibility. The turn of the century was an incredibly exciting time. It was full of new inventions, a sense of open, endless possibility, that human beings were on the verge of discovering all kinds of new potential about what it meant to be alive, to be a human being. So this painting really encapsulates that moment just perfectly. These paintings in 1905 led *very* quickly to all kinds of new developments, with each artist then challenging the next one about what would be the next radical departure. So you begin to get here, the way these brushstrokes are put down, really the beginnings of what turns into cubism. You begin here to get pure geometric abstraction and expressionist abstraction. So after this, the German expressionist painters developed out of this work. If one looks at this, I think one can think of some of the abstract expressionists in the United States after the Second World War. I think particularly, looking at this, of Guston.

This particular painting was owned by Michael and Sarah Stein. The Steins, along with their sister Gertrude, were Americans, originally from San Francisco, who had moved to Paris at this time, became completely involved in the avant-garde world of painters, writers at the time. Gertrude Stein had the great salon in her house, where all these artists would congregate and talk, and the ideas of the time developed. This painting was very much part of that circle. Michael and Sarah Stein—they were *the* great supporters of Matisse—bought this painting, and they moved to the Bay Area in 1935, during the Depression. They left Paris and came back to the Bay Area and brought this painting, along with many other paintings, with them. They lived in Palo Alto, and they would open their home to artists. Richard Diebenkorn, for example, would have seen this painting at the Stein's home, as well as the still life over there. This painting, I think, is absolutely critical for Bay Area figurative painting—Diebenkorn, David Park and others. This painting has an extraordinary place in the development of modern painting in the twentieth century, but it also has an extraordinary singular place in the history and development of painting in the Bay Area after the war. So for us, this is just an

absolutely key picture, generally considered one of Matisse's great early masterpieces.

Cándida Smith: Now, you must have seen this in reproduction many times before you saw the real painting.

05-00:55:47

Garrels: No, I didn't.

Cándida Smith: No?

05-00:55:49

Garrels: No, I didn't. I have to say, I am basically fundamentally an autodidact. I became interested in art through Rothko and Pollock, and I was interested, then, in contemporary art. I went to Europe for the first time and went to Italy—to Rome, to Florence, to Venice—and discovered the extraordinary paintings of the renaissance and the baroque period. I decided to study art history. I started by studying the Italian renaissance and the Italian baroque, and *then* went to modernism, to Picasso and Matisse, finding the middle ground between the renaissance and contemporary art.

This painting came into the museum's collection in 1991. It had been acquired from the Steins by Elise Haas, who was one of the founding trustees of SFMOMA; she had been the chairman of the trustees at the museum. She had bought this painting from Michael and Sarah. As Michael and Sarah Stein needed money over the years, they would occasionally sell things from their collection, and many of those things were sold to other people in the Bay Area. Elise Haas bought pictures, including this, *the* major picture from their collection. Although it had been promised to the museum for many years, it still hung in Mrs. Haas's house until the time she died. So it came into the collection and went on public view only in 1991. I have to say, I had never had a chance to see this picture until I came to SFMOMA in 1993.

Cándida Smith: It had a profound effect on you, would you say?

05-00:57:53

Garrels: Well, of course I knew about the fauves, I knew about early Matisse. I had seen other early Matisse paintings. I'm sure I had seen it in reproduction. I have to say, when you encounter this painting, at least for me, in the first time, it still is an incredibly radical painting. Again, as I said, you can look at her and there's a little uneasiness as you start staring at her, and those dark eyes just boring through you as you look at the painting. Then surrounded by this swirl of this intense, hot, hot color. Then you see that transferred into the sketch for *The Joy of Life*, which is Matisse's great large painting. This swirl of life and voluptuousness that then becomes transferred into the great historical

tradition, the great European historical tradition of a group of people out in a large outdoor environment, which goes back to the whole idea of the Garden of Eden, falling out of Eden, the loss of innocence. This was a great tradition through European painting, going back to the renaissance.

Cándida Smith: Arcadia or the return to harmony.

05-00:59:23

Garrels: Arcadia, exactly.

[End Audio File 5]

[Begin Audio File 6]

Cándida Smith: You were talking about the difficulties that [Jackson Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret*] had for some people.

06-00:00:12

Garrels:

In some ways, I would say this painting is a wonderful parallel to the *Femme au chapeau*, the great Matisse. This painting is one of the foundations of American painting at mid-century. Pollock, along with de Kooning, particularly, is the key figure in the development of abstract expressionism. These early paintings—this is from 1943—are the harbingers of what develops as abstract expressionism. It's called *Guardians of the Secret*. There are these sentinel figures on either side of the edge of the canvas. In the middle, holding what we would call an ark, like the Ark of the Covenant—It's a closed box that is teeming with energy. It's like primordial life, ready to burst into the world. There's a guard dog underneath. We have here what looks like a red cock, a chicken, a male chicken, which might be the idea of the cock crowing, of again, a signal of something momentous going to happen. We can't identify all the forms. There's this calligraphy. But you feel the reference to ancient Mediterranean myth, to a primordial, archetypal idea of guarding the very source of life, somehow, in this painting.

Pollock, at this time, had been going through Jungian psychoanalysis and the idea of the reconciliation of opposites, of the male and the female, of good and evil, was very much present. Many of the abstract expressionists at this time were interested in going back to earlier cultures and their beliefs about the birth of mankind, the myths that explain the forces of the universe—American Indian, Native American Indian stories, mythology, certainly the ancient Greeks. Many different sources. In the forties, there was a lot of interest in examining the whole history of world culture and trying to find common denominators that would allow a common understanding of humanity's history and religious belief and philosophies. So one looks

at this painting for its iconography—that is, its subject matter—and not so much for its pure quality as abstraction.

On the other hand, it's very much like the Matisse, the *Femme au chapeau*. You feel this potential release of energy, this sense of momentous discovery, of radically altering the ideas of what a painting could do, about what could be a painting. There's still, just by the way this is structured, a relationship to cubism and to German expressionism. But now with this calligraphy, a writing coming in. It's hard to read that writing, that meaning that might come out of that writing. Actually, you can see a fish swimming through here, as well.

So it's important in that regard, in terms of, again, this radical rupture with the history of painting in the twentieth century, but also the way it carries forward the early explorations of modernism. With this middle passage, it points the way for what Pollock would do by 1947, where he abandons any reference to subject matter and develops pure abstract painting in a way that no one has ever seen abstract painting before. He revolutionizes the idea of abstract painting to a grand heroic scale, to again, the idea of abstraction, the idea of art having its own life and the relationship between the viewer having their own personal experience, rather than anything external to the painting itself. That paintings are not telling a story, they're not depicting something else out of the world, that they are creating their own self-contained universe, their own self-contained potential for experience with you, with me, the viewer.

Cándida Smith: With the other paintings, you really emphasized the structure, the formal aspects, the application, the work method. You haven't done that in your discussion of this painting. Are there things that you appreciate formally, structurally, in terms of application in this work?

06-00:06:49

Garrels:

These early paintings of Pollock, they have such an incredible rawness and roughness. I don't find the brushwork particularly—There's not that much beauty; it's just a rugged, tough, immediate, raw quality to it that I think takes some time getting used to. Even like in the Matisse, the *Femme au chapeau*, there's an exquisite, elegant mixing of paint, mixing of color and the way the gesture, the stroke is put on. This is a really tough, raw, almost abrasive way of painting. You can see, like in the over-painting, there are ways that it feels maybe unfinished, unresolved. He's really pushed the idea of how to paint and what to paint, which then explodes four years later, with the first overall abstractions, which those paintings do take on an incredible elegance and a mature control of the way of painting. He's still struggling so ferociously in this painting. You feel that ferocious struggle in the painting, so it doesn't resolve itself as a painting. But it's a young

artist struggling to figure out what it means to be a painter and how to paint, and to destroy all the old rules that have been constricting one. I would say this painting, in many ways, leads to some of the things that happened in the sixties, which were also a period, again, of a radical reassessing of the potential of art. I really think about this, in some ways, in relationship to an artist like Richard Serra, with some of his, like the lead casting piece that we have in the collection, up on the fourth floor. There's a real continuity there.

[interruption]

Cándida Smith: Let's talk about why [Andy Warhol's *National Velvet*] is so important to the collection. What is there that you see that you want others to see?

06-00:09:55

Garrels:

This is an enormous painting by Andy Warhol from 1963, called *National Velvet*, which is taking an image, a film still image of Elizabeth Taylor from the film *National Velvet*, which really introduced Taylor. That's, I would say, the moment she was born as a star. Warhol was, as a young man, obsessed by celebrity, by film. He grew up in Pittsburgh. Many young people live through fantasies about a world that's bigger, more beautiful, beyond their own lived life, whether that's in a small town or a working-class background in a city, but that there's another world out there, full of glamour and excitement. Warhol was obsessed by films and Hollywood. He came to New York; he became a very successful designer. He was one of the most successful designers of his generation in New York in the 1950s. He looked at a lot of art; he looked at a lot of galleries; he was following what was going on in the contemporary art world in New York. By the early sixties, he really wanted to break out and try to define himself as an artist in his own right. He began by hand painting images coming out of the world of advertising, but by 1962, he had made a leap in using the silkscreen process, which is a technique often used in the commercial art world, but totally erasing its relationship to any commercial purpose. He was interested, as a lot of artists, like Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, at this time, who were predecessors for Warhol, in figuring out how to get beyond abstract expressionism, which celebrated the hand. It celebrated the idea of the individual's emotional identity, an existential questioning about place in the world. The Pop artists—with Rauschenberg and Johns—were interested in taking on our immediate reality, the ebb and flow of our lives in the immediate present in contemporary society and culture. So things like advertising and film were primary potential as subjects.

Warhol then started doing paintings using a silkscreen in 1962—I believe it was in the summer of 1962—and he very quickly developed a range of subjects and was interested in and worked with many

different film stars or popular culture stars. These are the icons of our time. Probably one of the most famous paintings by Warhol is an early silkscreen image of Marilyn Monroe, the goddess of the silver screen. Warhol also very quickly did a series of paintings of Elizabeth Taylor, who at that time was the great star of her generation in the early sixties. With Marilyn Monroe, Warhol only took one image, a classic image of Monroe fairly late in her career. He repeated that image in different ways on different canvases, different series, but it was always the same image. With Elizabeth Taylor, he ended up doing paintings over a period of about two years that charted her development through a range of different movies and different stages of her life. This is as a young woman, in the first full glow of maturity, of adulthood, where she breaks through as a film star. She's spirited and open. All the world is in front of her, in this film, *National Velvet*. But we know by 1963, by the time this painting is painted, that already clouds have gathered over Taylor's life. She's had tempestuous relationships and her life was not static. She was not the iconic goddess. She might have been in some ways, larger than life, but she was somebody that people could look at and project all of their own demons and troubles and passions. She played her own life like some grand theater. Warhol was absolutely captivated by this. So he did these different images of Taylor at these different stages in her life—as Cleopatra; as the intense, sultry, sexual icon of *Butterfield 8* and these late fifties movies; and moving toward *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* She's moving toward that.

You can project that darkness in Taylor's career and life. In this painting, you see he starts at the very upper left with the most photographic image. It's almost a straight transfer of a photographic image onto the canvas. Then, the different inkings on the silkscreen leave out detail, obliterate detail, or it fades because there's not as much ink, and you see it almost like a flickering film being projected across this silver-painted background. It jumps and darts and comes in and out of focus and fades and darkens. It moves across the canvas until you get to the lower portion, where then it opens up here in the lower left. By the time you get to the last image, it's just a ghost. She's vanishing in front of your eyes. It's as if the film has run out. So it projects a psychological journey of this young woman in the first full bloom of her mature life up here, and as it flickers and proceeds across the canvas, this ghost that fades away at the end. So in this one canvas, you get a trajectory that Warhol sees in Taylor's life.

Again, the fragility of that filmic image. It's a haunting painting. It's full of darkness, at the same time that it's about shimmering light and reflection. It's a *vanitas* about the fleeting nature of human existence, about the frailty of our dreams, the way we project our dreams.

Warhol, many people think he is the quintessential Pop artist. Many of his paintings are that, particularly from 1962. 1962 was a year of American culture in its greatest hope. By 1963, Kennedy is assassinated and storm clouds are gathering on the horizon. By 1964, the civil rights movement is in full force, the Vietnam War is already starting. Warhol is like a sensor for the times. He picks up on these movements in our history, as they develop, very quickly. So he might be considered the quintessential Pop artist in 1962, but already by 1963, the work has taken on an extraordinary psychological and social dimension. It's no longer bright, shiny, new. It's about the uneasiness, the fading of dreams, the uneasiness of our culture and society at the time. Artists are often like the canaries in the coalmine. They're the first ones to sense change in the culture, to signal to the rest of us what's going on. This painting, for me, is really one of the great Warhol paintings of the period. It's definitely, I would say, one of his great masterpieces.

[interruption]

Cándida Smith: This is a piece that you acquired in the 1990s [Katharina Fritsch, *Kind mit Pudeln* (Baby with Poodles), 1995/1996]. You had worked with Fritsch earlier.

06-00:21:22

Garrels:

Katharina Fritsch is an artist from Germany. She studied at the academy in Düsseldorf, which is one of the great German art academies. In the twentieth century, it's been the place where most of the most prominent German artists have studied. I was very lucky that I happened to go to Germany in 1984, to Düsseldorf, to see a very large exhibition called "Von Hier Aus." It means "From Here On." It was a survey of art in Germany after the Second World War, centered really on the Düsseldorf academy. Artists like Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and many, many, many others. It was amazing. I spent three days in Düsseldorf, going to the exhibition every day. It was one of the most extraordinary times to know a lot of this work firsthand, to begin to understand the complexities and breadth of art in Germany in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. It was organized by a curator named Kaspar Koenig, who was the head of the art school in Düsseldorf and a great curator. He included a few students that he thought were the most interesting and promising, from students working at that time at the academy. That included Katharina Fritsch, with one of her very first earliest works that was seen in public.

I saw the work there and it was, like with so much of her work, almost hallucinatory. A vision, a frozen, surreal vision in front of one, with impeccable craft and detail but all kinds of unlikely potential, so very much coming out of what I would think of as surrealism, but with

almost a Pop clarity. So I began to follow her work a bit. When I was working developing a project at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, we had a building that we decided to develop for exhibitions. One of the first artists we wanted to bring to that, through the urging of Kaspar Koenig, was to invite Katharina Fritsch to potentially develop a project for the Dia Art Foundation. So I began going to Germany, trying to meet her. She was very elusive. She would meet me at a little old fashioned coffee shop across from the train station in Düsseldorf and talk to me. We did this two or three times. Then I think we had dinner. She finally agreed to come to New York to visit the Dia Art Foundation and consider possibly doing a project with the foundation in New York. At that time, she wouldn't fly so she took the QEII with two of her friends. They crossed the Atlantic, I picked them up on a Labor Day morning at eight o'clock in New York. I got to know Fritsch quite well, and she did end up making a proposal and eventually doing a show in New York at the Dia Art Foundation. She's someone whose work I followed very closely and I think is exemplary of artists of her generation. I think this generation of artists—and I would include in this artists like Robert Gober in New York, Charles Ray in Los Angeles, and a number of others—were very interested in strong, striking imagery that comes out of a heightened idea of visuality, of the visual presence creating a very strong image that sears itself into one's mind in one fell swoop. A gestalt that is whole, formed, and can't really be dissected very well. It exists almost as an apparition. Fritsch is absolutely one of the key artists of her generation dealing with these kinds of issues.

In this particular work, which was originally done for a show in Zürich, she only had twenty-four poodles in the show. I had seen the piece. I think she hoped that I would be interested in buying it for the museum, but I found it disappointing—it didn't have the force, the power, that I would associate with her work—and very politely, just let it go. About a year later, I discovered that she was remaking the piece and had decided to make it these dense circles of these black poodles. Fritsch is, like a lot of artists of her generation in Germany are, very interested in resuscitating German history. The culture was destroyed through the Nazi period. A lot of Germans didn't want to think about German history, didn't want to think about the ideas in German culture that somehow, in some way, may have contributed to the ideas of the Third Reich. The romanticism, the superiority of German thought, philosophy and so on.

Artists of Fritsch's generation, which is the next generation after the war, young people who were born after the war, began to go back and rethink and rediscover and dig through German history of the nineteenth century, the eighteenth century, the German enlightenment. Fritsch is very interested in all of that. This particular piece is based on

a story by Goethe, the great German writer/philosopher, one of the foundations of modern German culture and thinking. Goethe writes a story about Mephistopheles, about being on a walk. Germans have a great tradition of walking. The protagonist in the story is taking a walk and a black poodle crosses his path. This young man invites the poodle back to his house, to his study, and the poodle turns out to be Mephistopheles, the devil, who then confronts the young man in a debate about good and evil and so on. The poodle comes as an image, out of this Goethe story. You see this ring; there are 224 poodles arranged in four concentric rings. They are guarding? protecting? about to attack? a child, a baby in the middle. There's a white, plaster figure on an eight-pointed gold-green star. Well, is that like a Christ child? If one knows the history of German painting, this fleshy, full-cheeked, little figure very much is the way a German painter might have rendered the figure of Christ in the history of German painting. But it's very ambiguous. The child is pure white, obviously, and catches the light as it comes down and glows and emanates light. An idea of imminence, of new life of arising. All the possibilities are there. Surrounded with this huge mass of darkness. One can't tell; is this darkness being kept at bay by this light coming out? Will these forces of darkness somehow devour, overcome this new birth, this new lightness? Or are these sentinels? Are they guardians for it?

So we don't have a narrative that has a specific beginning or end. What we have is an extraordinary, sharply focused image that has an incredible visual play. Just the pattern of the poodles' tails create this wonderful flickering light. Poodles themselves are animals that we think of as playful. They're one of the most intelligent of dogs, they're alert. They're really not threatening. We think of them really as these wonderful, funny, playful dogs. So her choice of the poodle also has other kinds of associations. I think there's a lot of humor and absurdity in it. The visual richness of the patterning, the formal patterning is wonderful. The play of light and dark, of inside/outside space. The poodles, each one has to be very precisely placed. It would be like if you want to place something in a straight line, if you start to veer off at all, the line then starts to curve. Or it's like sending a satellite into space. If the trajectory is off just the least little bit, then the whole thing is lost. It's the same thing with placing these poodles. Each one has to be absolutely precisely placed, or the intervals in the whole circle don't work. So it's also, once you have worked on installing it, the control and obsessiveness comes out. There's just an absurdity about it, and a preposterousness, if you will, about it. So I find it a work of extraordinary delight, visual complexity, strength, with these layers of referencing German history and Pop art in the sixties, and with a new generation of German artists reckoning with their own society and culture.

Cándida Smith: How does the public respond to it? How has the public responded to it?

06-00:33:48

Garrels:

I think the public—at least my sense of it is—finds the work delightful and unsettling. It's funny. The poodles are wonderfully approachable, a baby. But it's very hard to really make sense of it. You understand the incredible labor and intensity, and you can admire the craft and the obsessiveness of it. The sheer visual and physical presence of it is extremely impressive. Then as you begin to understand more layers of reference and history, it raises lots of interesting issues and questions to think about. Fritsch's work often has this quality. Works that have been shown in other museums often become favorites of the public. They take on an iconic presence within the museum.

Cándida Smith: Here we have a piece by Robert Gober, who's an important artist for you, personally?

06-00:35:13

Garrels:

I love looking at contemporary art. I, since the mid-seventies, have had a regular pattern, habit of going to lots and lots of galleries and seeing new things, seeing new artists, keeping up with artists that have been working for a while, seeing what their new work has been, or discovering artists that I have never heard of, young artists as they first begin to show their work. Bob Gober, I believe, had his first show in New York at the Paula Cooper Gallery—well, the first really fully public show—in 1985. It might have been '84, I can't say for sure. He showed a series of what appeared to be sinks. They were handmade out of plaster, painted, and they lacked all of their handles, their drains. They were just the shells of sinks that had become increasingly distorted, so they began to take on an anthropomorphic presence, some idea of being animated by some spirit. They were responding to minimalism, to people like Donald Judd, but also to Jasper Johns and to classic surrealism, like Magritte. They were very beautifully made, very hand crafted. They caught a lot of people's attention. I certainly wasn't the only one. A lot of people were fascinated by these objects. It was a very strong first show for a young artist. Then there was a second show, where the sinks got even more extravagant and extended. I became more and more interested in this artist.

A friend of mine at the time, a woman named Suzanne Ghez, who runs an exhibition space in Chicago called the Renaissance Society, asked me if I might make an exhibition for her in Chicago. I immediately thought of young sculptors that were just beginning to show at this time, and I proposed a show with Bob Gober, Jeff Koons, and Haim Steinbach. I got in touch with Bob Gober and went to visit his studio. We did a series of conversations, which got edited down into a little interview in this little brochure. I presented three of his pieces—I think

it was three—in the show. So beginning, in 1985, I began a personal relationship with Gober, and a professional relationship, talking about his work. Then over the years, that continued, and I invited him, as I did with Katharina Fritsch, to make a proposal for an example at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, which eventually was realized. I was very happy in coming back to the museum this past fall, that my predecessor, Madeleine Grynsztejn, had acquired this wonderful work by Gober from a slightly later period. It's from 1991.

06-00:39:17

After he had done the series of sinks, he began then to work with fragments of the human body, or representations of fragments of the human body. I have to say, surrealism was not something that I had been naturally inclined to. A lot of young people first get interested in contemporary art through surrealism, because it has wonderful stories associated with it, fanciful, imaginative imagery. Somehow, it's often more approachable for people. I have to say, I had gotten interested in art through abstraction, and it took me a while to get interested in surrealism.

My fascination with Gober was, for me, one of the windows—or I should say, one of the doors—that allowed me to go back and approach surrealism. Also, to go back and appreciate Jasper Johns more fully. That is often the way I work. It's through contemporary art that I begin to understand the precedents maybe more fully and appreciate them more deeply. Gober, the first works, the sinks, had an incredible abstract quality to them. The tactility of them, they were very painterly, they had a lot of resonance with minimal art, which I was interested in; and also, yet, the way that they were done, were painterly, almost like an abstract painting. Then as he moved more into pushing the idea of the sinks out of anthropomorphic resonance into full-fledged bodies and fragments, I learned and followed, working along with Bob. He's been a very important artist for me in just thinking about the way the human figure is represented, about these more absurd, surrealist images.

Cándida Smith: When you mention Johns, are you referring to like the plaster casts with targets series?

06-00:41:39

Garrels:

Yes, the plaster casts. Jasper Johns, in the early sixties, began adding to the paintings cast segments from the body. Johns is someone I didn't immediately appreciate because there is a lot of potential narrative in the work. I was not very interested in narrative in painting, actually. A lot of layers of art historical reference. In some ways, Johns's work is a more literary work than what I was initially attracted to. As the years have gone on, Johns just becomes more and more and more interesting. You peel one layer and there's another layer; you

peel another layer and there's another layer. His own development as an artist has just continued and moved and expanded and shifted in so many ways, over decades. He's one of the most extraordinary artists of the twentieth century.

Bob Gober definitely relates back to Jasper Johns. One can create all connective relationships with Gober and Johns. But Gober developed incredibly bold, strong, visual objects that are very present. They create just an intense physical visual presence. So by the time this work [untitled, 1990] develops, the basic form recalls a sack. Like a sack of potatoes or a sack of grain, whatever, that has just been left. Clearly, it's a torso with the head severed, the legs severed. You see it's slumping, the fold of the body. It's beeswax with some pigment on it. It shimmers, almost like alabaster or highly polished marble. So it goes back to the idea of a Greek sculpture fragment or an nineteenth-century American white marble sculpture. So the whole history of the rendering of the figure through white marble, which is this great tradition of Western sculpture, is also then recalled in this, but then fused with the idea of a cast off sack or a bag. The work itself recalls very specifically some images out of Magritte paintings. The chest also begins, as you look at it, to become a face, and you get two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, which again goes right back to a very famous Magritte painting. As one then begins to look more closely, you can see how lovingly this piece has been crafted. You see and feel the carefulness with which it's been made. Each one of these hairs has been hand inserted into the beeswax. There's a tenderness. One senses the vulnerability, the fragility of it. It becomes a just incredibly tender, almost sacrificial image. Yet it also can be seen almost like a tombstone, a strange anthropomorphic tombstone.

06-00:46:54

It's an unsettling work. It's got the absurdity, the strange humor that one associates with surrealism. It's dealing with the whole history of the representation of the figure in Western art history from the Greeks to the nineteenth century, up to the present. So it's just a marvelous powerful image and object. I think that is what wonderful great works of art are. They have these multiple layers of association of meaning. Yet as you look at it visually, you begin to appreciate the delicacy and the complexity, the texture of the object itself.

Cándida Smith: There's also an everyday quality to it. It could be somebody's boyfriend sitting on a couch watching TV.

Garrels: Right. That's right. There's nothing grand or heroic about it. It has the feeling of an ordinary person's body, a very average person one could identify with this object.

[End Audio File 6]

Interview 7: February 11, 2010

[Begin Audio File 7]

Cándida Smith: We convene one last time, to discuss a couple of missing topics. The first is the decision to end jury selection of the SECA [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art] Awards. Perhaps you could talk a little bit about how that came about, from your perspective.

07-00:00:45

Garrels:

Well, when I came to the museum at the end of 1993, the SECA process had already concluded for the next SECA Award winner, the next SECA show. The way it had been organized was that the SECA members visited studios and then voted among themselves about who would be given an exhibition at the museum, and the publication. This particular round, they had decided on a young Vietnamese American artist who was living here in the Bay Area. They had decided to focus on one artist, and there was going to be a big show of this artist's work. When the exhibition was organized—it was in the old building—I have to say it was clear to me that the work was quite derivative of a lot of work being done at the time by more important artists. The artist who was selected, frankly, had been extremely influenced by Anselm Kiefer, who had been championed by the museum recently. Anyway, the show was mounted, and it was critically trashed. The reviews were terrible. The response generally, out in the community, was terrible.

Cándida Smith: By community, you mean the artist community.

07-00:02:46

Garrels:

Artists and our viewers, our public. It did not get a very good response. At that point, speaking with Janet Bishop, who was much closer to the process at that point, we realized that we had a flawed process. I discovered the longer I was here that a lot of the really interesting young artists in the Bay Area wanted nothing to do with SECA. They absolutely would never have these SECA members visit the studios, they wouldn't be considered to be part of the process. In fact, the best and most interesting young artists were not participating. We had to do something to try to get some credibility and some meaningfulness into this program. I met with the chairman, Phyllis Kempner, and she was wonderful. We had a long talk about it. I said, "You know, I think we have got to develop a process where the curators at the museum make the selection. Because it's embarrassing for SECA." I have to say, it was devastating for this young artist. It was a terrible situation for the artist, really not deserved. "To engage the young artist community in the Bay Area, that this was something they wanted to be a part of." It was very important for me because I felt that the role of the museum in nurturing, identifying, engaging young artists in the Bay Area was really critical for the museum. It was a critical function that the

museum could have in the community, to help support and bring to the public, younger artists. And Janet agreed.

We set out on this process. It was incredibly difficult. The SECA members felt that this was their contribution and their way of really participating. It was considered the most important part of the whole SECA program. There were a few members of SECA, including Phyllis and some other leadership members, who understood the situation and agreed with me. So we set about organizing a series of basically town meetings, inviting SECA members to come and meet with me, Janet, Phyllis, and other SECA members, to discuss this. We worked *very* hard. It took months and months of talking through the process and trying to get people to understand why it would be so important, and hopefully, so that the SECA members didn't feel that they were being stripped of this relationship. We had some SECA members quit. We had some incredibly vitriolic meetings. Very difficult. But at the end of many, many months, the SECA membership agreed and voted to allow the curators to make the final selection process.

So we embarked then on a new process, where anyone could submit material. We met for, I believe, two nights, reviewing all of this with the open membership of SECA and winnowing it down, over the course of two nights, to thirty artists whose studios we would visit over the course of six Saturdays. Janet and I would lead these Saturday studio visits, and at the end of each morning, we would have lunch and discussion with all the members about all the work we had seen. We tried to create a sense of real genuine participation—which actually had not occurred in the old way. In the old method, different SECA members would begin to champion one artist or another, and they actually didn't really discuss openly the work they were seeing. As this process developed, I think everyone recognized it was a much richer, more engaging process for *everyone*, talking about the art and the artists. At the end of the day, Janet and I would then decide if these artists were worthy of a second studio visit. Then we would do a second round of studio visits with SECA members. At the end of the process, we would pick, two, three or four artists for the SECA Award. We did that, the first year, through this process, moving into the new building. Which was another thing; we were moving into the new building and we knew we were going to be under even more scrutiny. But Janet and I were able to engage a lot of artists who, before, were not interested in participating. They were willing to have SECA members come to their studio, talk to them, meet with them. All in all, it just became a much more satisfying process for the SECA members, for the artists, and for the curatorial staff. We had a great SECA exhibition in the new building, which got a lot of good critical

response. We bought work out of it for the museum. It launched a new chapter, I think, in the SECA Art Award.

Cándida Smith: This first show was the Mission School show?

07-00:08:53

Garrels: Yes. Barry McGee was part of that and—

Cándida Smith: So that was a big breakthrough, in some ways.

07-00:09:00

Garrels: It was a big breakthrough. I think it set SECA on a path that's continued. At this current time, the younger curators are involved with it. I have not been involved with it directly since I've been back. It's healthy, thriving. It's linked the museum, in a very wonderful way, into the art community here in the Bay Area.

Cándida Smith: As part of the process that you're trying to develop, is developing a critical consensus among the active SECA members part of what goes into the decision you make, or the curators make, ultimately?

07-00:09:47

Garrels: Janet and I were very conscious that we wanted to listen to the SECA members, we wanted to hear their points of view. It's interesting that there would be different groups that would champion one artist or another. At the end of the day, Janet and I would make the decision. We felt we had to maintain the curatorial integrity of the process. But on the other hand, we were listening and open, and I think the SECA members felt that their opinions were taken into account. It took a burden, actually, off of them, so that there wasn't a bad feeling that one group had been left out or that one group had championed over another. So in fact, the SECA members, I think, had a better integration between them, as well.

Cándida Smith: This process, the ending of the jury selection process, seems to coincide with other big changes in SECA: the move from education to development, raising the dues, some changes in membership requirements. In some ways, it's hard to know what exactly were all the factors that would cause somebody to get upset and leave.

07-00:11:15

Garrels: I know there were some members, long-time core members, who left because they felt that the core responsibility had been really taken away from them. But fortunately, that was a very, very small number of people, a small minority. SECA, I think, is thriving. We had more people get involved and more people coming to the Saturday studio visits. In fact, it reinvigorated the organization.

Cándida Smith: Did you continue to participate in the SECA selection process through your first tenure here?

07-00:11:55

Garrels: I did.

Cándida Smith: So it was Madeleine [Grynsztejn] who then transferred it over to the junior—

07-00:12:00

Garrels: To the younger curators, that's right.

Cándida Smith: Did the curators, as a group—or at least the P&S [painting and sculpture] curators, as a group—discuss the awards before the decisions are made?

07-00:12:18

Garrels: No, it's the curators who are working with the SECA members, going on the studio visits, who really make the decision. Next year, for the first time, assistant curators in painting and sculpture and an assistant curator in media arts will be the curatorial committee for it.

Cándida Smith: And of course, they're younger so they're more closely in tune with what young artists are doing.

07-00:12:47

Garrels: They are. They're more closely linked to the young Bay Area community here, so I think it's appropriate.

Cándida Smith: Let's switch to the acquisition of the Ellsworth Kelly paintings, which was quite a coup for SFMOMA. As I recall, you said you had first met Ellsworth personally, Ellsworth and Jack, when you were at Dia.

07-00:13:17

Garrels: Well, actually, I met Ellsworth when I was still at MIT, at the old Hayden Gallery. He was in a group show that Kathy Halbreich organized, of handmade works on paper. I met Ellsworth then. That must have been, oh, 1978. But just very briefly. I didn't know him. I've tried to recollect when I actually first really got to know Ellsworth, and I really don't remember. It was probably while I was at Dia in New York.

Cándida Smith: The impression I formed—and you can clarify or correct—is that you actually got a fairly substantial view of what was in his vault, as it were.

07-00:14:14

Garrels: Well, there was an exhibition—it was organized in, I believe, the late eighties; '87 or '88, something like that—that I saw in Europe, in

Münster, that focused on work done while he was living and working in Paris. It was a revelation. First of all, to understand that work, and to understand the ideas and the development of the work at the time, and then to realize that Ellsworth still retained almost all of this work. There were photographs, there were drawings, and there were many paintings. It was a revelation that there was this extraordinary body of work that was still basically intact, being held by the artist. When I came to SFMOMA, Ellsworth was an artist that this museum had been interested in, had acquired work going back to the sixties.

We approached Ellsworth about a gift in honor of the anniversary, the sixtieth anniversary, in the new building, which he was willing to consider. I will say, at the time, he said he wanted to make a gift of a sculpture, and he said, "I'd like to make the gift in honor of John Caldwell. I wasn't really particularly close to John, but I don't want to give a gift that's unattached, because I'm asked for gifts so often."

Cándida Smith: Museums do this all the time? How do you ratchet up the courage to go ask an artist of that stature, hey, give us a gift.

07-00:16:33

Garrels:

Well, Jack Lane and John Caldwell had been very supportive of Ellsworth. Through the Carnegie International, there had been a history here. There were trustees here, notably Don Fisher, who was an avid collector of Kelly. I don't remember who made the initial request to Ellsworth; it probably was a letter that had come from Jack Lane. I just don't remember the process. I do remember I talked to Ellsworth personally on the phone, and he said he would make a gift of a sculpture. But again, he said he wanted to do it in honor of John, just so that people might see it as something specific, in terms of why he was making this gift, even though he actually wasn't particularly close to John. Although, of course, they did know each other from the Carnegie.

After we were working on the Rauschenberg acquisition, it occurred to me that Ellsworth was in a very similar situation to Bob, holding onto this incredible group of his early works. I raised the issue with David Ross and to Matthew Marks. I have had a long relationship with Matthew. I knew him very well. I asked Matthew whether we might approach Ellsworth about the purchase of a key group of these early works. So it was a combination of things. Then we brought this up to Don, who loved the idea. And Don had already talked to Matthew Marks about trying to buy some early work from Ellsworth. Matthew knew that Ellsworth wasn't going to sell these things to a private collector. It came about sort of through a congruence of factors. Matthew talked to Ellsworth, and he was agreeable in principle to the idea that we might acquire a core group. He was also considering at

the time a number of museums: the National Gallery in Washington, which had a long history with Ellsworth; there was interest at the Art Institute in Chicago. Ellsworth was thinking about where these works would eventually go, and with deciding key works that he felt should probably go to particular institutions.

Cándida Smith: Did you have any influence in shaping his ultimate decision on those—

07-00:19:38

Garrels:

Oh, yes. Absolutely. Once Ellsworth agreed in principle that he would let SFMOMA acquire a group of works, I then began systematically studying, as thoroughly as possible, the early work and thinking about which works could make sense here, in tandem with the works that were already in the Bay Area in collections—in the Fisher collection, in the museum's collection. There were a couple key works I knew Ellsworth felt had to go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I was aware of discussions at the National Gallery and the Art Institute. But there was such a wealth of work. I began compiling a list, and I began conversations with Ellsworth about these works. There were a couple things I really wanted, but in those cases, these were two works he felt he really wanted at the Modern in New York. So I found, I think, extremely good alternatives. It was knitting together clusters of objects that were representative of the key issues that Kelly was dealing with in these early works. So the issue of shadows and the issue of the relationship to photography, the relationship to the early collages, to chance operations. Ellsworth had made a book, or proposed a book, called *Line, Form, Color*, I believe in 1951. Those three issues—line, form, color—are really the bedrock of Kelly's work. Ellsworth was very open, and he liked the choices. He was interested and generally agreeable to the choices I had made.

Cándida Smith: Were any of the other institutions as interested as you were in the early material?

07-00:22:35

Garrels:

Probably, but we were in this extremely fortunate situation that Don Fisher got very excited about this prospect. At the same time, Chuck and Helen Schwab also got interested in this. Mimi Haas was very interested, particularly in the very early works. Mimi Haas has had a very interesting, very particular take in her own collection, on very early formative works, which she helped us acquire with the Rauschenberg gift, as well. So between the Fishers and the Schwabs, and then some interest on the part of Mimi, we were able to put together a very large amount of money to approach Ellsworth with. It was very hard to put values on these works. There wasn't a market for them. I have to say that I think Ellsworth was very generous in terms

of the prices he put on things. He loved the idea that there would be this core group, with the idea that eventually, there would be a gallery or galleries in this museum dedicated to Kelly's work, that could really tell the story of the development of these early ideas, though these specific works. We also were interested in some of the later works, to augment works already in the museum's collection or in particularly, the Fisher collection. I picked specific things, particularly focused on sculptures, that would augment, enhance, fill out, what might be possible to understand about the work, in tandem particularly with the Fisher collection.

Cándida Smith: Was money really an issue in this? I know that you had to have the money, but was the price really sort of open ended?

07-00:25:12

Garrels:

I made the list of what we wanted, knowing a kind of ballpark figure. I have to say, I can't recall how we finally got to the final number. I was really focused on a particular group of objects, and Ellsworth agreed to that. Then there were three very early paintings that he felt were not mature work that I wanted. He didn't feel they were mature works, and he didn't feel they were appropriate to be sold or purchased, so he made those as a gift. But I felt they were very crucial to understand the steps leading to the work that began to develop, that he calls his mature work. So we reached a figure. The Fishers and the Schwabs basically gave the museum the money so that the museum could acquire a third interest in the overall body of work, with the Schwabs acquiring a third interest and the Fishers acquiring a third interest, and Mimi Haas acquiring two early works that were part of this overall package.

Cándida Smith: But with promises to gift everything to the museum?

07-00:26:57

Garrels:

The idea at the time was that the interest on the part of the Fishers and the Schwabs, they would be promised gifts. I have to say, after we went through all this, the Fishers felt that their interest should be retained by the Fisher collection but obviously, accessible to the museum. It was a little bit of an awkward point. Fortunately, the relationships, personal relationships, were good enough and strong enough that it didn't create a real crisis.

Cándida Smith: It strikes me that really, this process of fractional gifts and co-ownership really begins in the 1990s. There wasn't a whole lot of history, at this museum, in any event, of how to handle these kinds of things.

07-00:28:07

Garrels:

It really began here with the sixtieth anniversary collection campaign. At the time, there were a number of works that were acquired as partial and promised gifts. It was a relatively new initiative on the part of museums. Partially because of the frustration in the past, where there'd been a number of cases— there had been some very high profile cases in New York, particularly at the Whitney, and at the Modern, where trustees had made promised gifts and subsequently their heirs had withdrawn those promises and sold the works at market. The museums had planned, the way they had built their collections was with the understanding that these works would be coming to the collection. But there was no legal recourse for the museums. So the idea of a partial gift was that the work was encumbered, that a museum actually had to agree to any subsequent decision about the dispersal of the work. It became much more difficult to simply sell the work without the museum's agreement. It was an effort to create a more secure commitment on the part of donors, and the understanding of potential heirs, that the work was committed to the museum's collection.

Cándida Smith:

Now, you mentioned the idea of a gallery or galleries. I was wondering the degree to which Rauschenberg, Kelly was something that you were going to move on with other artists, with this idea in mind, and the degree to which, say maybe the current fourth-floor shows are a taste of the museum's future. Ten years after the expansion has occurred, do you see more single-artist galleries?

07-00:30:18

Garrels:

Well, the same thing then came up when I was organizing the Sol LeWitt retrospective. Because again, Sol had a lot of his own, particularly early, work. In organizing the retrospective, it's a chance to understand the full range of an artist's work, understand where things are available. Again, with this idea of concentrations. We had been acquiring work in preparation for the retrospective, as well. At the time of the LeWitt retrospective, we did acquire a number of things directly from Sol—wall drawings and early structures. Very much with the idea of the Kelly and the Rauschenberg acquisitions as the model for that. But of course, the precedent for this goes back to the 1974 gift by Clyfford Still, of the twenty-eight paintings for the museum. As in this anniversary show, the focus on artists, it's something that was in my mind for many years. In the nineties here at the museum, the idea that one of the distinguishing things of this collection could be these great, in-depth representations of certain key artists.

Cándida Smith:

Then of course, it's important to get the right sequence, and not just the work that happens to become available or that happens to be donated.

07-00:31:53

Garrels:

With Gerhard Richter, I was very conscious about which works were in the community and which works weren't, which works were available to us. In making some of the selections about possible acquisitions, I tried to pursue works that would create a core group representing the range of Richter's work.

Cándida Smith:

A strategy you're going to be continuing to do as the collections grow, do you think?

07-00:32:33

Garrels:

In fact, our next meeting, March 17, I'm going to be presenting a core group of early sculptures by Bruce Nauman that we will be buying from the collection of Count Giuseppe Panza, in Italy. Panza has five works, including the only painting that survives or exists of Nauman. All works that he made when he was either still at Davis in grad school, or working in his early studios here in San Francisco. That, in tandem with the early work we already have in the collection, will give the museum maybe one of the richest holdings, if not the richest holding, of works by Nauman from the early part of his career. Those works were made here in the Bay Area. To my mind, they are among the most important works made in the Bay Area in the twentieth century. Yes, we are continuing that, as we can. And of course, it all will be transformed by the Fisher collection being here at the museum, as well. Because again, with the Fishers, one of the ways they also collected was focusing on particular artists and collecting those works in great depth.

[End of Interview]

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