

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

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SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

ROBERT RILEY

SFMOMA Staff, 1988-2000
Curator of Media Arts

Interview conducted by
Richard Cándida Smith
in 2009

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Robert Riley

Interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith, ROHO

Interview 1: April 15, 2009

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Cándida Smith: The first question is if you could tell us about your background. When and where were you born?

01-00:05:04

Riley: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, at the Beth Israel Hospital. My mother followed her obstetrician there, a woman doctor named Snow, I think.

Cándida Smith: You grew up in Boston?

01-00:05:21

Riley: I grew up outside the city when it was easier to get into Boston from Danvers because it was on the highway loop. The town had a considerable amount of history to it, because it was once part of Salem where witches were captured and put to trial. One of my first jobs was mowing the lawns, being the gardener of historical properties when I was a kid. I took care of witches' gardens.

Cándida Smith: What did your parents do?

01-00:06:15

Riley: My father was in insurance. My mother went back to work when we were small, worked for a cardboard container corporation. Part of our weekend activities were taking apart cookie packages and light-bulb packages to figure out how an exoskeletal corrugated container can be made, how all these packages would slip into the container. In commercial food production you have a very interesting structural problem about how your cookies and crackers arrive to you at market or table unbroken. All those little inserts and all those little cardboard

things that you find, it's all about the packing. During the war, she worked for a roofing company, in construction. After World War II, she went back to work when we were little kids. She taught us all how to make certain types of dishes, and then with her absence from home at work we were responsible to make one of the suppers for each night of the week.

Cándida Smith: How many brothers and sisters did you—

01-00:07:18

Riley: I have two sisters—there were three of us. We always had to negotiate that schedule of dinner productions, based in our catalog of recipes that we had committed to memory. All part of growing up.

Cándida Smith: Was your family interested in art or culture, in any sense? Or fine art?

01-00:07:41

Riley: No. Art was actually something that I found. I was very busy with my own projects, building things, making things, watching the world and how it functioned mechanically. Little things like pumps and science projects. Things that moved. Clocks. My grandfather, Hugh Nathaniel Boulter, who was Scottish, was my great defender. He was always saying, "Let the boy alone. Let him do his projects." I became known as a little fix-it kid. If something was broken or something needed mending, if something *happened*, I could fix and repaint and make it as good as new. I was also very good with scissors. I used to cut out profiles of objects and put them on the window. In the neighborhood, it became a bit of theater. People would come over and see these funny little silhouettes that I used to make and tape to the windows. It's still quite a joke in the family, actually.

Cándida Smith: It's nice.

01-00:08:57

Riley: We didn't have a real cat, but we had a memory of a cat or a silhouette of a cat against a window.

Cándida Smith: How did you drift from that into art?

01-00:09:17

Riley: I started winning things. I started to draw. I had an older sister; her idea of play was to play school with her two younger siblings. Basically, we had reading, we had writing, and we had art. That was what we did when we played. By the time I got to school, I had this ability to draw things. When something needed to be commemorated, people just asked me to draw things. My hobby led to trophies. When I was at the end of high school, I actually won the Scholastic Art Awards. I got a scholarship for college through Hallmark Cards for a collage. That was my beginning.

Cándida Smith: Did you go to college with the idea that you would be an art major?

01-00:10:31

Riley: I did. I went to Windham College in Putney, Vermont, in the seventies. I met Nam June Paik, I met Carl Andre, I met Chuck Ginnevar, I met all these people of the 1970s, who came to Windham College through the art faculty. Artists had residencies and made presentations, things like that. I remember in 1970 meeting Nam June Paik and thinking, now, this is *something*.

Cándida Smith: What work was he doing at that time? What was he working on when you met him?

01-00:11:07

Riley: I think the Paik/Abe Synthesizer had just been demonstrated as an instrument that could take the programmed television image and turn it into an animated image under the artist's control. Paik was taking found images and using the television as a collage medium. His talk

was foundational to me, about the artist's will. The artist's will and the struggle that artists have with materials of all kinds. That seemed to be the discussion at the time, a struggle with material would ultimately be an expression of will and that the resulting object—It was the seventies, so the artist's objective wasn't always object-bound; let's call it art, for now. It was unclassified; it was unknowable; it was something that needs to be considered seriously.

Cándida Smith: I know that you got your BFA from Massachusetts College of Art, so you must have decided to shift to an art school.

01-00:12:22

Riley: To an art school, yes. I left Windham, but I stayed in Putney for a while because exciting things were happening; there was a woman on the basketball team, and there was no issue about gender separation. This was a great time—it was around 1973—that all these wonderful things were happening at the college. I met some wonderful people there. John Irving was my English teacher. Annie Proulx lived up the road. It was a very dynamic scene there, but I couldn't escape the idea that life was passing me by. You can't stay high forever. I packed up at that point and was accepted as a transfer student to the Massachusetts College of Art.

Cándida Smith: I noticed at least your initial focus was in printmaking, so it seems like you were still wedded to art as a material object.

01-00:13:32

Riley: Process. I started to explore ideas about time in printmaking. The sequential development of the image-generating mechanism, sequential pieces in time as prints. I thought, "Oh, I really have to get to art school." By the time I got to art school, in Massachusetts, a student could cross-register at universities for a variety of courses. I went to MIT and Harvard for a few courses. It was a great time to be at

MIT. The Center for Advanced Visual Studies was there, and I took a sound course with electronic composer Paul Earls. I'd come up in art at a time of exploration. There were faculty members in place to support the independent thinking of their students, a classroom outside a strict curriculum. I looked at that freedom as a real guiding principle. As a student at MassArt, I was able to have what the college now calls an open major, a program which entitles a person to drop out of the college if there's an internship or a job that's available. You introduce freedom as part of your curriculum, and get a faculty member as your supervisor for an off-curriculum or off-campus project. That's how I went through art school.

Cándida Smith: The early seventies was a special moment. In part, because the art market collapsed. You were in a special period, when sales weren't driving things and artists were exploring new ways of thinking about what they were doing.

01-00:15:41

Riley: And it began in architecture, which made it possible to move into buildings and call it your studio. A discussion that artists started to have with space and installations was, I think, an aspect of inheriting these abandoned buildings. These buildings had been industrial, there'd been people working in these buildings. So the time was right to get into the building and get to work. I think it was less intimidating for people to look for a formal language at that time.

Cándida Smith: Now, this is a period of exploring process, maybe of exploring communication as something in and of itself?

01-00:16:44

Riley: Yes.

Cándida Smith: Then was this a period, for you, where the supposed barriers between art and life had come down? Is that fair to say?

01-00:17:06

Riley: I'd say that characterizes the period, certainly. The admiration that everyone shared for the achievement of somebody's success, of artistic success, I think is a real difference from that period to now, where a person's success working among a group of colleagues or associates becomes something competitive or destructive these days, where at an earlier time—the rising tide lifts all boats. Everybody seemed to be happy for another person's successes. People were working collectively, out of Fluxus. The Vasulkas [Steina and Woody Vasulka] started the Kitchen in New York, which was basically a mechanical bank for lending and production of works. The origin of the Kitchen—magnificent.

The cornerstones of so much artistic practice, I agree with you, were set in that era of cooperation and real delight that someone could advance their ideas and *finally* find their way into museums. Actually, that is a place where I start, I had this ability—because I'd worked in public works and things of this sort—to work with artists, to talk with museums about architectural or physical changes to the layout of the gallery in order to support the physical demands of these new pieces. In the movement from the sculptor's three-dimensional ground into a four-dimensional space, certain conditions had to be achieved in order to experience the piece correctly. I would be able to work with artists and meet with the museums and the organizations and gently work against their resistance to get things done, which shifted the conditions a little bit more favorably to the appreciation of an artwork. That's really where I started.

Cándida Smith: Your interest in time-based media was becoming very intense at this period, it sounds like.

01-00:19:48

Riley: Oh, yeah. I was doing these projects where the Boston Fire Department would come in and let me know that an installation wasn't a work of art, it was a fire hazard. There were all these mental exercises that one had to go through to look for language in defense of art, against all these other types of allegations that were being defined by people with other concerns. The arts administrators would see art as one thing; the fire department would see it as a hazard.

Cándida Smith: Do you remember a specific work where that was the issue?

01-00:20:25

Riley: Oh, film projectors. It goes all the way back to power cords when machinery needed to draw power from the wall. You couldn't have trip hazards and you couldn't have a dark room. This was forbidden. All these things were forbidden. Danger is a theme that follows me through my entire professional career, and I'm sure we'll touch on it again and again.

Cándida Smith: Of course, you're particularly interested in new media. Were you also interested in performance art?

01-00:21:10

Riley: That comes a little bit later, when I go out and I see people working in a live format, every bit as conscious and considerate about the delivery of information through a time-based practice or discipline. I think of the early work of the performers that came out of the Image movement, like Eric Bogosian, or Karen Finley; the people that come out in that same era as their associates in the art world. Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo, for instance, are practicing more frozen gestures. The performance work that was done at the time was so accomplished that I branched off to start a performance program at the ICA, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, where I was working. It's funny, when I graduated from Massachusetts College of Art, the dean of

administration, Mort Godine, asked me to stay to be the director of programs and exhibitions, because Virginia Gunter had retired. He asked me to stay for two more years. It's always been my instinct to start more and more projects. So, sure. There were two galleries at Mass Art, but I just decided that there needed to be more. We started projects for commissioning artists in different places—stairwells and different forlorn, forgotten places of the school. But I moved to the Institute of Contemporary Art, I think, with a Claes Oldenburg show. That's what happened. I worked there as a preparator for years, working on all of these projects that were coming into the museum, where there *had* to be architectural adaptations to the space. I evolved from that into being a curator for new programs. We were very successful in locating funding—government, state, and commission money.

Cándida Smith: It seems like at ICA, that's where you begin to really develop a program for what it is that you want to do and you discover what it is that you *can* do.

01-00:24:22

Riley: Yeah, the curators were really good. Elisabeth Sussman, who's now at the Whitney [Museum of American Art], and Michael Leja were there for a long while. David Joselit arrived, and he does incredibly good work. David [Ross] was there, Elisabeth was there. We worked as a curatorial team. It was good work.

David Ross came in to be the director of the ICA in 1983. Stephen Propokoff went off, and David came in. ICA became a great platform for David, and the curators, to start to invent ways of exhibition practice that were not clearly defined, but were incidental, were *co-incident*. Certainly, some thought behind it. But it was a bit of a willful program to look at the artistic production of the time and put it

together as a way of—people called it the Zeitgeist back then. Taking a measure of the artistic expression as a measure of the times.

David was energetic, and really helped advance our thinking and the programs. [Two paragraphs deleted in editing.]

ICA Boston was my first real experience in collecting the most fugitive medium of all and learning how to author copies of the artist's original for various reasons of distribution or exhibitions. A new language of conservation and presentation of media had begun. There are number of things we did there. Like a Polaroid award, a \$30,000 gift to an artist to develop a piece. Joan Jonas won one, and Bill Viola made his *Room For Saint John of the Cross* as part of that Polaroid. Marina Abramovic and Ulay won another year. We invented all kinds of novel means of production, both through awards, through grants, through collaborations between industry and private sources. We had a fairly active exhibition program going on there.

Cándida Smith: Did you have any models for what you were doing?

01-00:30:19

Riley: The points of reference were possibly more of a response to failures, when artists would try to show at museums and the museums were resistant or somehow unsupportive. For artists showing in some places, it was a money-losing experience. The different methodologies of the video and media festivals that were happening in Europe at the time were a model. That was the model because it demonstrated that you could, if you set the right groundwork, you could achieve almost anything, with perseverance and manners. I wrote my mother a letter a while back, with thanks for being so insistent in teaching us manners. That it's not about making *you* comfortable, it's about making *other* people comfortable. I'd say the guiding principle in my career was not to allow failure. Import something of a more fluid, polite society and

relationship with an artist into an organization; such a policy helps everybody.

Cándida Smith: Was this like a joint improvisation between you and the artist? Is that fair to say?

01-00:32:12

Riley: You'd get to know the artist, and what the work of art required.

Cándida Smith: David Ross was probably unusual for a director at that time, in having a lot of grounding, at least in video art, one aspect of time-based media. Was that part of what made the ICA an exciting place to be at that time, that the director was not just wedded to static objects?

01-00:32:56

Riley: David Ross was a director who took an enormous amount of pride at the program that his curators developed. He took an amazing pride in that, and of course, he had a fundamental place in it all. It was wonderful to work for a director who had a visible expression of being proud of his institution.

Cándida Smith: It seems like it must have been a great place to have been in the 1980s, late seventies and most of the eighties.

01-00:33:29

Riley: It was a very good place. My friendships from that era are long-term and lasting. It's quite nice. But you know—[pause]

Cándida Smith: But?

01-00:33:54

Riley: All I can say is it was a lot of work. When you're twenty-eight, thirty or something like this, fun and your artistic ambitions are all connected. It was possible to achieve these things because it was, as you say, life and art. It was a real disappointment when you had to go home to sleep.

Cándida Smith: Now, the period while you were at ICA, in particular, was a period in which there's a big shift in art criticism and the way in which art was talked about. It may or may not have been impacting you, but I'd like to ask the degree to which the ideas of Rosalind Krauss or Hal Foster, on the one hand, or maybe Michael Fried on the other hand, were at all important to you, interesting to you. The death of the subject, the death of the artist, Fried's criticism of theatricality.

01-00:35:21

Riley: I would say that those texts weren't all that important because they were observational, whereas my work was more practice. My connection was with the artist. It was wonderful to find reviews of the work if you had some part in it. But there was so much written about deconstruction, appropriation and all of that, what I just considered the toolbox of an artist's selection. As there was more and more work produced, there were more and more and more sources for content. That got to be, actually, the most fun. That artists could draw from almost any area of production and find a very lively conversation. I remember Dara Birnbaum saying, "TV will spend \$100,000 making an explosion. I need an explosion, I'll just take it. It took me two minutes." She didn't have to spend the money for it. The image had been produced already, so she just took it in appropriation.

I might reveal in this interview that I have a foundation in a hippie, countercultural past. An excommunicated theologian named Ralph Harper wrote a Freudian analysis of fairytales and was excommunicated from the church. He spent his life, I think, on Patmos. He wrote two insightful essays. One he wrote on the ineffable idea of presence. What is presence? I found, in his text about presence, some true guiding principles in a life's work. Which was, as he explained it, the uncomfortable confrontation with things you don't completely understand. But you know that there's something in that experience of

perception that you may come to understand over the duration of your lifetime. One of the things that most attracts me to artists working in media and time-based projects [is the] balance between the material and the immaterial, wherein there's an experience of perception that the artist controls as content in their work.

I'm drawn time and again to the transitional pieces that artists create. I seem to have a knack for going to a museum and finding these uncomfortable, awkward pieces that mark a point where a whole life's work took off. A rendering of space. Or the artist who inscribes as content that has to do with the context of their own time—uncomfortably, but trying and struggling. I admire those pieces. What we have in our collection—which makes the San Francisco collection a bit unique—is this experience into museums and trying to resolve their presentation harmonically with the restrictions of a cube, of a gallery, of a room. The scale relationship between visitors, the physical relationship of the person to the size of the image. In three-dimensional work, the visitor has a physical sympathy, or a connection, to the form in three dimensions. An aspect of communication between, let's say, the sculpture and its observer, an artist moves from 3-D traditions into a 4-D time-based [form], you have empathy for the physical situation, and you also have an intellectual link with the distribution of visual or sound information in space, as well. You have multiple sense perceptors working simultaneously. This resolution, I believe, is one of the differentiating points in works of art, where someone has really achieved their goals.

Cándida Smith: Maybe we could discuss the Doug Hall *Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*. It was made in 1987, so I made an assumption that it may have well been made for “The Spectacle of Image” show that you did at ICA.

01-00:42:13

Riley: It was.

Cándida Smith: You acquired it in '89, so I made an assumption that it's one of the first things.

01-00:42:22

Riley: In fact, yeah.

Cándida Smith: It's not *the* very first thing you acquired, but it's one of the earliest things you acquired.

01-00:42:28

Riley: It's a wonderful work to talk about.

Cándida Smith: What's going on there? What is it that you wanted people to see? What were the problems the work posed for you, both in the ICA space and then in the SFMOMA space?

01-00:42:51

Riley: I never met Doug Hall, but I knew his work. I knew of the videotapes, such as *The Eternal Frame*, I knew of his interest in media performance and his real immersion in the culture of the time. I called him up, and he shared some information about things that he was working on and what he might like to do, work that he might like to create. The Massachusetts Council for Arts and Humanities had a program of New Works. The grants were gifts to museums to underwrite the production of a work of art for exhibition in Massachusetts. We had real success with that project. I spoke with Doug, and he was very interested in issues of spectacle in his recent works. In his early videotapes, I think it's *The Amarillo News Tapes*, he becomes an artist in residence at a television station—another truly foundational work—where the artist is trying to learn the language of the news. He takes a real situation and translates that event into a language for the consumer of news. It's just quite a spectacular tape

because of all the things that happen: a church burns. I am one of a number of people right now who waits for the moment that television news announces itself as a crime, and then the time that I want to live has arrived! The analysis of complicated human situations through the news mechanism is just so sad. But that's another question altogether. These were the issues that were of interest to Doug at the moment; he was also continuing his practice as an artist of becoming an artist-in-residence at various places. When he made *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, he was an artist-in-residence at the office of extreme weather. He was an artist-in-residence with the Coast Guard; he was an artist-in-residence in all different situations that were conditional to make the images for *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, an expression of sublimity he sought to define.

In my interest in media, which comes from the artist's exploration of the mechanical process and the process of image generation as content in the work, Doug, to my extreme pleasure, was about to set off to look at industrial processes and conditions we observe in weather, these huge environmental forces at work. The hot and the cold, the wind and the stillness, and meteorological events that create the environment of the earth. Basically, where electricity comes from, how electrical forces permeate everything. Everything. Everything, everything. He translated weather, concepts of weather, into a three-channel video installation, which was, at that time, ambitious and very impressive, an edited synchronized presentation of multiple images on a number of screens. In the work was a presentation of rhythmically organized and semiologically organized images that constructed, in a sense, image sentences that had conclusions, conceptual power, and rhythmic relationships. Image sequences work almost as sentences. He would explain how what we know as sublime or ineffable in the universe all comes delivered to you in that little smiley-face Edison plug, that little two-eyed, three-holed receptacle. A Van de Graaff

generator, which is a machine that generates and discharges an undifferentiated blast of electricity, was a component of the sculpture at certain times in the installation itself. He did research into [Michael] Faraday, the physicist who worked on electrical currents and how one current was blocked by sending another current through a grounded wire cage. So Doug looked at the pixel matrix of the television screen, created a pixel matrix of a steel screen, and worked sculpturally to create this work of great power in variable media forms.

We premiered the work at the ICA Boston. Then I think within a matter of months, it was included in a show at the Carnegie Museum called “American Landscape Video [The Electronic Grove],” which was coterminous with my arrival in San Francisco. It was the first show that I brought to 401 Van Ness Avenue, the Beaux-Arts building. The museum had been active looking at artists working in media forms in San Francisco and in the area. Mostly in California.

There were actually two early shows. The first one was an exhibition of video for television called “[The] Arts for Television.” I wrote an essay in a catalog. Julie Lazar co-curated the exhibition with a group of collaborators from MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] and ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] Boston, and the Stedelijk [Museum] in Amsterdam. It was presentation of artists’ works that had been commissioned through international production arrangements. ZKM [Center for Art and Media] in Germany, Channel 4 in London, and there were different co-producers of artists’ projects for broadcast. Boston was represented by the ICA. C-A-T, (Contemporary Art Television) Fund. Not only did we have an exhibition program at the ICA, but we also had a production program. The production program, directed by Kathy Ray Hoffman, was linked to the international artists’ production network that was either at museums or with public

television stations. CAT Fund was a joint venture between ICA and WGBH.

01-00:51:08 I came to San Francisco with that work at the ICA, at Jack Lane's invitation. I bring "The Arts for Television." So right after "Arts for Television" comes "American Landscape Video." In this exhibition we have *The Terrible Uncertainty*, by Doug Hall, a local artist; Mary Lucier; Frank Gillette; Bill Viola; Rita Myers; Steina Vasulka. *The West* was a piece in "American Landscape Video" that we placed in our permanent collection here. I think Steina's first museum purchase, actually, was SFMOMA. We present this exhibition, and it becomes clear to San Francisco that we mean business. The museum has stepped forward with confidence. The scale of these pieces, first of all, was vast, and editions of the videotapes needed to be created for presentation. We worked with the Bay Area Video Coalition as partners in production and in authoring exhibition-quality tape—this is pre-disc; this is three-quarter-inch tape—for that exhibition., While we were at 401 Van Ness Avenue, for all the years there, people would come to the front desk to ask, "Now, I saw this artwork here that was a circle of televisions. It was the ruins of Anasazi. They kept drifting and shifting. Where is that?" Obviously, the show made a big impression on the visitors to the museum. It also set forward our path of exhibitions, collections, and conservation of these great ideas in fugitive forms.

Cándida Smith: What were the practical problems for mounting a show like that in the space?

01-00:53:28

Riley: There's a very good preparator, on staff, Kent Roberts. Kent was a brilliant engineer and problem solver. When I first arrived, I asked for the blueprints. I have to fit all of these installations to the architectural footprint of the building. I was looking at the 401 Van Ness Avenue

gallery spaces, and I noticed there were these open space. There's the gallery wall, but then there seemed to be this open hidden spaces. What are these? Well, it turned out behind every exhibition wall at 401 Van Ness Avenue, there was about eight feet of open space. The result of the renovation of the museum building years and years ago. The gallery walls didn't actually touch the structural walls. How about that good fortune? There were even little doors and gateways, which we opened. We found that there were doors. Voilà! Some place to put all of the equipment. Candles could be up to the ceiling and brought down through the skylights, take a sheet of glass out of the skylight, if you had to mount a projector or a piece of equipment aerially. You could just put a piece of plywood into that suspended ceiling and down comes the pipe and up goes the projector, and problem solved. The preparator team, not only are they very, very, very good at hanging pictures with earthquake precautions and things like that, but they were very, very good in talking with the artist or talking with the curator and satisfying the criteria for the work in its most advantageous way. An exceptionally good team to work with. That discovery led to some ease of production of some very demanding works because solutions presented themselves. Some of the better solutions we brought here, actually, when we built and designed this building.

Cándida Smith: Now, I have been told that the Hall piece hasn't been on display since the old building because the Tesla coil, it's incompatible with the power grid in this building.

01-00:56:19

Riley: Well, you always have to bring an isolated 240-volt box to it. You could deal with it.

Cándida Smith: It's an easily solvable problem?

01-00:56:33

Riley: It's a solvable problem. In fact, it'll fit perfectly on one whole side of the fourth-floor gallery. Now, I will tell you that when I left the museum in 2000, what with the strain of operating the building for five years and the costs of operating, and shifts in staff, I believe the deputy director said, when I left, she said, "Finally. No more threats to the safety and security systems of the building." That was her send-off. Finally. Yes, finally, no more destruction, no more threats. I had to just laugh because such a notion goes all the way back to the firemen and the fire hazard in Massachusetts, and it goes all the way back to how people project worry into situations that are their primary concern. For her, it was the safety of the visitors. *Finally!* No more danger!

Cándida Smith: We have gotten into SFMOMA a little bit, but I wanted to see how broad a network of working with artists you had before you came here. Were you familiar with new media artists working in most of the country? In Europe? Japan?

01-00:58:10

Riley: Yeah.

Cándida Smith: It was an international grasp?

01-00:58:12

Riley: It was an international grasp. Close friendships, too, with most of the curators that were working with museums that had media projects going on. Then the editors of the great newspapers that were coming out at the time. *Afterimage*, for example. Most of the video production facilities were publishing catalogs, books, and newsletters. *Afterimage* came out of media studies in Buffalo. Very good editors. The history of *Afterimage* is the history of alternative media. In fact, there are people who are really concerned—and very smart people—who were very concerned that the goals of alternative media reflected a society and thereby could change it. For them to take [the media] and control

it with another message means that you'll be able to change people. With museums developing media art programs and sponsorship coming from the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts], there're a lot of deep concerns about what will happen to the goals of alternative media and its practitioners if they become so institutionalized that concept and concepts for radical change are tamed by support *Afterimage* carries a lot of that history with it. There are some fantastic articles in those volumes written by Marita Sturken, who was out at USC [University of Southern California] in the school of communications for a while. I think she's the department chair in art and communications now at NYU [New York University]. She is a great writer and thinker. She worked with SFMOMA, on catalogs and essays, for a few years.

Cándida Smith: What about collectors while you were at ICA? Were you getting to know the collectors that were taking an interest in new media?

01-00:60:46

Riley: There were a select few. There were a few mostly involved with museums that had established media programs. There were some collectors out of the Whitney. There are some collectors at Carnegie, in Pittsburgh. The ICA did not have a collection or an acquisition program, an official acquisition program. SFMOMA was the first time that I actually worked with an acquisition program and a Board that supported the purchase of works of art as nominated by the curators. This was a new part of coming to San Francisco. The collectors of media forms were few but developed over time.

[Begin Audio File 2 04-15-2009.mp3]

02-00:00:00

Riley: The Tatsuo Miyajima in the collection, *Counter Line*, comes through discussions with artists about work they would really like to do. Tatsuo

was in San Francisco working with some theoretical mathematician at Berkeley. Miyajima admires Frank Lloyd Wright, which I think is really something about Miyajima's work, the systematic structures of Frank Lloyd Wright and the systematic organization of his *Counter Line*, a work that send and receiver sites throughout the whole line. His English is not so good, but I really understood where he was coming from. He made that piece especially for SFMOMA for presentation on the East/West wall of the media gallery.

Tony [Oursler] said he always wanted to make a crypt. He had been creating small images with the home video equipment. Tony, early on, started to make tiny, little effigies, these tiny, little sculptures. He developed that piece *Multiple Personality Disorder* for a crypt of skulls, actually. Piles of skulls. That piece hasn't been shown for a while, but it makes children cry. Children get very upset with it. Because, well, first of all, it's their height. The heads are all stacked up. It's a wonderful piece. They're both autobiographical in some way and I'm very happy to have placed them in the collection.

Cándida Smith: Could you discuss how you came here. How did the job open up? What made you decide, "Yeah, I'll leave Boston and come to San Francisco"?

02-00:02:51

Riley: Well, interestingly enough, in Boston, I was a practicing artist. I had won a commission, an architectural commission for the rehabilitation of the Nantasket Beach House, which was this art déco building on a strip of land between Hull and Cohasset, on the way to Cape Cod. Absolutely beautiful building. It was a ruin. I proposed a work for the great glass brick walls that were part of the casement windows of the building be dyed and colored in a way that's so familiar to us now as an image breaks into its digital pixilation. I had proposed, in '81, '82, to dye the glass brick blocks so that the mass of glass brick blocks

could be fragmented and colored, so that you would invoke an image, a landscape image, into the building itself. It could be of the sea, it could be figurative. There are a number of things that could happen with its pixilated components. There was a recession. The committee cancelled the project. I was thinking, “Oh, this is so sad! I’m not going to get a chance to do this and build this building with architects.” I was working with Howard Fried—on an ICA project called *Atomic Time, Plus Minus Control*. I’d come out to work with him for a while. So I attended an open house at the Headlands. The Headlands in Marin had just opened, with great ambitions, and I thought the Headlands a wonderful place. I met Jack Lane at the open house. Jack had already been talking to artists about who they might think would be a founding [media] curator for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, who could see their way into the future and could articulate the earmarks of a program inside a modern art museum context. I understand the same name kept coming up. Jack is a very gracious person. He’s very generous and very polite and interested. A month later, he asked if I’d be interested in coming out to start a program for media in San Francisco. The disappointment of this architectural project answered the question, really: “I would be delighted.” I came out, met the museum trustees, started to workshop and talk to Jack, and Graham Beal, about what would be the most important work to look at, in terms of a media arts program and a media collection. He had been at Carnegie before he moved to San Francisco, and he had worked with a curator there, Bill Judson, a very smart man. He comes to media from a background in experimental film and independent media. Jack had already worked with Judson. I believe Judson had already proposed “The American Landscape Video” show, and so he had a strong background in experimental media. It was a pleasure to accept.

Cándida Smith: What were the opportunities for you? What were the pull factors?

02-00:07:18

Riley: The artists working here were among the best—*are* among the best in the world. Jack commissioned Bill Fontana's soundscape of the Golden Gate [*Sound Sculptures through the Golden Gate*] for installation between the Opera House and the museum. I arrived, in San Francisco in April and it was the second time I'd heard a Bill Fontana work. The scale of this project is so immense an indication that here's a thinking museum. It would be possible to form the department with a foundation that would continue with a series of ambitious projects and guarantee successor curators.

Cándida Smith: What were the promises that were made to you to entice you to come?

02-00:08:33

Riley: Well, we need more space, was the re-sounding cry back then. The draw was also here as San Francisco the center for experiments in taped music, the projected light medium. The art college programs also had majors in new genre and experimental media. It was an incredibly exciting time because I also knew the filmmakers. Warren Sonbert, was a friend from way back, Warren died from AIDS in '91. The city lost a lot of really creative and important people in the health crisis. Marlon Riggs, who I admire, practiced an analysis of media as a journalistic form, a syntactical medium. The strength of the artists' community made it impossible to say no.

Cándida Smith: Well, to get back to the question, what were the promises that were made to you?

02-00:10:38

Riley: It was impossible to say no. The promises that Jack made. Well, they may seem comical now. One of the greatest reassurances for me was Jack. Jack was interested. He expressed a need to always know what I was doing. Always had good questions about this media art matched, or meshed, with the program of the museum? He knew that media was

part of the mechanicalization of perception; he knew it was part of a great cultural dialogue about art, aesthetics, and information media. These were the early years of the information age. One of the trustees, Gerson Bakar, said, "I guess the information age is really here." It was wonderful. More than promises, I think it was reassurances that the museum was willing to support the enterprise, so long as I was clear and articulate about exhibition goals, always able to mount an argument in defense of what needed to be done for the programs and reasons for supporting these artists. [Jack] didn't want a flimsy program. I understood that. He wanted a well-managed program.

When I first arrived, I could have 1.5 shows a year. I had 50 percent of an administrative assistant, and the technical staff wasn't yet a salaried position. I was permitted an adjunct staff that would come in under a project expense. Still that worked out well, I was able to import people to staff responsibility who already worked with the artists and I could earn fees. The fee structure of payment to a media artist is often different from an artist's in more traditional forms. Graham Beal was the chief curator at the time. He and Jack were willing to support these projects. Graham was a great teacher, in terms of working with the museum. He'd bring up problems: how could we achieve our objectives in media when we don't pay painters for showing their work here? I'd reply, "No, but you pay for the truck to get the painting here." It's the same thing; you pay for the truck to get the painting here. In order to get the image to the projector to the wall, there's a set of delivery systems that require paid fees. The editor and the artist, needs to go to the studio to produce the work for the criteria for its presentation here. Works were tailored and customized for presentation in San Francisco, so there would be a fee involved in that. [Graham] came to understand that. So more and more, as we were putting the budgets together year to year, our financial director was very, very, very good. Once I demonstrated that I could be fiscally

cautious, they were really very good about giving me flexible lines in the budget so that some amounts could be carried over. It's another reassurance. The museum would work with me if I would guarantee to work with the museum as the museum was structured. Once I came late to a meeting. I'll always remember this. I just sailed in at 10:00 AM or something. The meeting had been underway for a little while. Staff were critical but Jack said something like, "It looks like media to me. He's out doing a lot of night work." So very true. In order to keep up with the artists' projects in San Francisco, it meant finishing after-hours work and then going off, seeing presentations, projections, and projects. There was a lot of night work. Now, remember, it's not the ICA anymore. I'm getting a little older. I'm thirty-six now. I can get tired. What's another hour of sleep in the morning?!

Cándida Smith: But there's a lot going on.

02-00:15:58

Riley: There's a lot going on, but I believe Jack's support was part of reassurance. I admire Jack because he was able to articulate the concerns that troubled him the most. Media is so *other*, so out there. There aren't a lot of guidelines for museum practices in media. The trustees went to Documenta, or they traveled to one of the festival shows in Europe. Everything that was being shown there had already been seen here. They were so surprised.

Cándida Smith: I have a big question, but I think it's necessary. Which is, we need to define what you meant by "new media" and whether that was the same thing as what other people thought they understood "new media" to be. I noticed that in the museum archives, you had to insist, "I'm not a curator of *video*," several times.

02-00:17:43

Riley: Where did you find that?

Cándida Smith: They were in minutes of trustee meetings.

02-00:17:50

Riley: Well, neither am I a new media curator, because that's very specific right now. New media markets, born of the interactive technologies, reach your market or reach your audience through new media channels. I think new media comes up mostly thinking about viewer interaction, consumer interaction with the interactive avenues. As such, I didn't do so many new media projects here. Aaron Betsky covered that area in design. There were a few key pieces that I thought were central to artists interested in interactivity, but I have never been so interested in touch screen control. I'd explain, "No, no, I'm not a video curator. Video is just *one* material in a palette of material for media artists." So slowly, slowly, slowly, I worked to help others understand that the works are defined by some of their qualities, that they're electronic or time-based. I would explain that one of the worst experiences visitors might have with a video artist is if the video artist is not as profoundly in control of time as someone who composes music might be. That's twenty minutes you're never going to get back. The artist who is thinking about your time and your perception of time, and using time as an inherent quality in their work with video, then that's twenty minutes you wouldn't want to sacrifice for anything else in the world.

The earliest development of the media art program here corresponds with the art writing in the magazines and familiar international exhibitions. The wall text, reflected language in the explanation texts. Graham Beal advised early on, in those museum wall texts, to make it simple and follow a simple rule: Who. What. Why. Just watch for all those modifiers. It's often hard to write about time-based media because you're thinking in present tense regarding experience. You don't know if it's best to discuss present tense, you don't really know if you want to talk about production tense. Well, for the artist, it *was*;

but for you, it *is*. Writing these texts was always an exercise. Graham was supportive about the task. I think that we have a history of some pretty good texts here on the wall, just following that who, what, why. What was often a distillation of what the mechanical aspects were and what the artist's discipline was really all about. The *why* was the fun paragraph because it would address issues of perception, theory, how this work actually reinforces a theoretical position of some kind.

Cándida Smith: To what degree is the why the artist's why, as you understand it? Or is it the why that *you* have pulled out of the work itself?

02-00:22:42

Riley: Once a museum visitor did say to me, "Now, what you write here is a lot better than what I see in there." I replied that, "Well, no, the artist had inspired me with enough insight into the work to know that what I describe is the artists struggle to represent."

Once I wrote a wall text for an exhibition titled Systems Aesthetics, where I branched away from time-based media and drew from the collection some sequential photograph projects and some [Alfred] Jensen paintings of color fields and numbers. Wonderful artworks hide in storage. This collection is magnificent, by the way. When anybody comes to the museum, they only see a tiny portion of it. Media's a good example. There's dozens of pieces that are very important art historically. Sometimes media is intended for a space as big as this, but they're also considered for a box nine inches by nine inches.

I have done a number of sidebar shows in small scale. Which takes me to the moment Graham Beal left, and John Caldwell came. We were still at the old building. John and I got a great kick out of going through the collection and finding wonderful objects and ideas. Jack charged John with the responsibility of taking the catalog of the collection, to go through the entire collection and pull out what he

thought was quite worthy of presenting in the new building as the permanent collection. John developed a checklist of the works that are now on the second floor, years ago, before his death. John and I used to get a great kick out of going through the museum archives and draw from it little jewel-box exhibitions of themes, of early twentieth-century themes. We have a blown glass piece by Max Ernst that is *phenomenally* good. We never get to see it, but it sits in storage. Review of storage started the idea of exhibitions of a smaller scale, a theme well articulated. I found a Fred Sandback piece in an envelope, the artist that stretches strings to define space as a minimalist strategy. Research into it led way back into the archives to a plan. For what anybody knew, the work would be a piece of black thread in an envelope. Sandback's dealer, Virginia Dwan, was so thrilled that we brought this work up from storage and put it into the museum she made a gift of two more from her collection of them to the museum.

Cándida Smith: I was going to ask you about your assessment of the collection when you arrived, and it's nice that we have gone into that. Media arts and painting and sculpture seem to be two departments that meld together, particularly as you're dealing with more and more contemporary art. There're so many artists who will incorporate media elements into the installation that they have designed, even if they're not necessarily primarily media-based artists. It's become part of the palette, as you put it.

02-00:28:17

Riley: Part of the palette. In this collection, especially. This collection has some extraordinary works. Van Deren Coke, the photography curator before Sandy [Phillips], looked at the avant-garde of his era, which was a manipulated negative, the creation of a surrealist image from layering of negatives and prints. He was a wonderful curator, yet when Sandy came in, she was interested in another history of the twentieth

century more related to mystery and documentation and the subjectivity of the photograph; it's more about the portrait of the photographer who sees, rather than creating, through photography, a means of seeing that has a surrealist foundation. [deletion] I understand, just from being here yesterday, that people are starting to reconsider the Benny Bufano sculptures, some of the pieces that are here in storage. This city has a magnificent collection in the city itself. St. Mary's Cathedral, the great Georgy Kepes designed those long, thin stained-glass windows to mark the cardinal points of the compass, in the primary colors of communication. Georgy Kepes was the founder of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, and St. Mary's was one of his commissions. Well, there just aren't that many great public artworks by an emigrant Hungarian artist of such importance to art making.

In my time in San Francisco, these public works were the discoveries. There are some great works of art in the city. There're many works throughout the city, not only the Diego Rivera murals. I think the first [SFMOMA] director, Grace McCann Morley, thought the museum as an art institution had a civic responsibility. During World War II, she initiated a film program here, "The Art of Cinema," a fantastic program. During the war, when the country was defining other cultures as an enemy, she brings a documentary series to the museum called "Know Your World," which [included] all the ethnographic cinema essays about the cultures of different people that, during the war, we had configured as our enemies. The heritage of this museum is quite a noble pursuit. I saw, when I first arrived, that the museum seemed to go up and down. It seemed to be entirely noble and forward thinking and upward reaching, and then something would happen. There would be a decline that adhered to some questionable aspect of the human desire for parties, and the changing status of its supporters. Great fights for the advancement of certain ideas over other ideas led to

questions about great work of the museum. This also answers your question about the collection. We are quite fortunate to have incredible artworks in this collection that were acquired at times of high-mindedness and high-reaching, forward-thinking moments. There's another collection of things that have come in, of lesser value, at times where it's fallen to other—*fallen*, is that the right word? I don't know. Where the museum has *appealed* to another type of human nature that might be more socially based than high-minded pursuits. Both of those aspects are reflected in the collection. Hopefully, I worked at the museum at a time of high-mindedness. Time will tell.

Cándida Smith: What was the state of the media-arts collection, if at all, when you arrived? How much stuff was in the collection that could conceivably fall under the rubric of media arts?

02-00:34:39

Riley: I understand there had been a question about how to collect media. When the sculptors started to show pieces that were more about randomness and indetermination—piles of clothes, projected light—I know there was some problem about how to collect it. How do you conserve it? What do you do? There were a couple of pieces that were acquired before I arrived. I think they were videotapes in boxes that needed to have copies made *right away*. Because the problem with video, of course, is the material component of the tape itself. It's not the plastic tape and it's not the magnetic strip, but it's the glue that holds the two together that starts to fall apart. How about that? The law of the least anticipated outcome becomes its biggest problem. Part of the responsibility of curatorial tasks was putting together a program for its conservation, because people hadn't quite dealt with it yet. What *was* here? There were a couple things, I think, that weren't *properly* acquired. They were shown, and then they never got back to the artist, but they were still here in some form. The education department, Bob

Whyte and Beau Takahara were very busy bringing forward artists' projects in media. But there wasn't an official acquisition program for it.

Cándida Smith: Until you? You really are starting from scratch, even though the Bay Area had long been a center for the work that you were interested in?

02-00:36:54

Riley: It was really starting from scratch, but not entirely. We completed one of the first conservation programs with the acquisition of Mary Lucier's *Dawn Burn*. The theme of the work is the observation of a series of sunrises over seven days; a tape was produced each day of the summer. It's a poetic expression of time, because Mary actually destroys the video recording apparatus, the camera, which was so sensitive to light at the time that the lens actually burned. Each sunrise leaves, for sixty minutes of the duration of the open reel tape, a scar on the lens. It actually leaves a black line. She wouldn't move the camera, but she'd record the next day's sunrise, which would leave another line. It was marking time by destroying a camera and leaving the degradation visible as a poetic content in her medium. In the seventies, Mary showed this piece a few times on open reel. It was never transferred onto a modern cassette; it was still open reel.

One of the problems with conservation of media now is that we're losing some reader technologies. In other words, we have lost slide projectors, we have lost cassette tapes. In conservation of media, a place like Bay Area Video Coalition warehoused the old [players] they'd fix, like a machine shop. They were making one good player from the parts of six. Mary kept some of her reels in plastic bags, some of her reels in cardboard boxes in her attic. She didn't *think* about care for the tape on a day-to-day basis; she was mostly concerned with making new work. The funniest thing is, is the open reels that she put in her dry old attic in cardboard boxes were the least damaged. The

tape[s] that you wouldn't imagine were in great shape, were in great shape. We conserved, to contemporary standards, Mary's work from platform to platform. It's moved from open reel to cassette, from cassette to digital Beta, from digital Beta to disc. Now the sculpture presents on videodisc. It's a wonderful piece to have in the collection because of its migration from its first format in 1973 to its seamless production, without loss to the image. Whatever was embedded in the image as degradation, or to the machinery, lives on forever as its poetic content. Most of the artists that I collected, they would all say San Francisco is very important to them, because it was maybe one of the first times they'd been invited to show the work through these smaller arts organizations like New Langton Arts, Camerawork, and Artspace, Anne MacDonald's Artspace. A great history of a spot. John McCarrin was her curator, absolutely fearless. He would work very hard to make sure the artists had a great experience in San Francisco. Audiences of huge numbers, perhaps more than had seen their work *anywhere*, would come and see the work in San Francisco. Again, a response to your question about the draw.

Cándida Smith: I notice that in, I think it's 1996, you sponsor[ed] or you organized a conference on media-arts conservation. Which sounded, from the materials I read, like it was one of the first, though I imagine there had to have been others before.

02-00:42:13

Riley: The Rockefeller Foundation, who'd long been supporters of independent media projects, was deeply concerned that one of the most recorded eras of all time was in danger of being lost forever. No one anticipated that in twenty-five years, the material would disintegrate. What needed to be done for this most fugitive medium to keep it in the public record? The Rockefellers funded the conference. The interest was in saving this alternative vision forever, with support

from the Rockefeller Foundation. I advanced alternative and diverse voices through media outlets and networks by securing work of radical new content. That was a very extraordinary program.

Cándida Smith: That's part of the museum's job, to conserve, to preserve for posterity. But there is a tension with an aesthetic philosophy that much but not all of media arts taps into, which is the ephemerality of the art experience, the nowness of it, allowing and foregrounding the immediacy of the presence, rather than seeing the art process once again engaged within the commodity form or the monument form—the two enemies, particularly of a lot of 1970s work.

02-00:44:52

Riley: The monument form. Yes, the monumentality of a small work. I was very surprised the first time I saw a Hieronymus Bosch painting. I was very surprised that, well, it was tiny and that you could tell that it was made of materials that were unexpected and perhaps magical. You can tell the surface is not paint. You wonder where the luminosity is actually coming from. What are these magic ingredients to this fantastic little thing? I had to sit down, a Hieronymus Bosch painting surprised me so much. I had always thought that [Filippo] Marinetti's portraits of light and speed, because of studying them in school and looking at books and things like this, I thought they were big. *Of course*. A portrait in light and speed would *have* to be monumental. It's the size of the palm of his hand. It's inscribed with touch. How absolutely fantastic is that? I really had to sit down. The idea of conservation in an art museum, of media projects, if done right, it's my belief that a visitor to a museum in the future will be provided with the same experience I had to sit down. I was so overwhelmed by the way an artist articulated the experience of time and information in their own era. We go and see the great court paintings of Europe, and we're just amazed by the scale. We're just amazed by the proficiency of the

artists and the genius of it. To come to see media works that have been conserved properly, as the artist constructed them, I'm saying that conservation of media at a museum is perhaps one of the most important things the institution can be doing. Not all museums are doing this. San Francisco is unique among them in the country, that it's actually preserving for future audiences a direct and chilling experience with the conditions of the moment in which they were made. We have it all, we have transgressions, we have sublimity, we have unknowability, we have narcissism. We have some incredible themes in this collection. It thrills me that San Francisco is so profoundly, and with certainty, interested in preserving this work.

Cándida Smith: In 1989, you also got Steina Vasulka, *The West*, which she had made, I see, originally in 1983.

[interruption]

02-00:49:49

Riley: *The West*, by Steina Vasulka, was included in "The American Landscape Video" show. The work in our collection is a very specific, twenty-two-monitor array, which she developed and designed. It's been seen as a six-monitor array, it's been seen as a six-, eight-, twelve-monitor array. Here in San Francisco, she saw it appropriate, and we had the means to produce it, to do a double-horizon piece and to accentuate the contents of the work by its structure, its array. Steina and her art-making partner Woody—we had a show called "Machine Media" here a while ago—are long-time practitioners of media arts—as I say, they founded the Kitchen—always running a parallel stream with Paik. Paik is always, always claimed to be the father of video art. Steina and Woody Vasulka are known as being the dismantlers, the reverse-engineering type crowd, who would test the impedance of recording machinery, would ask recording machinery to work in ways that were peculiar to its function. In other words, they would ask a

sound-collecting machine to also create an image; an image-making apparatus to also create a sound, and record that sound, and then have that sound sometimes feedback to alter the scan lines or the pixel matrix of an image. Where one, like Paik, say, actually celebrates the beauty of his video image—as he says, “My video is beautiful. It is like nature; it is always moving”—Steina and Woody Vasulka’s impulse, of course, is to understand what humankind is building into these machines, what they’re expected to do, how they’re expected to see. What’s the relationship between the camera and consciousness? They are great investigators. They’re also known for making their own machines. The synthesizer is widely credited to Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe at WGBH in Boston. Incidentally, Paik blew out the transmission tower of WGBH once, in an artist-supported program for broadcast. Artists were almost, then, permanently banned from broadcast through WGBH because the piece was so demanding of the broadcast apparatus that it just—*phsst*—couldn’t handle the edits or something of this sort. Famous, most famously.

Steina and Woody, on the other hand, most famously have a great history of asking the mechanisms of media to perform as they wish, not as the machine was stereotypically designed to perform or to record. It’s this great history of malfunction and disruption and peculiar results from innovative electronic experimentations that lead to the very formal aspects of their work. In *The West*, they invented something called “horizontal drift,” which was a method of controlling the image. You might remember the vertical control of a television image in Joan Jonas’s *Vertical Roll*, where she uses that control mechanism in reception as a formal device, as a theatrical presentation opportunity, a distortion, a malfunction, as a poetic, an artistic content. This is what characterizes the Vasulkas’ work. They’re able to break away from what they call the tyranny of the frame. Instead of conforming the visual information to the pixel matrix of a single

screen, in the same way you had a vertical roll as a malfunction, they created a horizontal drift. The actual square of the television image could move from frame to frame within a grid matrix. Between two television monitors, you could have a half—a fractional—and fragments of a square/rectangular picture, which of course, television inherits from photography and film, and painting before that. The rectangle. They stand better. Someone told me once that's the reason buildings are square. They just stand better. I'm sure there's something to be written about the inheritance of these conventions from one medium to the next, to the next, to the next. Here the Vasulkas set out to conquer the tyranny of the frame and actually make their image fluid and drift. The image source is Anasazi bricks, the building blocks of the Anasazi culture, in a very slow moving relationship with the imposition of our communication, satellite seeking—The Great Array in the West, with the railroad tracks to the end of the road of the Anasazi-making structure from the world they knew, of bricks to a poetic analysis of the west as a place of seeking. To break away from the frame of the solid video monitor to make it fluid. The sound in the piece is a recording of the camera, amplified. When cameras record, they have a whirr and a click. The Vasulkas are an incredible art-making couple, and have been working in media for many years.

Cándida Smith: As you started to present pieces to the accessions committee, what was the response? Did people understand what they were getting into? Did they like the work?

02-00:58:40

Riley: They did. They did. They really did. Then of course, there were the new trustees, Pam and Dick Kramlich, who came along as collectors and supporters. Fortunately for us, the trustees did go to the great international art fairs. They did see these works and they understood

there was importance to the work. Whether or not they understood it yet, was yet to be known. The support was there.

I never wanted my own discretionary funds in the accession committee. I wanted to pursue acquisitions through the full accession committee. Photography had its own sums and its own support group. Architecture and design had its own sums. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to have these works considered as important, in the larger world they understood, as painting and sculpture. Because I followed the artists from sculpture into four dimensions, in time and projections, it only made sense to me that we should consider media as a sculptural medium, just made from new materials, with new ambitions in mind. When a work was acquired, there would be a plan, there would be components. There wouldn't be equipment, because you'd want the equipment to always change and evolve, as its development was swift. What you needed to preserve were the artist's intention in a plan and the original-image generating medium, whether it be slides, whether it be film, whether it be video cassette. This is what you need, this is what you need to conserve.

They'd say, "Well, what did pay for? This?" They would just hold up the little cartridge. I'd say, "Only partially, and not even fundamentally. Because from *this*, we get the permission from the artist to author and up-grade, not change, but whatever flaws are in the original are going to continue through the history of the work." The committee came to understand that there was a plan, there was an architectural, three-dimensional plan of considerable structure, that we needed to conserve for the piece. They understood that the piece was twenty-minutes long, but it was also thirty by thirty by fifteen feet in proportions. It was twenty minutes in duration, but the size of the piece was actually *huge*. Basically, the purchases come with some of the exhibitions, but they also follow the themes. They follow a landscape

theme, which is very traditional. There are, as I said, early interactive pieces. But they also follow a more traditional interest in sculpture, where the material of video is as malleable as wood, plastic, cloth, lead, glass. That's what you really want to see in the piece. The collection follows these themes.

In the purchase of Bill Viola's *Passage* I think the committee really started to understand what we were doing. *Passage* in itself is a twenty-minute tape. The piece is one where you walk through a very small opening to a large projected image. It's the full length of one-half of the fourth floor here. The work was in our collection before we even built the building. Some of the criteria for the fourth floor, both in ceiling height and the dimensions between the posts and pillars, are actually quite functional, suited everything that we had in the collection, the media pieces that we have purchased, they fit well. We were considerate of the proportions of artworks when we came into the building, based in what was already in the collection.

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03-00:00:00

Riley:

Bill Viola's *Passage* has a very moving theme about time in its installation. Structurally, there's a door that is only wide enough for the width of a body. You're compressed into this small opening. As you walk to it, you're walking toward what looks to be bright light, really. When you walk into the chamber, a space only six feet wide and fifteen feet high when you get to the center of it, to confront face-to-face a projected image against a scrim. That image, is the result of projection distance, on the other side of the scrim, I think it's twelve or even fifteen feet past that scrim into dark gallery. What the board had to see was this elaborate space-consuming plan. How you get an image that large is this very sculptural organization of space that brings the concentration of the piece to the scale of the human form. It's only a

twenty-minute recording of a child's birthday party, which Viola slows down to run for six hours. It's very slow moving. The same sound that was collected at the child's birthday is slowed down. It's part of his art-making practice, of course, slow motion and speed acceleration, as his form. Expansion and retraction of space is part of his work that always returns something to the human body and to our means of perception. Viola set out to explore what it must be like to see the world before you have collected any memory. The idea that perception is linked to experience, in that more experiences you allow yourself to have, the quicker your perception of time draws. It's just the most phenomenal thing, having just been with aging parents, to see that they don't even know what's happened, but they can't figure out why their coffee is cold. Time is moving so quickly at the end. It's such a gift in human consciousness to understand how memory effects perception. Viola made a piece for a contemporary viewer about the possibility of seeing the world before you had any experience, before you built an experience of it. That was the reason for his camera angle often, and the size of the image. *Passage* is remarkable for its ambition.

My associate at the [Centre] Pompidou, Christine van Assche, had seen works like *Passage*, that artists had taken the photographic medium into new territory. They were out of the camera, were creating an image that is various and variable and full of amazement, a nineteenth-century convention that we have in the twentieth century. The camera had been part of our lives for so long, but here were artists looking at a new content for the photographic image, through different media channels, which were various and diverse in that show, how we render the world with our new camera apparatus. It was a wonderful show to do. We put a film series with it, and it was very popular. ["Le Passage de L'image?"] came to SFMOMA from Paris.

["le Passages de l'Image"] was a difficult show to do. I think because Bill developed the piece for "The Passage of the Image" show, it comes with a very complicated contract. After all, it was made for the French. It comes with a contract about always guaranteeing that the integrity of the piece will be in the scale relationships of the image-generating machinery to the scale of the image. If the museum should ever want to sell the piece, he has first right of refusal. It's one of these very complicated acquisition contracts that we had to work on for quite a while and convince Bill of the museum's best intentions. Our interests are to conserve it. I think the contract was developed in some form of self-defense; he was quite worried that he was going to lose control of it and that next thing you know, it would be translated into a viewfinder and for sale at the museum shop. Because there are problems like that, in the world that artists are busy protecting themselves against commercial whimsy when museums acquire works of art the contract guarantees. The work won't be translated into another form, in other words.

Cándida Smith: Was this a one-of-a-kind work or a multiple?

03-00:06:26

Riley: *Passage?* Bill Viola's studio makes an edition of three, but none for the same continent. In other words, Japan and Europe, and I think probably now Central Europe is probably considered another. Perhaps his studios are making editions of five for the market. But at the time, it was edition of three, separated by continents.

Cándida Smith: So you have the North American continent rights.

03-00:07:07

Riley: That's right. Exactly. We own the American rights. One copy was always reserved; there was an artist's proof copy. I think there was always a copy reserved for his estate, as well. Bringing the trustees

through that contract negotiation was also fairly interesting. Somebody asked, “What does he think we’re going to do, wreck it?” I said, “Well, something poorly conserved, you can consider ruined.”

Cándida Smith: Sometimes the conservation problems, the source is the artist, not the institution where a painting winds up. The materials that the artist has chosen to use may not have been the best materials.

03-00:08:12

Riley: Well, this happens. We have them in the collection. Conservation is a huge and dynamic field. I’m delighted here in San Francisco because the conservation people take it *very seriously*. I’m delighted by this. Truly delighted by this. They’re a distinguished department. There are people who are coming from museums around the world, having residencies here, just to look at conservation. In fact, Pip Lawrence, from the Tate [Modern], I think was just here.

Cándida Smith: At the same time, you acquired the *Passage* piece by Viola, you also acquired Vito Acconci’s *Command Performance*, which as you say, is a cornerstone for the collection.

03-00:09:30

Riley: Vito Acconci made a number of pieces where he really took a look at the artists’ experience at their own openings, which is often [a] very unhappy situation for most artists. Vito Acconci made a series of works. *Command Performance* is the first; *Seedbed* was another, where he hid under a ramp during his own opening. He had something called *Theme Song*, done at the same era that Richard Serra made *Television Delivers People*, that problematized television, where he repeats, “You know you want me to be in here. You *know* you want to be in here.” *Command Performance* introduces a live camera into a video installation, which had been used by Bruce Nauman, in perceptual conundrums of never being able to see yourself. The

configuration is such that as you walk toward a picture your image shrinks in the television image. These wonderful setups that Newman produced are just so confounding and so hilarious. He has a very good sense of humor. Lives but a town not far away from the Vasulkas in New Mexico. The Vasulkas are often his technical assistants, unofficial technical assistants.

Command Performance shares one of these similar qualities and questions. What do you do with a sculptural set up to experiment with a possibility, using a live camera and a pre-recorded feed, and a work of art that explores a stereotypical response to a situation? As Alan Turing would say, all computing relies on stereotypical commands. The machine expects that you're going to behave in a certain way. It mimics our response. You think you're having a very successful operational experience with your computing mechanism, because it anticipates your command. So *Command Performance* is a work that precedes personal computing yet we don't have screen-command control or keyboard control of an interactive situation. What we have is a gallery. Acconci proposes a gallery as an interactive situation. He showed the piece at Greene Street Gallery in Soho, where it had three pillars, presented as a stool and a spotlight and a prerecording of himself in his studio, a live situation. A camera focused on a stool, where he's pleading for you to make an image of yourself, make a spectacle of yourself. He says you know you want to. Come in here with me. Sit in the stool, join me in this configuration. It's a little nasty thing, too. It's a bit of a seduction into relinquishing control of your experience to the artist's demands. Which very much reflects an artist expectation that you're going to look at a picture and you're going to understand the artist's intentions. Well, here he's actually embedded himself in the work of art, just to make sure that you comply with his intentions. It's very forceful, actually.

In talking with Vito, we questioned what to do with a historical piece like this. He was making sculptures at the time and devised an act of conservation that's made of floorboards that look like they're just ripped up out of the gallery, and then the pipe or column is the same criteria and proportions as those in the gallery where he initially showed the work. He wanted to carry those proportions with because those were the given elements of the piece when he actually made it, the pacing off between the columns. What's conserved in the piece is the original format that inspired him to make the piece in the first place. The acquisition was a question about how to conserve a sculpture that's about information and seduction, a work of art about information and seduction that is based in a sculptural ground. How do you make sure that those elements are conserved? It's a double conservation piece. The sculptural components are as they are intended, and then the information aspect of it, the theatrical aspect of it, is also conserved. It's quite an insight that he had about the viewer's contact with a work of art; that as a museum presents a work of art, it's expected that the viewer is going to have a communication through time, with the artist's intention. Here he's taken that concept and turned that into a sculptural idea. Time is immediate, time is now, time is presence. You're there at the moment, having an uncomfortable relationship with an image, the presence of a person in the video monitor asking you to relax your inhibitions somewhat and become part of this work of art.

Along the same lines, Julia Scher's *Predictive Engineering*, which we introduced at the old building, in a show called "Thresholds and Enclosures," was such a success that we proposed it for acquisition. Part of its contract for acquisition is that for the duration of the artist's life, she will always come back to the museum and create an iteration of it. Predictive engineering is actually a term in computing design, where a surveillance camera or a collection device or something like

this is engineered so that it actually creates the result that you're looking for, in very much the same idea of the automatic opening door pad. Let's start there as a comparison. When you step on the pad, why does the open? Is it your wish being granted? Or has an engineer predicted your desire and created the situation so that the predictions are fulfilled, because you actually come through the door? It's something that we don't think about too much.

There is a long history of interactivity in our world. It begins with the Boston Fire Department, the first to instrumentalize your need for rescue, developed in the telephone/telegraph time. You would pull that box, and a telegraph would go to the fire department. Or to all the fire departments, I think there were many. They weren't civic, they were private at the time. If your house was on fire, fire departments expected payment. The horse-drawn fire engines would come from all corners of the city, quite madcap, in fashion sometimes they'd have collisions and mayhem because you pulled the box and interactively, so to speak, your fire alarm would provoke response. Location of the box was pre-coded so they knew exactly where to arrive. Then of course, the telephone company turns its operation out to the consumer. You pay the corporation to dial the phone. That's very funny. The models for interactivity are historical, hilarious, and we're only in a moment of its continuum. Some day we're going to look at interactive shopping today, an interactive encyclopedia information retrieval service that we have through our web providers, someday it's almost going to be as comical as the instrumentation of fire.

[interruption]

03-00:19:28

Riley:

All right, so much for diversion; back to Julia Scher's *Predictive Engineering*. *Predictive Engineering* is a capture-and-retrieval system. It captures images of people in the museum looking at the piece. There

was a voice-over in it that encouraged certain types of behavior, an analysis of the people who were viewing it. Projections, mostly. Those moments, then, would be stored. The sculpture is a collection apparatus, and a type of folly. The cameras in it would record to disk during a day at the museum, certain visits and events that would occur. She had pre-staged chaotic events in the same hallways where people stood looking at themselves in the image, and then there would also be an image of, say, a chase down the hallway or a person chasing another person, or a nude person walking along. Kids thought that the camera could take your clothes off. There was a hilarious reaction to the piece, because it was both real and predictive, in terms of events that would happen in the museum. It operated as if the museum was always under some super-surveillance system. You'd see yourself in the hallway, then it would click over to another surveillance site and you'd see something transgressive happen here and there. When we moved to the new building, we did another iteration of it in this space, using this building as a forum for this super-surveillance system. But it would also tie into its own memory, its own recollection. Its current iteration is on the internet as an electronic version. You can get to the piece through the museum's website. It's not physically borne to the place anymore, but it's wider and it's collecting information about people who visit it, at this point. It will keep growing and changing and evolving. It is with the museum collection as a media piece in the museum, and it will end at the end of Julia's life, in a sense. It's a wonderful adaptive and iterative piece that's going to keep going and going and going.

Cándida Smith: Most of the acquisitions come through the exhibits that you organize, is that correct?

03-00:22:41

Riley: Most have. There is a dual reason for that. The expense of setting something up for preview for the accession committee, for them to either say yes or no would be prohibitive. There's a vote, always a two-third majority before we could accession anything. I thought it was helpful, too, to have a public response to a piece. In a way, you could say that this is an interactive quality to the artworks, that if there was an incredibly favorable response public-wise or critically in the town—the chances for its accession are improved.

Cándida Smith: Did you have an acquisition plan, either in writing or in your head? Out of the dozens, maybe hundreds of pieces that you were showing, how did you select the one or two that you were going to present to the trustees?

03-00:25:43

Riley: There was a collecting theme: the landscape idea and then these little interactive pieces of a small scale that seemed to be so profoundly important to the advent of interactivity. Also the idea of collections in areas of media art, post photography, where Sandy's department leaves off. I have to say that my admiration and respect for Sandy Phillips and the shows that she's produced here has been just a great benefit, I think, for the media-arts department. When I would speak of art, Sandy would speak of art, we sometimes spoke about similar themes in the artists' work, in the artists' ambitions. Our collections benefited from the fact that both of us were here at the same time. Sandy's John Heartfield show was exquisite and well-timed. I think that our board really understood that certain times are marked by innovation and they're not necessarily the best of times, the greatest times. There's usually a threat, there's usually something that causes the artist to innovate and create, as I have said before, a form language of a proper sort for expression. Anything else would just be vain or vulgar. Artists find a way. They really find a way to create a form

language that then becomes a convention to express these similar political situations or conditions. In choosing works of art, I thought it was important, as a curator, to keep some of the birthmarks of the medium alive from its origin and application in countercultural response, and reason. There's a psychedelic foundation to media that people don't often see, and it's a perfect avenue for the expression of psychological space as constructed through the conditions of the times. A direct and truly meaningful record of a time. Laurie Anderson recites, "These are the times. This is the record of the times." An excerpt from the fast-moving repetition in her work. All these artists are related. If there's any way that a museum can have a coherent collection that shows the relationships between the artists and their achievements, what they all shared in common, their fragmentation and mass, edit and flow, as a way of understanding our world at the moment. These are the themes that are unique to media that are shared by all the artists who choose to work in it, from experimental cinema forward to video. We haven't even talked about the connections between experimental cinema and making media. But keeping these birthmarks legible and coherent in the collection was very important, really important to me.

Cándida Smith: There's one artist that was not on your list, but whose work you showed a couple of times, which is Matthew Barney. I thought we should discuss Barney and his relationship because this museum was very important to his career; also Matthew Barney was very important to Jack Lane and Jack Lane's understanding of contemporary art.

03-00:30:44

Riley: First museum show of Matthew Barney and publication. I don't know how many times it's been reprinted, but it's popular. I know I can present it as gifts when I go places. I know that I can present Barney and the Vasulka *Machine Media* catalog as a gift.

The palette of an artist's toolbox or studio practice or whatever you want to call it, is never a dull subject. Barney's real palette is the male body. I found it heroic on every level. You see the body as subject in many works at SFMOMA, and I've had to defend a few times because of nudity and because of the translation of body processes into sculptural form. It's been part of the art-making practice since, of course, Joseph Beuys' social sculptures. Before *art*, people were translating something of their body and their senses into material form. In a way, Matt's doing work of a primitive sort, but in new form.

I saw a Joseph Beuys sculpture once that I have always remembered, which was a spiral of rope, a vast length of rope that coiled from a compact center out into the room. Every now and then, there'd be a knot tied in the spiral. I had a tremendous physical reaction to it. Basically, Joseph knotted the rope every time he had a bowel movement. A recording of continence, the body's relationship to time. Here it was, this incredible spiral of time, marked by the movement of material to energy, and its evacuation to its evacuation.

When I saw Matt Barney's work, I thought, well, this is exactly the same. He's working with his body and he's externalizing everything about his body into these processes of heat and cold, dark and light, up and down, recline/decline. All these elements are revealed in his titles. The two pieces that we have actually now in the collection are the *Flight of the Anal Sadistic Warrior* [*Mile High Threshold: Flight with the Anal Sadistic Warrior*], and *Transexualis*, right? The refrigerator piece and the frozen Vaseline. Matt brought me to a whole area of thinking of artists' cosmologies. Here we have a group of artists who are very, very, very busy trying to define their world based in self, inward looking. Not outward looking into the environment, natural and otherwise, but inward looking, into the way the body functions, defeats its own malfunction. He's able to make these incredible installations

based on inward and outward observations. I'm delighted to have been part of the first showing here, and that the Kramlichs, who came on board, were also fascinated by his work. I think he considers the Kramlichs his charmed patrons, more or less.

Once involved in the work, you understand that Barney has a whole cosmology about understanding his own body processes and its translation into dynamic material. It's something that we all just toss off as an effluent from our body; he turns it into a spectacle. He turns it into a whole phenomenon of cell division and molecular response to invaders. That's what the pearl is all about. That's a key to his work, actually, a grain of sand inside the oyster is an irritant. The oyster covers the piece of sand with effluent over and over and over again, so it doesn't bother it anymore. Then the pearl is the thing that humans value, the very thing that irritated the oyster. The oyster's biological response to its irritant becomes the object residue that society values. That's key. So every bit of offense that people might take that he has materialized his own body in all these forms that are medical, scientific and material, there's something so moving in the end. The show recently here was basically a love story of some kind. It's a small idea rendered in epic proportion. He's something. He's really something.

Cándida Smith: Did you discover him on your own? Or was it Jack Lane who brought him to your attention? Do you recall?

03-00:40:55

Riley: How did he come to my attention? It was Jack and John, I think, who might have seen some of his smaller pieces. He has some small pieces that are quite lovely, that were made early on in his career, in his obsession about cuts, scabs, and healing.

Barbara Gladstone's son, Stuart Regen, was running a space called Regen Projects in Los Angeles. That's where Matt, after he graduates from Yale, does his first public project. That was the first time Matt presented work outside graduate school at Yale. Matt and I were introduced. I understood dimensions in his work. This is why I say I wasn't exclusively a video curator. The material, and immaterial, in his work, drew me into the themes and discipline. Yes, video was a small component to it, but he only needed video as a way to record a time-based situation, a duration. As I say, the pearl is a metaphor for the point of investigation for what he's truly about.

Cándida Smith: This was a project you wanted to do for the museum. Did you do it jointly with John Caldwell?

03-00:44:27

Riley: Oh, very much. We put our budgets together, and we worked on it. I wrote that essay called "The Expense of Energy," about his fusion of horror movies and sports. Perhaps I was still a little bit shy about writing about male body processes. I think by the time it showed here, I wasn't shy about it at all. I remember somebody reading the wall text with a scolding, *tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk*. Imagine. *Imagine*. Matt's color palette is very specific. He doesn't want just white, he wants refrigerator white. That yellow-brown color of decay underscores a relationship between efflorescence and decay. Light causes material to decay right before your very eyes. He doesn't leave one theme unexplored. He's *very* analytical about what he does. As I say, the theme is artists' willful manipulation and use of material to be molded in the service of their vision.

03-00:46:20

Riley: I would say that Matt actually liked the idea that painting and sculpture and media were produced by him in San Francisco collectively. He was very specific about what information he wanted revealed about his

work. He didn't necessarily want to be art-historically positioned in any relationship with the image artists of the time. He wanted to have us understand that his work was about the workings of his body and his ability to transform his body through exercise or sloth or whatever was serving the piece. He understands his art-historical connection, I think, to actionism in Vienna and the physical response in psychological inquiry. A strong connection between Matt and SFMOMA began then.

Cándida Smith: There was the '91 show, there was the '96 show, and there was a show just a few years ago.

03-00:49:03

Riley: It was the '96 show that included some of the works that were about to be installed at the Guggenheim. He will be back. He will be back to SFMOMA. I think that SFMOMA will be a place where we'll see the arc of his career. Because the natural progression would be to scale down, because we know everything about age is biological. Oh! He's a good artist. He's a very good artist.

Cándida Smith: But Michelangelo didn't scale down, so—

03-00:49:57

Riley: He sure didn't, did he? No. No, the arc of his, he went big, big, big. Yeah.

Cándida Smith: A very different piece that was on your list that you acquired in '91, was Jim Campbell, *Digital Watch*.

03-00:50:17

Riley: *Digital Watch*. Another piece that I would put into this fundamental group of works of art that describe the interactive condition. It's funny. You come to museums now and kids expect that everything is going to interact with them. Everything is going to do something. *Digital Watch*

is a charming combination of analog and digital media, in terms of time. The sweep hand of a clock and the numbers of a clock all come from the analog. The sun and the earth, and the motion of the sun and the earth, and time. You can teach a kid time by sticking a stick in the ground and drawing a circle around it and, See? Look, it's noon. See? Look, it's one o'clock. Digital time is not like that because it's mathematical, it's numerical. Jim wanted to put those two conditions together in a single piece. I think he masterfully makes a work from meditation of the difference between fluid time and mathematically rendered time, with images. He has a camera on a small Timex watch clock, with Roman numeral numbers around it and a sweep hand. The camera looks at that.

Now, Jim is never very forthcoming about what he calls custom electronics. He'll let you know it's custom electronics, but he won't exactly reveal the engineering that goes on between his cameras and his installations. Just call them custom engineered. Don't know what they are, don't know if he holds the trademark, because he works in Silicon Valley sometimes. I don't know exactly what the engineering is. There are two cameras in operation at that point. There's a camera above the image that that camera creates, so that there's an image of the viewer looking at the piece, that's animated through the sweep hand, second by second. You don't have a fluid reflection of yourself, as you might in a mirror, but you have a digitally calibrated reflection of yourself by second, by second, by second, by second, by second. What he's doing is he's telling us, in this work of art, that fundamentally, there has been a shift in the mechanical representation of time from something fluid to something blocky. It just occurred to me, considering the titles of these pieces as we were going to talk today, that *Digital Watch* is probably also an evolutionary piece, in that what he's doing is you're watching how digital time works. Your image is there as a digital counter might work on your telephone, on

your LED screen; that every second, a new number appears, counting off. But we don't have a sweep, we don't have the relationship to light that we used to have; we have a relationship to mathematically contrived time. It's a discrete piece, but it's very deep in its presumptions.

I wish we had more. One day, the museum may have more and more of Jim Campbell's pieces. I looked him up. I knew he moved to California, but he had attended the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT. I saw some of his early films there. He's doing very mature work in digital. He makes large LED boards, I'm not sure we have any in the collection yet, after my time. I didn't acquire any of them because he was just making them around the time I left the museum. The source image of those pieces is also a film image. He's gone full circle. He takes a camera image and translates it into the far extremes of perception. Those little dots, the dot matrix, LED matrix, he pushes it right out to the edges of your ability to see an image. "Just a little further," he says, "It all falls apart. You don't see an image at all." After looking at Jim's work, of course, you see LEDs everywhere. In traffic lights and in car brakes. You just see LED objects everywhere. Or is that my perception altered by the experience of Jim Campbell works?

Cándida Smith: Several of the curators have observed that as contemporary art curators, in some ways there's a generational window that they're most attuned to; there's a generation of artists who speak to them. It's as if the curator is the Geiger counter that feels what's most original about the work being done, corresponding to the experience of the time. But then as they get older, they look at work by younger artists, it's interesting that they don't have that Geiger counter, the same experience. I wonder if, in the work that you were collecting, if there's

a generational cohesion. Is it a generational moment in media arts that you were assembling as a revelation?

03-00:57:29

Riley:

That's really a good question to ask when we're all so hungry. A Geiger counter is actually a wonderful analogy, because the challenge of making that instrument, of course, was to measure the unseen. The sound of a Geiger counter is produced by particles hitting a sensitive instrument. So let's think of a curator as a sensitive instrument. Our responses about a work of art are measured by our reaction to it. Now, it could be we actually operate in the opposite of a Geiger counter, in that we might not respond to pieces when it's a full array of stimulation. [makes a machine gun type sound with his tongue] Because it just could be that we have seen too much of one medium or form. The newer work might not be appealing because of the very fact that we have seen too much. I agree with you. Curators do this. You work for a while, and then you're afforded a period of reflection. You write, perhaps, some great things, or you work on just one or two shows, or you become known as being a champion of one variety of work. I think you're right. I come in at a time where I have a perspective of some of the foundational early works that are done in the 1970s, or sixties. I have a preset idea about what I think constitutes successful work, a work of art for its time. I would definitely say so. Around 2000, I was so overwhelmed by the impression that one day I walked out the back door, after we'd built the building and I was here for a few years after that. Five years after we moved, I remember walking out the back door one Friday and I said, "Oh, I'm just not leaving for the weekend. I'm leaving. My work is done." It was almost phenomenological. You know the feeling when you break for the weekend? "Phew! It's the weekend"! It wasn't that at all. It was more, "Phew! Oh! This is forever! I have done my work. We have built the building." A time of sweeping changes had arrived. Welcome them.

Cándida Smith: You had assembled a core collection of some fifty artists.

03-00:60:41

Riley: Some fifty artists. We'd built the building, and the building was functioning well. When Jack left, let's see, we were having the [Alexander] Calder show. I think things shifted a little bit during the Calder show. The curators weren't so interested in the Calder show. I saw Calder as like an atomic age artist, expressions of the material moved by upheaval. Material had fallen apart. I saw Calder as the atomic age. Not a big gate nor a fun show for families. I love the atomic chicken and all those little wire things of substance becoming immaterial, everything falling apart. His time was an interesting era, Calder, is a very good artist. But the rationale for hosting the show didn't seem like the museum that I wanted to work for anymore.

Cándida Smith: The blockbuster concept?

03-00:61:51

Riley: That concept, or that competing for leisure-time entertainment hours with your audiences. I thought a museum should be something else. More of a record of the time, more of an analysis. I wasn't hearing support for a place where I would want to work.

Cándida Smith: Also the Calder coincides with a marked shift in the collecting priorities.

03-00:62:28

Riley: Yes, there was a shift in the collecting priorities. When I left that Friday afternoon, it wasn't for any one big issue. There had been a recognizable shift. I could feel it. Jack left just a little while before that, but I thought I'd be a good sport and wait for the next director, because there were still great exhibitions on the schedule and there was still work to be done. But there was a real shift. Now we're back to what we were talking about, *where* the museum program shifts.

How the program shifts. It shifted back at 401 Van Ness Avenue from time to time, and it shifts again and again.

[Begin Audio File 4 04-15-2009.mp3]

Cándida Smith: I thought maybe we'd start with the planning for the media galleries, the media-arts galleries. I think by the time you came here, it was already determined there was going to be a new building. You came knowing there was going to be a move, right?

04-00:01:04

Riley: When I first arrived, the idea was to acquire more space from the Veterans Administration. But they just wouldn't give it up because the building was built as a war memorial *and* a museum, right? Much of the building was not used by the veterans, we really couldn't enlarge. The theater was withheld from use most of the time and the green room was their earned income for rentals. There was really not much we could do there. There was talk. There were plans discussed to be the pediment of a high-rise development building downtown for a while. It wasn't my first concern when I first got in, but it was an added program after we started working here for a little while. We were involved in the planning of the new building. John Caldwell, painting and sculpture curator, was involved. Sandy Phillips was involved. We initially needed to articulate our program goals and needs. Questions of what was the future going to look like? What building do we need? The first building plan that developed as a result of the program was bigger than this facility now. The plan was more stories high and wider. Eventually, all of our programmatic requests were satisfied by Mario Botta's design, and the building is what you see today.

We knew we wanted to have a media gallery that had certain aspects and conditions favorable for the presentation of media. There was a

time when half the fourth floor was for the permanent collection of media; the other half was for the collection above and beyond the second floor. Then the third floor was going to be predominantly photography. The idea continued for shows of a smaller scale, intelligently crafted, throughout the whole building, so a visitor's experience would be a "march through modernism", as we even called it then. We called it the Modernist Project for a while, but John didn't particularly like that. A new motto came about: we don't want to process the viewers; we don't want to behold and move along. We don't want anything where people are going to get trapped at the dead end of a gallery. The media gallery was the exception. A place apart, where you could actually sit and be undisturbed by the passerby. I did not select this location in the middle of the museum. This is a selection by the Mario Botta team. What's lovely about it is that it becomes a column of hidden spaces. With the consideration of the theater downstairs, the Wattis Theatre, which was beautifully designed. And almost lost a few times in the "value engineering," a consideration of, what you have to take out in order to keep things on track, on budget. We almost lost that theater a few times. I'm happy that the theater is still there, and that it works out. I think its history is still forthcoming as a really integrated, good gallery for the museum, with film programs and more lectures. These were more internal spaces. They weren't pushed out into the galleries, but they were more drawn back like the theater.

Cándida Smith: You were going to have two major galleries? What was agreed upon that media arts should be able to count on?

04-00:05:56

Riley: An equal space in proportion to one side of the fourth-floor galleries. In other words, the poles divide the space into six squares, more or less. It would be equivalent to the three squares on the edge. Most of my

demands were functional requests. So much of the effort is put into the air circulation system. If you look up into the ceiling above, you see three layers. You look all the way up to the ceiling, but it's maybe five foot thick. Three layers of utilities and support systems for the application of media that include theatrical apparatus and lock-in rebar and a greater control of the air system. I was worried that it would be noisy, and so I was concerned about acoustical separation. What else is up there? A greater degree of control for the lighting and electrical tracks. It's just a big exoskeletal shape up there that is also found in the ceiling of the theater. If you look up into the theater, you can see that there's functional apparatus in the top of the space. In fact, the sound in the theater comes from the ceiling; it doesn't come from the stage. Just one of those little things that has really worked out. The requirements really were to be able to show works of considerable volume in here and not disturb the rest of the museum.

Cándida Smith: Aural volume, audio volume.

04-00:07:58

Riley: Audio. Light control, audio volume. The one dis-favorable aspect of location was placing the media gallery right out here by the oculus, which is, well, pretty sunny at the end of the day. It was planned way back when we opened to put a coating or a filter on glass or a feature, to lessen the light. But after a while, we just figured out that you could have an entrance through the side gallery or you could have some preliminary work in the little gallery leading into the big gallery and be able to block off the light somewhat. But I also wanted the flexibility to use the other galleries in the fourth floor, for media exhibition. We did do that. See these floor plates? These were all things that were part of the media plan. Any time we could be able to power and run cable. Not necessarily through the ceiling, but also through the floor. There's actually open pipe. There's some way, if you open up one of those

blocks, there's going to be open pipe leading to another location. Basically, one of the reasons you can install a computer workstation or control deck is because it's actually readied to do that.

Cándida Smith: Was it a goal of yours to be able to have the permanent collection up much of the time, selections from the permanent collection?

04-00:10:10

Riley: Yes. Yes.

Cándida Smith: Was that goal realized?

04-00:10:20

Riley: No, but probably for good reasons: there's too much in the program. In other words, I would like to see more media pieces included in the permanent collection. But it's actually good news that it's not the case. There's an interest to satisfy all the audiences. It always was our interest to be prepared to lend media art. That was another set of operatives that had to be done with the registration department, because lending a media installation was a little different from lending a static work of art that fits in a crate. Again, you're back to the plan, you're back to the media, we're back to authoring for inhibition. Registration divided everything up according to components. The plan, the media, the electronics, the equipment and so on. So as a museum, we can successfully lend the installations. So maybe if they're not on view here, they're on view in an influential show someplace else. We have lent to a number of great shows in the past. In a way, I'm thrilled the pieces are in the museum, but I'm not so sad that they're not up all the time. Other curators can call. The artworks can be lent.

Cándida Smith: When you were the curator and you have moved to the new building, were you then looking forward to putting some of the permanent collection up? Did you?

04-00:12:11

Riley: When we opened, I think there were a couple of pieces from our collection in “Public Information.” But as soon as “Public Information” closed, I was the contact curator for “Against Nature: Japanese Art of the Eighties”. Right after that was the Steina and Woody Vasulka survey show, and then after that was a Bill Viola survey, then after that was “Seeing Time” the Kramlich collection. It was just a very busy schedule of projects. But the works that we’d acquired—Well, only now, they’re coming up in the painting and sculpture and media arts rotations. They’re included more often now than when I was here in the first five years.

Cándida Smith: I did want to talk to you about your efforts to commission a major piece from Paik. It seems to me that quite often, I’ll encounter a Nam June Paik piece in the permanent collection of a museum, and it seems to be up there probably all the time, most of the time.

04-00:13:30

Riley: Paik wished to make a V-matrix installation on the third floor by the elevators, where he had proposed a multi-channel piece that was up in the ceiling. We would have had to have opened the ceiling and put a support system up there for, I don’t know, twenty-four or twenty-six Samsung monitors. Paik commissioned monitor matrixes directly from Samsung. They would put screens together in a steel frame, not in a television console. It turns out that it would have been close to one of his last works, had we been able to do it. The money was in place, but there was dissent. It was a difficult road. Nam June was cooperative, but sight unseen, the committee said it was too much blue sky to be able to commit to an acquisition without having seen it. It was an elaborate plan, and perhaps the proposal came just too close to the operation of the new building. I think there was a little bit of fatigue about how we were actually going to run this facility. Here I am, proposing that we open up the ceiling. We’d only really been operating

for a couple of months, and I'm proposing to open up the ceiling. The museum has done absolutely wonderful projects, Paik never achieved his vision with San Francisco. We have some drawings for it. It just could be that, one day, it could still happen.

Cándida Smith: To have a Nam June Paik is equivalent to having a great Rothko or a great Warhol. It's a level of monumentality.

04-00:16:02

Riley: But we have a great Vasulka. The artists were parallel lines. We have something equal but opposite. We never know which way history ultimately is really going to unfold, right?

Cándida Smith: Well, does the space in which the pieces are displayed, the media arts are displayed, shape the experience of those pieces?

04-00:16:38

Riley: How do you mean?

Cándida Smith: Well, what I'm trying to get at is your thoughts about what the space has to be like in order to maximize the experience of a piece that you're exhibiting or that you have acquired. I saw the Bill Viola retrospective at the Whitney. I saw it after it came here. Of course, it was the same show, but it seemed like two very different shows. The works, to me, played in somewhat of a different way. The context, the physical environment, the way in which you circulated, told a different story, created a different context for how you interacted with the work.

04-00:17:35

Riley: Very much so. You know that basically, when you really look at the fourth floor here, it's round. Sure, it breaks up in these rational squares, but because of the oculus in the front, actually, the flow path through here is circular through each section. Just because of that passageway. Peter Sellars, the theater producer, was the designer for the Bill Viola

show, turned it into a theatrical experience. He intentionally made it different for California and made different punctuation points here in San Francisco. In San Francisco, it read a bit funereal, in fact, because it ended with *Little Voices* and it had *Sleep of Reason* at an early point. A piece about consciousness, alive and dead. He started us out there, I think. He provided the theatrically, of course, known as a shared shock. You get everybody on the same wavelength, or pulse. Then you went through *Passage*, and then you ended in that little piece called *Little Deaths*, which was, again, the efflorescence of image and sound, which advances into the dark space at intervals. Instead of something retreating and disappearing, things would advance and disappear, as if jumping into you. The show here became quite funereal.

It was also the show that I announced that I was leaving. As I said, a little while before I realized that I was really done, because the place had shifted so much. The decision to move along wasn't easy but the show made it the right time.

I didn't have control over it, really. David [Ross] had, in some ways, enlarged the show that Julie Lazar had proposed for LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art], with Bill and with Peter Sellars, and just a few well-chosen installations. David came around from the Whitney and a whole survey, a complete retrospective. Peter the technical and aesthetic designer, located the Viola works into a particular narrative. Then when it was time here to make all the architectural adaptations to the space and build in, I really couldn't get too much cooperation, because it wasn't really perceived as my show. It was David's show. Things had to be moved in the gallery spaces, and nobody was too interested in doing it for me. I figured, "Well then, why stay, really?" It was out of my control. David took proprietorship over the program.

Cándida Smith: That specific exhibit, or the media arts program?

04-00:21:19

Riley: More or less. He became the proprietor of the program, and he wanted a direction that I didn't much feel was suited to my program.

Cándida Smith: Was there an aesthetic difference between your vision and his vision, as well? Is that part of what you were reacting to?

04-00:21:57

Riley: He hired Benjamin [Weil] as my successor and Benjamin was much more interested in interactive network-based art. But I'm projecting. I don't know, really. I just knew instinctively that something was wrong. Now, it could have been because it was a repeat performance with David, and the museum program had shifted a little bit. But it just didn't match. I guess David was here for, what, a year?

Cándida Smith: Year and a half, I think, maybe two.

04-00:23:05

Riley: Yeah. Yeah, that wasn't a long run.

Cándida Smith: No.

04-00:23:09

Riley: I left in 2000. I think the painting and sculpture curator said that my decisions were too subjective or something like that; that he was sick and tired of my subjectivity. I'm reminded him of the great essay "A Judgment *Against* Objectivity," and perhaps there is no such position.

In the course of any institutional life, change is built into it. If the trustees wanted David, in a way that indicated that they didn't want *me*. I was more happily paired with Jack Lane than with David. My dentist, actually, explained the principle of entropy to me when he asked, "I hear you're leaving your job. *Why?* Why would you be leaving your

job?" I replied, "Well, I feel like I just can't get things done right. Some other forces have come into the museum, and I feel frustrated because I just can't seem to get things right. Maybe I have been there too long." Maybe this, that, and the other thing. I had a philosopher dentist. He took the equipment out of my mouth and he continued, "When you eat a piece of orange candy, *everything is excited*. Your sense perceptions recognize an incredible taste, orange. You savor it, you taste it. Then it's gone. You miss the orange? No, but you had the experience of the orange." He said, "That's entropy." he said. "It's human nature." "You did something very exciting for a very long time, and perhaps it's over." Then he put the instruments back in my mouth and continued with the root canal, and bridge which I bring with me to this day.

Cándida Smith: But you had mentioned before we left for lunch that that day when you left and realized you weren't just leaving for the weekend but forever, even though it would be another two years before—

04-00:25:36

Riley: Before it actually happened, yeah.

Cándida Smith: Before you left. But that at that point, there was a shift in your collecting strategy; that you shifted towards memory as a theme that was interesting you.

04-00:25:51

Riley: I did. I did. I was looking for very important artworks in this area. I'd been working more with Bill Fontana, because I did a show at the old building called Bay Area Media. He made an incredible sound piece that placed microphones at sound-generating timepieces, like the Ferry [Building] clock tower and different clock towers. He placed his microphones around the city and had them transmitted through phone lines to the gallery space. Every time there was the pealing of chimes,

the microphones, set at a certainly distance, would record it. But, because light—and you have all noticed this in San Francisco—the quality of light and the amount of moisture in the air periodically alter your perception. Sometimes things look far, sometimes things look close up. A phenomenon even more pronounced with sound in this city. Sound has a capacity in this environment to bounce. In his sonic rendering of San Francisco, the bells would chime, but there'd be a distance between the sound and the microphone that captured the echo. It did sonically what we see as visual phenomenon. Talking with Bill, I discovered he made a piece from a sound recording at the level crossings of the railroad tracks, the synchronized railroad tracks in the East Bay. He put a microphone at each one of the level crossings. The speed of the train going from level crossing to level crossing, and that was your time-counting sound that was matched to the speed of the train. It is a beautiful, beautiful piece. It hadn't been heard since the sculpture conference at the Oakland Museum [of California], long, long ago. When I was at his studio, I listened to it. We work-shopped the idea of putting a beam across a space with a series of JBL studio speakers—the joke is that they stand for junk but loud; to cross the ceiling beam at spaced intervals, so that the sound was linear and spatial. When you stand in the space, you perceive space through the speed of a train, as registered by sound at the level crossings. Oh! It was a nice piece. Then I acquired that in honor of my years working with Jack, because Jack actually likes trains quite a bit. It's white speakers, it's a white beam in a white room, and it's actually a white piece. Very different from the black-toned works in media.

The Tatsuo Miyajima piece called *Counter Line*, which was commissioned specifically for this room, to go on the wall that divides the east from the west, the east and the western horizon. The counter line of, I think it's five-inch LED numbers—I have forgotten how many are in it, but it extends the entire length, corner to corner. Unlike

Fontana, this one is absolutely silent in the form of a line. A lot of people would sit, and it was as if you were looking at music. It's very much like that. But it's wired so that it has set receiver sites, so that there's a rhythm to it. There's also a mathematical sense to it that calculates a rendering of the horizon and infinity—the idea that you'll never reach the horizon because as you advance towards the horizon, the horizon advances. This piece is actually about the numbers in specific sets. One set is advancing while another subtracts. It's a charming piece. In the end, you can see that I'm not looking at this mechanical and technical innovation; I'm moving a little bit away from the themes, toward memory and commemoration, for the later pieces that I bring in.

Cándida Smith: You mentioned that the last piece you acquired was Steve McQueen's *Drumroll*.

04-00:31:18

Riley: Steve McQueen's *Drumroll*. I acquire that, and never saw it installed. Steve McQueen is one of the YBA's—the Young British Artists. He didn't particularly like being a Young British Artist, so he moved to Holland. He's recently made that film, the widely distributed film about Bobby Sands, the Irish political prisoner. Steve proposed a series of Edison-like booths in the media gallery, of three or four projected-image pieces. When he was in San Francisco, he experienced the hurly-burly, topsy-turvy development of the downtown—there was a lot of construction when he was here. There was traffic mayhem. It was nutty the year that we did that show. I don't know, 1991, maybe? 1992? He's also an artist who has the courage to represent his figure in full form, in various degrees of dress or undress. He always mostly represents himself. Quite extraordinary, really. What did we show? We showed *Bear*. There were four installations. But it was very much in the style of commemoration or memory of the Edison arcades, where

you'd walk through these hallways and see all these light-generating instruments as a form of entertainment. Steve's were black-and-white pieces. He found San Francisco to be completely topsy-turvy, vertiginous, and absolutely mad. He work-shopped an idea here of putting a camera lens into the drain hole of a striped orange construction barrel, which he borrowed. He's a large man. He decided to start pushing the barrel down the street and just telling people to look out. The image was a round image, like this, that would come up his full figure like this, go across the sky, and then come back down into the landscape. People would appear, but the image was falling now toward the floor, right? You would observe the landscape down to the figures, and it would go down to the dirt again. The image of people jumping out of the way. He found San Francisco just to be nutty. Loose. He decided that he would do this piece, *Drumroll*. He decided that one screen was not enough and one barrel was not enough, and he needed to actually go off with this idea and take his sketch material with him. He didn't make the work in San Francisco; he actually made it in New York. But it came home here to San Francisco in the end, because he just loved the idea of it. It's a three-screen projected image and it takes up most of this room, from edge to edge. I came back to see it.

Cándida Smith: I wanted to talk to you about working with Jack Lane. I guess the first question I have is whether you felt he actually had a genuine interest in media arts and a knowledge of it, so that you could have a collaborative relationship. Or was it basically, you're on your own to do the best program that you can?

04-00:35:47

Riley: Well, I think a good answer to that question is that Jack and I remain very close. He was genuinely interested in this new form of, in a sense, mechanization. What would artists do with all of this instrumentation?

I think a big turning point for him was the Woody Vasulka installations that appropriated military equipment that he knew from his time in the Navy, from Verso boards to charting instruments. Woody spoke with him about his childhood during World War II in Czechoslovakia, and what it meant for the Americans to leave the country when the war was over and abandoned all their first-world engineering equipment and tanks. Americans left their stuff there. They didn't come back to get it. It made him, at a very early age, wonder, well, if this stuff is just expendable, what is it *really*? Why was it built? How does it perform? So Woody always had an interest in the assumptions and the biases that we build into all of our technology and weapons. One of the pieces was about that mishap in the Gulf War, where the automatic weapon couldn't differentiate between two men walking and one camel passing. It was calibrated to be able to recognize certain things. But we know, in our integrated life of social connections, how the machine is calibrated—It couldn't find its target. Horrible, horrible mistakes were made because of it. I think that Woody's interest in revealing the biases of the machines we make and the weapons we fabricate and how they malfunction touched Jack deeply. Absolutely deeply. I'm getting choked up thinking about it because Jack thought that each one of those pieces was some miracle in a shift of perspective or perception he admired. He understood them. He didn't expect, as he said, that two old-timers could be so relevant in their concerns and so well produced in a show, that he hoped that everybody truly understood their media, and their message.

An early media piece that really captured Jack's attention was, the Irish artist James Coleman. He follows literary traditions in his work, as telling stories; that as the narrative in the story congeals, you find that your mind is coming *unraveled* by the story that he tells, in a James Joyce tradition. He had seen a Coleman piece at the Carnegie [Museum of Art]. I brought James Coleman's *Charon* piece, named

for the ferryman across the River Styx, about the subjectivity in photography and the fact that we make a picture, we depend on our own presumptions about how to read a photograph. In Coleman's words Jack became a great friend and a great supporter of media. He understood how complicated and complex these works were and how these artists had taken as their practice themes of such enormous complexity and were able to satisfy them. He became a great advocate for media. Every now and then, when I would check into his program in Dallas, I thought, *there you go!* You have got some of the best projects for exhibition in Dallas [Dallas Museum of Art]. I was proud to see that. Jack did a good job in San Francisco and brought his success to the Dallas Museum of Art.

Cándida Smith: What was the process like, of proposing shows?

04-00:41:05

Riley: *Ah!* The transcriber will say, "Emits loud utterance, drinks from coffee." Oh, I don't remember.

Cándida Smith: Yes, you do.

04-00:41:37

Riley: Oh. I don't think I recall.

Cándida Smith: Well, who would you talk the shows up with?

04-00:41:45

Riley: No, I'm really just teasing there. Well, there were so many different occasions where an artist might be developing new work, or an organization might be developing a new piece with an artist of interest, and then I would think, well, that might look really good in a nice little show; package something together and propose a show for the media galleries. But I think, what you're getting at, is the question of having a new museum, you're showing less than 10 percent of the permanent

collection, and you have five dynamic curators trying to find space to advance their program, because they want to reach a certain demographic in the audience and make sure that that audience still comes to the museum and makes viewing of art a civic responsibility to the life and times of San Francisco. *This* is what you're asking! Those discussions happened weekly with our exhibition manager, often years in advance, as we would have to make budgets for the shows. Then we would find collaborating or cosponsoring institutions. The process was long. We had a six-page document of time blocks, sometimes three years four in advance, with the name of a show and the time that it could be presented. Flexibility in that schedule was often good, because if somebody had to move a show up four months for some reason, because of a participating institution or what have you, that might leave a four-month block there without very much notice. Those sporadic opportunities were quite wonderful. You put a big show on the schedule, and then of course, year to year, we'd have to make the budget in order to pay for those shows. We'd work at a deficit for a while, but the money would come in from various sources to do it. Barbara Levine was a crackerjack exhibition coordinator/manager. She's very good. We had the official meetings, but then we also had the desktop meetings with Barbara: "Barbara, we may have the opportunity to bring in something from Holland or Germany. Let's see if we can do it." She would work on everybody's behalf, with her schedule and budgets. Then by the time we had meetings, the schedule was there for the next four years. We'd look at it, as a group flesh it out and find time to do it. I don't think there was ever a time that Jack cancelled a show. He would take the proper amount of time to secure funding to support it, because there were many shows that he really liked. Shows would be offered to us from other museums, but we had to decline those for a few years, unless we were one of the producers. Sound management.

Cándida Smith: For financial reasons?

04-00:45:51

Riley: Well, were we lending an important piece to the show? Did we have anything in our collection that could go into the show? You really wanted to make sure that the museum was well represented in an exhibition before you took it, in a way. Sandy had great success with her colleagues in the photographic world. I suppose I have, too, with Bill Judson and Christine van Assche at the Pompidou, with “The Passage of Image.” The crew wasn’t infinitely expandable. So nothing could line up on the schedule where the crews were needed in two shows simultaneously. It was always slipping and sliding the schedules. But in terms of discussions, theoretical discussions, there weren’t many. If anything, we were more advocates for each other’s programs than detractors. But when I left, as I say, there was a shift in programmatic interests. Perhaps market aligned. John Caldwell was a very frisky colleague. In a sense, John Caldwell was in a place professionally to introduce gallery owners to artists. But with John Caldwell’s replacement, Gary Garrels, it seemed then that priorities moved in the opposite direction. There seemed to be more control of exhibitions through market forces. There just seemed to be a shift. Instead of feeling heroic by introducing people first to the world, it seemed like it shifted to a more functionary mode of bringing works to the public that, in a way, weren’t edgy, had been vetted, their value had been somewhat determined. A principle of exhibition on planning doesn’t seem all *exciting* to me, not really.

Cándida Smith: Since you have brought up Caldwell and Garrels, there is an underlying question, I think, for the public, probably for most trustees. In a museum like this, the collection is the painting and sculpture collection. Then the curators of the other programs are determined to

remind people that that's not so. You're always struggling against the invisibility of the non-painting and sculpture stuff.

04-00:49:37

Riley:

At the San Francisco Museum, I don't agree that we are invisible. I know in my program, there was no fear of nudity. I admire Jack Lane because, somebody was complaining about content, and Jack just said, "Ah, let them see, in San Francisco, what they came here to see." In other words, let's be courageous. Let's continue the history of this fine town. Let's just be courageous.

If the public sees the museum as only a painting and sculpture museum, then we have somehow failed. It's really so much more. Jack one day asked the question. We were having a curatorial meeting—part of the curatorial meeting would be for the scheduling of the exhibitions. Jack one day asked, "We're the Museum of Modern Art." He said, "How do we place modern? What's modern?" He was curious that day. It was very interesting to hear curatorial response to his question about what constitutes modern. I can't remember all of the answers, but the museum is a modern place, in terms of being able to represent to the public a framework for all the various avenues and aspects of creative development at any time. The museum stays modern, only if we are able to define, classify and place all of this creative work in some coherent program. Right? That's an ideal, isn't it? It truly is an ideal. As I say, that we would fail in that ideal, if we weren't able to present to the public works of diverse origin and content and presentation material. That we would have failed.

Cándida Smith: What was the level of your interaction with trustees? Did you have much personal engagement with them? Well, certainly, with the Kramlichs. But generally, was that part of your job?

04-00:53:54

Riley:

To reiterate again, the Board was very supportive, and they really did see what we were trying to achieve, and they were always there with great support. From the names on the walls and those that aren't yet up on the walls, they are certainly a wonderful class of people, who share, I think, in the success of the place. People worldwide ask, how about that board? They must be really difficult to work for? I never had that experience, in fact.

I didn't necessarily measure my success or failure with the Board by their votes on acquisitions. I either thought that I didn't do a good enough job in explaining the work to them, but I never took that as a personal loss, as some curators do, that they just don't like me. They might not have understood. Jack used to say, "Know your audience." These people are successful because they make fast decisions and they grasp how things are going to go. If you're tentative, they'll know it. Their success is business people based in their abilities to run organizations. They had their own battles on the Board. I'm sure you have heard of a few. There were a few long-term friendships that broke apart during the process of building this building. I never did succeed in putting together an advisory committee on the Board, although I did start pursuing committee chairmanship with Pam. Now there's an advisory committee for media. The Kramlichs came along not at my invitation, but at John Caldwell's invitation, to help this fledgling department find proper support. He knew that the Kramlichs, in their relationships in the business community here and in Silicon Valley, would be a true advocate. They started to collect, of course, on their own. I brought them to a few wonderful pieces, which are in their collection. I wasn't that close. I stayed more closely attached to the arts community than the trustees, so I could represent the aims and the goals of artists, more or less, to them. I can't count any friends, really. Except maybe Pam and Dick, of course.

Cándida Smith: You brought artists to the accessions committee and had them do presentations. I haven't noticed that any other curator did that, actually bring an artist to talk about—

04-00:58:00

Riley: Their own work. Yes. That's documented, eh? That was actually a wonderful thing to do.

Cándida Smith: At least from the minutes—Minutes never truly reflect everything, maybe even the most important things that are going on in a meeting. But they do suggest that the acquisitions committee had trouble understanding the financial aspect of how media arts worked. It seems to be the question that keeps coming up and up and up again. You answer questions, Lori Fogarty answers questions, why it really is comparable to buying a painting or something.

04-00:59:03

Riley: Lori was always there as support, too, in case my language wasn't getting through to them. They often questioned what we were buying. The rights to exhibit a work in media was always peculiar. Confounding, I think it was the Bill Viola acquisition where they were finally satisfied they knew what they were buying. We're buying a plan. We're actually buying something quite big, but it can come in a FedEx envelope. You don't have to take the front of your house off to get the painting up the scaffolding, in the door. Media art can arrive in a FedEx box. I think eventually, they really came along, to understand that the experience of the work of art is in its presentation. That's what the museum is buying from the artist, the rights; in agreement with the criteria for showing the piece that we have the right to lend and the right to show. I did bring them artists. They were happy with that, I think. They felt good about it.

Cándida Smith: Then in '96, the SECA [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art] program develops awards for electronic media. I think that's, in fact, how it's called; it's not media arts, it's electronic media. What did you do to get that to happen?

04-00:60:57

Riley: Well, we did a SECA Award for film in my first couple of years here, right?

Cándida Smith: That, I hadn't noticed, but I'm sure you did.

04-00:61:09

Riley: We did film and media. Marlon Riggs' *Affirmations* was one of the films. All Bay Area filmmakers, and so they came in a very good time for filmmakers, because there was a cash award. Then there was the SECA, yes, for electronic media.

Cándida Smith: Rebecca Bollinger, Jim Campbell, Paul DeMarinis, Carol Selter.

04-00:61:53

Riley: Yes, it was a terrific group. I think SECA—Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, always a really bad name—used to be the husbands of the women's committee here, to give the husbands something to do. The husbands, their first idea about how to support art is to, well, pay some money, I guess. Have a competition and pay some money to the winner. That's how that started. I think I did a SECA video almost the moment I arrived, in '85 or '86, but I don't quite recall. I did work closely with the SECA people. I like them. I like them very much, the SECA group. They had events all year round. Their support evolved in-place. But they were always meeting with the curators, and so the year to do the electronic media arrived.

Cándida Smith: This allowed you to give some recognition to some local artists whose work particularly mattered to you?

04-00:63:08

Riley: I put a jury together. The four winners for the SECA Award were drawn from probably twenty-five or thirty people who submitted work samples. Same with the films.

Cándida Smith: You do studio visits, each artist would do some presentation?

04-00:63:30

Riley: We'd get to the semifinalists. I asked a couple of people from the field to come in and then we selected them. Then we would go out and make the final selections. That was a very sweet show in these two galleries. Actually, Paul DeMarinis showed [*The*] *Edison Effect* pieces, which are in the tradition of Steina and Woody Vasulka, presenting the dysfunction as a poetic devise. Like asking a laser reader to read a grooved record. Each object was a history of media apparatus of different eras trying to work together. They were complex little pieces.

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05-00:00:00

Cándida Smith: Now, you were here when the NEA wars break out. Media arts and performance arts people are at the center of that.

05-00:02:10

Riley: Yeah, the NEA Five.

Cándida Smith: How did that affect how you worked? Did it make you want to show certain kinds of things even more so? Or did you have to become more cautious?

05-00:02:26

Riley: Well, when we were building the building, we got a very large NEA support for media arts, a matching \$750,000 grant, which we matched

with the funds raised for the museum construction. Basically, I was directing a media-arts program that had \$1.5 million in it. The funds had to go to a lot of construction costs, but there was an endowment for a while that was carefully guarded, for quite a while. My relationship with NEA, earned over many years, because I was on many selection panels.

How did that affect? Well, I think it affected everybody, in terms of the way that withdrawal of favor is a form of censorship. No matter how you look at it, causing the end of individual artists' creative grants and content review is chilling. Now, before this had happened, a lot of corporate supports of exhibitions, American Express and banks were insisting on content review. So lots of times, you had to send to your sponsors a synopsis or an analysis of everything that you were showing. Then you'd get this preliminary, oh, okay, I guess we'll keep the funding coming, or something of this sort. This chill had come over long before the NEA. I was personally friendly with people whose grants were revoked. Their grants were reinstated. But it was the end of that program. No, it was a disappointing and very chilling time that has not yet been repealed. We're still in these so-called culture wars, or state's rights to refuse a national policy. It may indirectly have lots to do with what's selected to be shown, in the permanent collection. I am proud to say that I nominated for acquisition a work by Carolee Schneemann, the great artist Carolee Schneemann, called *Infinity Kisses*, which is a record of her cat waking her up in the morning with a kiss. Her camera was on her bedside table. It's this enormous Egyptian frieze of pictures that she fed over and over and over through a Xerox machine, with linen paper, so that the Xerox ink saturated the linen. It's in the book, *The Making of a Modern Art Museum*, because we are the only museum in the world or something that owns a Carolee Schneemann piece. Or maybe we were the first. John Caldwell got a really big kick out of it because

he said it broke a greater taboo than nudity, which was if there's one thing parents try to tell their children, it's don't kiss the cat. It was a lovely piece to buy because I guess there's a myth about an embodied spirit of a lion that kisses a Syrian princess and peace is restored to the world. There's a frieze in it, also of this deity, this inspirited lion, kissing a queen or a princess, to restore harmony to the world. She often explains the sequence of events as, "Ah, it was the cat's idea."

Cándida Smith: Did you travel a lot while you were curator?

05-00:07:47

Riley: Yes.

Cándida Smith: Where would you go? What would be the prime locations?

05-00:07:54

Riley: Well, I was very happy whenever I was asked to talk at other museums or to serve on a selection panel or something for a contest or an award. I was working for significant programs as an advisor.

Cándida Smith: I was wondering, would you go to New York, Los Angeles, Europe, Japan, to look at artists' work, gallery work?

05-00:08:23

Riley: I never went to Japan. No, even though I did the show Japanese art and I was invited to Japan by many of these wonderful artists. But I never made it to Japan or the East. I did not. My travels were mostly in Europe and in Canada, and widely, across the United States. There are cities I quite like. In fact, I did a talk about Matthew Barney at Marquette [University] once. It's a Jesuit school, with a museum. What were they showing? They were showing Roberto Matta, I think. I put Matta in context—they were mostly paintings of Matta's workstations. I brought Matthew Barney in to talk about the work that he did. I ended my talk with something about that because Matta's

subject was science and a society run amok by control by technology and science. I remember saying something about the area of the artist is precisely what science cannot prove, the existence of time, consciousness, and the soul. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a group of Jesuit priests awarded me with a standing ovation for sharing such an idea with them. I wouldn't have been able to say that, had I not been able to work with Matthew Barney. So my good fortune comes, from my job at SFMOMA.

Perhaps I didn't travel as much as I wanted, but I was able to bring people to San Francisco for the site-specificity of their installations and their projects. Even though I did not speak Japanese, there was always some wonderful level of communication, so that we could understand each other. Yes, we would build into costs of the exhibitions to have the wonderful opportunity to have artists come and visit us here in San Francisco. Sometimes they'd present to the acquisitions [committee], sometimes there would be a nice dinner. But most importantly, it was the primary relationship between the two of us that I started to understand, truly, what they drew from in their lives and in their experiences, to make works of this type. It was spectacular to bring people here. Dan Graham came once to work on. That proposed figure 8 transparency out there on the landing.

Cándida Smith: The Dan Graham *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay* was a piece that we were going to discuss, that we haven't gotten to yet.

05-00:11:58

Riley: Another important reach into the past to bring forward. To have his rudimentary delay system rebuilt as a digital-image capture and relay, based on the same seven second delay. It used to be an analog machine, made by one of the Vasulka trained engineers up there in Binghamton, New York. The digital device made by Dave Jones, who's a great

engineer for Gary Hill and other artists who need control of the projection apparatus. Under Dan's supervision, we brought an obsolete piece to life—in the nineties—from the seventies.

Cándida Smith: It was 1993.

05-00:12:50

Riley: 1993, yes.

Cándida Smith: So nineteen years later. Technology had advanced.

05-00:12:59

Riley: A lot had happened in that time. That's a very interesting piece about infinite regress. Even though it has a delay, you expect to see yourself in the monitor, but you see yourself in the mirror first. Then you see yourself finally walk into the monitor, but three monitors in because it's a reflection. It's this rendering of space and your participation in immediate time, stretched and reordered somewhat. A very peculiar relationship to the perpetuation of an image in media-determined space.

Cándida Smith: The sixties and seventies are a very special period because the technology bursts onto the scene, in a way that, artists can work with it, but it's still somewhat before it's bled into everyday life. When you would go to see something like Vito Acconci or Dan Graham, it was maybe, in a way, going into a Jetsons' universe. Whereas I think now, somebody in 2009 seeing these pieces is seeing something that is in continuity with every aspect of their daily life, in many respects.

05-00:14:28

Riley: In many respects. You start your day with it. Everything's interlinked now.

Cándida Smith: It's not a world apart.

05-00:14:37

Riley: It *is* the world. In fact, I wonder if that's what explains driving in San Francisco. It is *crazy* out there! People are multi-tasking. They drive the speed of people on highways on side streets, yet they maneuver in such a way that driving is much like keyboard command. You don't have to go across a block slowly, you need to just get to the end of the block quickly, as if it's an application or an option. It just *slays* me, the way people drive around here post-mechanically, proto-technology with their devices and with their handheld devices and their Big Gulp and all this stuff. I don't know how they do it.

Cándida Smith: There's an idea that remains fresh, but how do you keep the experience as startling as it was in 1973?

05-00:15:39

Riley: Oh! You mean in artists' projects?

Cándida Smith: Right.

05-00:15:43

Riley: In the visual art.

Cándida Smith: For instance, you were talking about a great show would be 1973. Let's say you were going to do that show.

05-00:15:55

Riley: Oh. Oh! Yes, and then to try and—

Cándida Smith: How do you keep 1973, the *experience* of 1973, as startling and maybe discontinuous, but also maybe liberating, as it was in 1973, when you have an audience today that's so much more media savvy?

Riley: I was actually listening to you, and my mind was running away from me. There's been an essay that I have looked for a very long time, by a critic named William Wilson, which may or may not have been

published, but it was the aesthetic analysis of the Apollo mission projects to the moon and beyond. There was a set of presumptions about what astronauts were to discover, what they were to encounter. They went out looking for discoveries predetermined, and they only encountered what they went looking for. To my knowledge, there's no record of other events.

A breakdown of classification characterizes 1973, including the Watergate and American Psychiatric Association, changed the whole path of what constitutes mental illness and what defines wellness. All those classifications changed. Everything was changing in 1973. There was *so much* in play that people's humanity came forward in all its complexities with the advent of the installation in art. It was the time when artists were starting to work in multi-dimensions simultaneously, with the installation. Transgressions within the white cube. What did it mean to locate information around the space as a sculptural condition? What did all of this mean? Hammering on the tools of the medium until they behaved in ways that you thought they should. There're all those documentaries that were made about street actions and marches. There's a videotape called *May Day*, by the Raindance Collective. It's just shocking to see how few demonstrators there are in Washington, but the law enforcement and the military response to them is *mighty* yet their numbers are so small. That tape ends with the passing of the camera on from the adult to the little kids, saying, "Why don't you make the news?" Without their understanding of the mayhem around them, they can only make the news about their immediate concern—their parents. Their parents are the world. They start to make movies about their parents. It's deeply, deeply touching. Again, 1973. It's something I have been considering on a test for some time.

Cándida Smith: When you left SFMOMA, did you continue curating?

05-00:21:03

Riley:

No, mostly teaching, taking up teaching residencies here and there and being very happy to go to various universities and teach for a short while. I published some articles about artists' work and the period in which they emerged. I actually wrote a very nice piece for a book about the history of taped music in San Francisco that I think was published by Rensselaer this year. I'm proud of that piece. I'm still writing, still focused, still looking at things. Still puzzled by all sorts of things, but grateful that I'm attracted to puzzles.

It was a great experience working at the museum. It was a great privilege to come and be the founding curator of a program and see it continue and reach the goals we set out for ourselves. Nothing bad ever happened. As Anne MacDonald so intelligently reported, "If you follow the artists, you will never go wrong. If you follow the patrons, trouble." I love that. I absolutely love that. Anne was on the Board, she was on the accessions committee for a while. She saw, often, the importance of putting things into the collection that were considered small at the time, but have grown in significance over the years. I believe her words. It's true. People often talk about disappointments and terrible things. I can't. It's quite a place. Maybe it's inevitable that all museums have this life. Right now, SFMOMA is building for something big. I don't think the program of the moment is necessarily suited to great visions of the future but I think a great age is coming, again.

[End of Interview]

Richard Cándida Smith is professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, where he has directed the Regional Oral History Office since 2001. He is the author of *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California*; *Mallarme's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience*; and *The California Claim to Modern Culture: Painting, Assemblage, and The Political Imagination*. He is the editor of *Art and the Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection*; and *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist As Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*.