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Oral history interview with Sylvia Plimack
Mangold, 1994 July 7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Sylvia Plimack Mangold on July 7, 1994. The interview took place in Washingtonville, NY, and was conducted by William Weiss for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Sylvia Plimack Mangold has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

WILLIAM WEISS: July 7, 1994, interview with Sylvia Mangold for the Archives of American Art. Interviewer, Bill Weiss. [Audio break.] Okay. Okay, so you tell me the date and the place you were born.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I don't remember the hospital, but September 18, 1938, in New York City.

WILLIAM WEISS: New York City?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: The Bronx.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay, and tell me the name of your parents, and their occupations.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: My mother's name is Ethel Rein, that's her maiden name, Plimack. And she is a bookkeeper, clerk. She's worked in high schools. She's worked at different educational institutions. My father was Maurice Plimack. And he was an accountant, but he had various occupations. He was self-employed for a while. And at the very end of this life, he worked for—he was an auditor for the state tax institute.

WILLIAM WEISS: Could you spell Plimack again, just for the purposes of the tape?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: P-L-I-M-A-C-K.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay. Okay, tell me—in regards to your parents—tell me about their interests—any interests that you remember that they had. Any pursuits they had.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: My father was—he loved to play ball—baseball. And he was also an intellectual. He liked to play games. He liked to read.

WILLIAM WEISS: So he read quite a bit?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: He liked to think about things, talk about things, and read about ideas. My mother was—is, she's still living, she's 84. She'll be 84 in November. And she is a very energetic soul. She knits, sews, does bookkeeping. Her interests are tasks. She's a taskmaster. So you give her a job and she likes to get it done, and then get the reward of having done this very difficult job. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM WEISS: Were either of your parents interested in art?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I don't think so. My father took me to museums.

WILLIAM WEISS: He did take you to museums? On a regular basis, or just for occasions?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Now and then, when I had—not—we didn't have a routine. But I didn't go with my mother. I went with my father.

WILLIAM WEISS: And this was in New York City.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: New York City.

WILLIAM WEISS: Did he talk to you about the paintings you saw, and the sculpture you saw, or was it just very casual?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I don't remember ever talking to him about what we saw. I remembered I always wanted to go to the store and buy postcards and reproductions to take home. So I don't remember ever talking—talking to my father about painting was difficult because he was very—it's like if I had a poem to write, he would correct it.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, I see.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: He had this idea—I mean, I don't think he understood creativity at all. He had this idea that there was a solution. That something was better. That his idea might be better than mine, or that he could say something better than I could say it. But you know, I don't think he ever really curtailed me. You know, he was so overbearing in these ways. I think I would—I learned to block this out. I mean, he would correct everything I did for school, or try to. So—

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. Yes. How would you characterize your childhood? Tell me about your childhood.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I'd say it was—generally, it was wholesome, looking at it from here. But I think that I experienced it when I was going through it as very dramatic.

WILLIAM WEISS: Traumatic?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Dramatic.

WILLIAM WEISS: Dramatic, uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Tension became very problematic for me. Tension in the house between people, my parents particularly, or my brother and sister. The tension was just—I always would try avoid the tension.

WILLIAM WEISS: Was that different than the other members—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: My sister is much more confrontational. My brother, I don't think he knows what it's all about. I think he's totally confused.

WILLIAM WEISS: When you look back at that period, do you think there was more tension then—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: There was a lot of tension.

WILLIAM WEISS: There was a lot of tension, yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I know there was. We grew up in a very tiny house, and with three children and two adults. And there was not very much space.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. Okay, and this was in the Bronx?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: No, by this time—by the time my brother and sister were born we lived in Queens.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you were the oldest child?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Right.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay. So this was in Queens now. Looking back at your early life—and I guess I mean the time, say, prior to high school—which individuals do you think now were the most influential?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I think my parents had a strong influence. But I think it was more trying to work against their influence, when I figured out whether what they wanted me to do was what I truly wanted to do, because they really had a desire to supervise my existence a great deal.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh. So you had to—you had to discover—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: My mother liked to know everything about what I was doing.

WILLIAM WEISS: I see.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: So I think I was always trying to be assured that my decisions were my own. And I did have an aunt. I had—my father's brother was married to a woman who was a very strong influence, because she was very supportive of me emotionally.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And she lived in the same neighborhood. So whenever I was upset, I would go and talk to her. [. . . -SPM]

WILLIAM WEISS: Tell me—tell me about your early exposure to art. I mean, you talked about going to museums. What else can you tell me?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I would—I drew early. I went to a public school. And it was a rather forward-minded, progressive public school, so that art was a serious part of third, fourth grade. And I had this teacher in the fourth grade. I think her name was Mrs. Malden.

WILLIAM WEISS: Mrs. Malving [ph]?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: [Frances M. Malden – SPM], something like that. But she had me doing a great deal of classroom projects. I remember doing sets for *The Wizard of Oz* in pastel on the back walls on this paper that was stretched across it. I seemed to have a natural confidence in drawing. And I don't think I was very skilled, but I went at it very enthusiastically, which other things I didn't do. I mean, I didn't especially like reciting in front of the class or doing math. I didn't think of myself as a very outstanding student. But somehow, I seemed to be distinguished early for the art that I did. So I probably got a lot of attention for it, or recognition.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. What as the name of the school, do you—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: It was called P.S. 150.

WILLIAM WEISS: And this was in Queens?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: In Queens.

WILLIAM WEISS: Anything else, as far as early—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I did—I had a best friend. And she and I went to art classes at the Museum of Modern Art.

WILLIAM WEISS: Ah, so what age were you at that point, more or less?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Ten, 11.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And I can remember—this is when MOMA was on 5th Avenue, over where I—yes, it was on 5th Avenue. And the art classes were upstairs in this building, around 55th or so. And you would—they had trays of feathers and sequins and all kinds of materials. And you would gather your resources and then make collages. And I loved it.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes, yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And then, of course, my mother didn't think too highly of these collages that I was doing, you know, for all this—you know, the MOMA was supposed to be so reputable. And I wasn't doing anything very formal.

WILLIAM WEISS: She thought you were going to be copying the Old Masters, you know, the Picassos.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Right, which I—we did. [Laughs.] But that was terrific. That was very—I mean, it—because it made art—it showed how much fun art—kind of exaggerated that part of it that showed me it was truly creative. I mean, you just took these different materials. I had a strong feeling for materials. And give me a box of crayons or pastels, that was very special.

WILLIAM WEISS: Let me take you up to high school. What high school did you go to?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I went to Music & Art High School.

WILLIAM WEISS: Music—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: —and Art.

WILLIAM WEISS: Music & Art, right.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: It was in The Bronx—no, 135th Street and Convent Avenue.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay. Did you have to have special recommendation to get into that school at that time?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes. Well, you had to submit a portfolio and then you had an interview. Everyone who—it was an honor that I was admitted. And I wanted to go there very much.

WILLIAM WEISS: Now, how many years were you at that school?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Four.

WILLIAM WEISS: All right, four years. Looking back at that period, tell me what significant events happened. I mean, what stands out in your mind the most? What happened there? What few things—teachers, friends? What's stands out?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I don't know.

WILLIAM WEISS: Nothing—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Most of the things that happened to me were—that stand out were family things. Artistically, I loved having all these art courses. I liked meeting students who were just as passionate about music as I was about drawing and painting. I liked meeting kids from Manhattan and going to jazz places with them. And it was a whole new circle of friends for me, friends who shared the same interests that I did.

And there was a very—seriousness towards school. I mean, besides taking academic courses, we all worked very hard at painting and drawing and thinking about what this activity meant, or what. So you had young people who liked being intellectual, who liked to be productive, and to challenge thought. I mean, there were—Peter Yarrow was there when I was, John McLaughlin was there. A lot of people who I met later in the art world went to Music & Art.

WILLIAM WEISS: Were there any teachers that stand out in your memory?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: There was. I'm trying—if I can think of her name. It's kind of on the tip of my tongue. Maybe I'll think of it as we go on.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay, we can come back.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: There was one woman who taught art history who, because she was a woman too. I didn't have very many teachers who were women. So seeing someone—

WILLIAM WEISS: What type of—what type of art were you doing then? Was it—were you experimenting with lots of different things?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Oh, there is something, actually. I just happen to have this here, but this is something from—this would have been a movement coming from within and shooting up. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM WEISS: No kidding? Was this an original idea, or was this something—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I think that was probably an assignment from my first year in high school, which I just came upon.

WILLIAM WEISS: It's like a Mondrian a little bit.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes.

WILLIAM WEISS: It's like a—it's like a landscape. Sort of a tree—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I think it's about the space, about what we have—[inaudible]. [As I remember, this was a charcoal drawing—the assignment was to create space using rectangles. The rectangles were from cut paper and applied as in a collage. The size, shapes, and color varied. - SPM]

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I know, isn't that—

WILLIAM WEISS: It's amazing, isn't it? It's in a way like your work now.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I did a lot of different things. I tried a lot of things then.

WILLIAM WEISS: Was the work you did there—was any of it independent, or was it very structured, as far as assignments and—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: It was both. We had structure. We had problems that were assigned to us. And then we did—we had studio classes. It wasn't—like, after Music & Art I went to Cooper Union. And so compared to Cooper Union we didn't—we didn't usually have art homework, because it was an academic high school. So we had a lot—I had physics, and chemistry, and biology, and—

WILLIAM WEISS: I see, yes. The usual high school courses.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: A very strong academic program.

WILLIAM WEISS: Sounds like a good school. What year did you graduate from there?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: 1956.

WILLIAM WEISS: And what did you do after high school? Did you work, or did you go right to—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I went to Cooper Union.

WILLIAM WEISS: You went to Cooper Union, okay. And tell me about Cooper Union then, how many years you were there and—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, you know, before I went to Cooper Union I didn't know that I wanted to be an artist. I had the idea that I would be a nurse when I graduated from Music & Art. So I applied to go to Hunter and take a bachelor, B.S. with an RN, which was a five-year program.

And then I applied to Cooper Union, mostly because my mother really encouraged me to apply to Cooper Union. All along she thought that art was really my primary interest. But I had other kinds of interests besides painting—I mean, making pictures, drawing, was something I loved to do. But then I liked to think that maybe I could be something else, and still make pictures. I didn't think of it as a life, as a career, as a way to—as a life. I thought of it as something I loved to do.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: So then I got into both schools.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And both schools—what happened was I chickened out. I suddenly thought, do I want to study? Well, I worked as a volunteer in a hospital. And I realized how depressing it can be, seeing very sick and dying people a lot. I also thought about going to college and studying math and science for four years, as opposed to doing whatever you do in art school. And when I took the test for Cooper Union, I thought the test was a lot of fun. So I thought, well, if this test is a lot of fun, that must be a sign.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And I decided to go to Cooper Union.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. So what year did you start at Cooper Union?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Fifty-six.

WILLIAM WEISS: Fifty-six. And you were there for how many years?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Three.

WILLIAM WEISS: Three years.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: It's a three-year program.

WILLIAM WEISS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. That was a bachelor's degree program?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: No, no, it was a certificate.

WILLIAM WEISS: Well, tell me about your time—tell me about your time—tell me about your—tell me about your work during that period at Cooper Union. Were you still mainly working off of other people's assignments? Or did you start to have original ideas, as you look back now?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: You know, I have the portfolio here that I used to enter Music & Art High School. I can show you.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay, but for the tape, for the purpose of the tape—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: For the purpose of the tape, going to Cooper Union was the beginning of taking art very seriously, making this commitment. It wasn't a total commitment, because I didn't know I wanted to be a

painter, but it was getting a little bit—you know, I thought maybe book design or typography lettering. And so each course I took helped me understand a little bit more about myself. And as much as I would—I loved lettering. And I got so absorbed in the texture and the rhythm I made so many spelling mistakes. And I would keep correcting myself. And so it was a kind of part of me that wasn't quite focused enough on the material that I was lettering and more just the appearance, the relationships and the letters. And then photography I did not—it was too painful for me, because I don't like using anything that's in between me and what I'm working on. I like to have, like, directness. So, I had no mind for photography, nor do I like the dark room or any of the chemicals. So that kind of—and sculpture, I just didn't click with sculpture either. I like clay, but I didn't care for any of the other materials that you would use as a sculptor. I liked thinking about space a lot, but I didn't especially want to fill it up. For example, you know, I like making space on a flat surface rather than making—actually, that's what is the most wonderful thing to me, and gives me a kick every time, painting that has volume or space.

WILLIAM WEISS: The illusion—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: That dichotomy between the surface and the space—right, the illusion is critical to me. So what happened at Cooper Union was these things gradually became more clear to me. On the other hand, I didn't have—but I didn't—there was still a lot about painting I didn't know. And I didn't know either how I would support myself. And so also I—somehow I'd stopped and seen Yale Art School at some point when I was going to Cooper Union. And I decided I wanted to go there. I set my heart on it.

WILLIAM WEISS: To Yale?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Right.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: At once when I saw it. So I—actually, I had this terrible tobogganing accident. And my first reaction when I had the accident—I knocked out teeth and I could have been more seriously hurt. But my first reaction was, oh, now I can't go to Yale, because it's going to cost so much money to fix my teeth. [Laughs.] That was my first reaction when I was bleeding.

WILLIAM WEISS: The very first reaction. So that was predominant in your mind.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I was really focused on this idea of Yale. And it was like a dream, going there. See, Eva Hesse had gone to Cooper Union. And I was friendly with her. She was two years older. So when I went to Yale, I saw Eva sitting in her booth reading with her work around. And there was something about the fact that she could—she wasn't working, but reading, and she had this kind of atmosphere for study was really—these things, you know, they strike you. They strike a chord. You say, I want that for myself.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. Yes. So that's when you decided to go to Yale?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Then I had to graduate Cooper Union, get accepted at Yale, which I didn't know if I would be accepted there.

WILLIAM WEISS: And you were?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And I was.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I was very lucky, though, just to be accepted in these different places that I had my heart set on. So it must be that there was something right about my choices.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. I think so.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM WEISS: Should we jump ahead to Yale now?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Sure.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay, now what year did you start?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Fifty-nine, and I graduated in—I got my—I got a bachelor of art in '61.

WILLIAM WEISS: In '61? Okay.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I didn't go any further at Yale.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, okay, so you went there for two years.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Two years.

WILLIAM WEISS: Now, at what point did you start looking around and become very aware of contemporary art going on around you—shows in New York and—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Oh, I knew that at Cooper Union.

WILLIAM WEISS: You did know that at Cooper Union.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: But I didn't pay attention to it. At Cooper Union we had a lot of painters who were teaching there who showed on 10th Street, and who I had as my teachers, who would suggest maybe we'd see shows. And I didn't necessarily go to see the shows they recommended. I wasn't interested in the Abstract Expressionist exhibitions during the late '50s. I became more interested in the '60s.

WILLIAM WEISS: In seeing Abstract Expressionist art?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: In seeing contemporary painting. It began to change.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. So at the point in your life when you did become interested in contemporary painting that other people were doing, what was the predominant style that was appearing in galleries at that point?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Oh, Pop art.

WILLIAM WEISS: Pop art.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Rosenquist and Warhol. Tom Wesselmann who was in my class at Cooper Union.

WILLIAM WEISS: At Cooper Union?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes. I went to those shows—[inaudible]. But the exhibitions that were most important for me were Fairfield Porter.

WILLIAM WEISS: Fairfield Porter? Uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And I would go to see Alex Katz's painting, although his—I liked his work. It was Fairfield Porter whose work I tried to—I would think I—you know, this is the direction I would like to go with.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes, so you'd say he had—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I identified with his works.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. And this is during the Yale period?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: No, this is after we moved to New York.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, after you moved to New York, okay. What point did you move to New York?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: You know, I think it was 1962, because we lived in New Haven. Bob was still in school, I think, and I had a teaching job.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you met Bob at Yale?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I met him in 1960.

WILLIAM WEISS: You were both students at Yale at this point?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: It was my second year at Yale, and we were both students.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay. So after you graduated—after you graduated, you—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I graduated and didn't stay in school. He stayed in school to get his master's. So we lived in New Haven for a year.

WILLIAM WEISS: While he was finishing school.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay, so let's move up in time to when you first moved to New York. Where did you live in New York—not exact address, I mean, what part of the city were you living in?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: We lived—well, we took a job as superintendents of a small apartment house on 72nd Street. I had a girlfriend who I had gone to Cooper Union with. And she was leaving that job with her boyfriend. They were going to go to Alaska. So she asked me if I wanted to continue, take it over. And we decided to because we each also had money jobs—jobs where we had a salary. And we rented studio space, too.

WILLIAM WEISS: You rented studio space.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: So we lived in this apartment and we were rent-free.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay, so at that point in your life, what type of work were you doing?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Oh, terrible work. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM WEISS: When you first started—when you first started working in New York—I mean, doing your artwork—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I was doing these kinds of images from commercial—from billboards, a kind of Pop. It was terrible.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you were basically responding to what was a predominant art style at the time.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. Okay, yes—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And then I started doing portraits and the cityscapes, as I started looking around at the art that was more interesting to me. I did paintings of apartment houses.

WILLIAM WEISS: How long were you in New York before what you would characterize as your more mature work started to emerge? How long did that take?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I think it took—I think the first interesting—the work I don't mind showing people were these apartment houses that I did. They were—the space was very distant, and yet there was a lot of—it was—I don't know how to describe them, but they began to distinguish themselves in some way that was more personal to me.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes, yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: But I don't show those really. It's just that I'm not ashamed of those, as opposed to the other kind of schlocky stuff that I tried. Then I did some—I started doing these paintings of spaces where we lived, like chairs and furniture, thinking about painting the space between the—between the objects. But then I would be always eager to get to the architecture. And I began to think about moving the objects and just painting the architecture. So there must be some connection between doing these buildings outside, which was the exterior architecture, and then very gradually I did the space that was even more personal, the interior architecture, where I lived.

And that transition from something out there far from me to something close to me probably was an important part of my development. And then the floors I guess were the earliest paintings that I did that people saw as most unusual. And because they dealt with picture plane and then three-dimensional space and perspective, and yet they weren't just about perspective because always you have a sense of the painter—the painter was me. And also there was a kind of radicalness to not having anything but these floor planes or wall planes making up my subject.

WILLIAM WEISS: No furniture.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes.

WILLIAM WEISS: So what year was that, more or less—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: That would have been the late '60s, between—

WILLIAM WEISS: The late '60s.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: —somewhere between '65 and '68-'69.

WILLIAM WEISS: When you moved from doing exterior architecture to interior architecture? And at that point, that period, what was the predominant art style that you were noticing? Was that Minimalism?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Oh, yes. I mean, I was around—we went to all these different exhibitions. We went—we saw all the—[inaudible]. I mean, I went to the *Primary Structures* show. Because of Bob's interest in a lot of what was happening, I was more exposed than—I don't know that I would have been so exposed to that. [My early influences were Edward Hopper, Fairfield Porter, Alex Katz, Magritte, while my husband was involved with artists such as Barnett Newman and Rothko. So we would look at a lot of contemporary abstraction as well as figurative painting. And we were friends with Eva Hesse, Sol Lewitt, Lucy Lippard, and Bob Ryman. We would attend a great many diverse exhibits in those early years. - SPM]

WILLIAM WEISS: Where was the *Primary Structures* show?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: The Jewish Museum.

WILLIAM WEISS: Jewish Museum? And what—that was in the mid-'60s, late '70s?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: That was—I can't remember the date. There was—there was just a lot of sculpture then.

WILLIAM WEISS: How long did you concentrate on the interior architectural images? How long did that last? And was that to exclusive thing you were doing during that period, or were you doing other things?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: No, I think when I started painting floors and walls, you know, that's what I did. But —

WILLIAM WEISS: So you really concentrated that, at the exclusion of other—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes. It wasn't until we moved to the country that I started looking out the window.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, really?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Oh, I did stairways too, but you know, it was always this kind of architectural—it was very—it was volume, concrete. You know, something that was constructed of particular surfaces. And I didn't want to do—it's also because of the kind of way I look at things. I don't like to generalize. I didn't want to just—I didn't want to paint anything that was grandiose. I wanted to paint something that was very specific.

WILLIAM WEISS: Specific and [cross talk]?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Particular.

WILLIAM WEISS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And related to the real world versus, say, a mental concept?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I don't know—I think that's a mental concept, to painting something particular.

WILLIAM WEISS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So when you went from painting the room interiors, the walls and floors and so forth, and when you went from that to painting landscape trees and so forth, the thing that really enabled that to happen is that you changed your location. Was that it?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: It's always—well, there has been a series—my mind too has had something to do with the decisions that happened later on, because I began to look at my work in a critical way. That did not necessarily have to do with my location. It had to do with my expectation of what I wanted the work to be. So when I was forming—I mean, the early work was more about developing skills and finding out about whether I—if I wanted to make a wall feel like a wall, could I?

As I began to find out that, well, I could do pretty much anything I wanted to do, then I started making these—setting these expectations that were more abstract myself and more interesting, I think. And I became more involved in the idea of painting, and the process of painting. Of course, I'm still—this is being affected by the thinking that's evolving in the community too. I mean, I have a lot of painter friends. And we talk about why we do what we do, and what we like to do, and what interests us. So I'm sure I've been—I'm all the time being affected by the community.

WILLIAM WEISS: Let me stop for just a second.

[Audio break.]

WILLIAM WEISS: Tell me—tell me how your work changed when you moved to the country.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Okay, now, there is—I'm kind of versed in this, because this is when I'm giving a slide talk or something I go through—I have it—I have it kind of worked out in my head, so I can—when I went to the country I took my interest in interiors, but then there was all this direct sunlight. And I became interested in the kind of poetry between the light and the architecture.

And before we moved to the country, I had been doing these laundry paintings, so that I was looking for ways to expand my vocabulary. I did some paintings with the way the light comes through the windows. And then I did a series of paintings with a mirror—that mirror, in particular.

WILLIAM WEISS: Oh, paintings of a mirror, per se.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Of a mirror sitting on the floor, so you got this interesting—the space inside the mirror and the space inside the painting, and really all of this. And it opened up all these different planes, which were kind of interesting in an abstract way, and also in a philosophical way, because it was about reflection and illusion. So I've always had an intellectual interest in just ideas and playing with them. And I think mirror pieces—well, maybe the light too—the idea of feeling like I was playing with poetry and thought as well as imagery, or that the images were poetic—or wanting them to be poetic. All of these different attitudes began to form themselves for me.

And since I was in the country, sometimes I'd see the sliver of the trees or grass out the window, and I might include that. And I did some—at a certain point, I think I went—I had a personal feeling of crisis and I started thinking about corners—corners that went in and corners that came out, as states of mind. And the space in between these corners was another kind of plateau. So I started inventing spaces, not so much painting my studio or the place I lived in, but using corners and areas in between them, and different kinds of corners, to express a feeling.

And as I was doing this, I had a problem with the space which seemed too flat. So I had a ruler and I painted the ruler in the middle of the floor, just to give it some location, so that you would enter—instead of having the space read up and down. So you would enter it from the bottom and go in. And in order to do that, you have to put an object in there. Otherwise, you read it up and down. And then that was the first ruler painting that I did.

Another ruler painting where—so my rulers hung from nails on my studio wall. And I would see the light coming in the window on the ruler. And I thought, I like this idea of measurement, which is fixed, and light which is changing and elusive. So I did a series of work like that. And then we moved, that's right. Oh, and I started teaching. And so—and also, I started—once I started thinking about rulers as subject matter, I started thinking about anything—any of my tools could be subject matter, including the tapes. So I did a painting of my studio wall with the tapes hanging off the wall that I had used to make the painting—rulers and whatever was my materials.

And in doing—that's one way to look at the subject matter, but also, you know, there is Jasper Johns, who uses a ruler. And when he uses a ruler, he actually makes the ruler make some—the ruler is actually participating in the painting. So I started doing rulers, where the rulers were actually functioning in the painting instead of being, like, still-life objects. And this transitioned from looking at my tools as still-life objects and using them to narrate the process of my painting. I think that was a rather big change in the work. It was also—there was a lot of artists who were making art about the process. Dorothea would make drawings that drew themselves. And so then we moved here, I guess in 1975. And I needed to find a new subject. And what did I do? I guess I found these floor tiles in the basement. And so I started making—like that painting you saw in the hallway—I started creating, like, new floors using these tiles.

WILLIAM WEISS: Out of the actual material?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I just found the materials.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes. So I would make the floors in the paintings—

WILLIAM WEISS: Linoleum.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Right. But they're not based on anything. They're based on something in my head, which isn't real. So then as I did a number of paintings of these linoleum pieces, and using rulers to measure the edges, and rulers to measure the diminishing space. And gradually I thought, well, the floor measures the space

as it diminishes, so I'll just have the ruler on the edge measuring the size of the canvas. Gradually I—no, then I started painting the rulers and the edges and leaving the inside empty, because I started painting about—

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, it's old. I didn't catalogue some things.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: So I don't have to go into that. So I won't.

WILLIAM WEISS: Okay.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Because it's too hard. Nobody could make—I mean, it's been written.

WILLIAM WEISS: Skip forward to where you want to. Just start—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Skip? Well, so eventually, as one thing leads to another, I started painting the landscapes very seriously. And all the remnants of the studio had gradually left painting.

WILLIAM WEISS: So now you're back outside again?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I'm outside painting trees. And at first, you know, I was painting the hills in the distance, and then trees in the middle ground. I seemed to go with things very methodically, but I don't know I'm doing that. It just seemed—when you look back on it seems like, well, sure. This path—you were just following this course, and it's laid out. It makes so much sense. But I have no idea that I'm doing it until I've done it. And it's the same with paintings, you know? I don't really have an idea of what I'm doing until after I've done it.

WILLIAM WEISS: So when you start painting the—you were doing landscape paintings, and then you were doing close-ups, for instance, trees. So—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I started painting in the distance, came first.

WILLIAM WEISS: That came first.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes.

WILLIAM WEISS: And then you started to single out a group of trees or one tree.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. Then I did a whole group of paintings of these trees at the pond. Then I got closer and closer to the trees at the pond, and then did separate paintings of them. And then I kind of think of them as portraits. Yes, I treat them like they're very particular trees there. So I paint—I'm looking at this elm tree, and out my window there are the locust trees and the maple tree.

WILLIAM WEISS: So you think of them like portraits?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Because they're—you know, they're part of my world.

WILLIAM WEISS: And they are individuals.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes. They're very particular trees.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes, with specific—

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: The maple tree that's right outside this window, I've never seen a maple tree that's quite like that one before, because it has the arms, it comes like this.

WILLIAM WEISS: Like a yew?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes. Do you ever think about how—of the place of your work, what place it would occupy in the historical context of painting?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: No.

WILLIAM WEISS: You don't? How about the place your work occupies in the current context of painting?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I've never thought of that.

WILLIAM WEISS: Are there any particular artists today working that you might know personally, or know the work of, that you feel are dealing with the same type of issues, or same kind of imagery that you are? You mentioned Alex Katz.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Yes, but he's not dealing with what I do. His work is more about color and gesture. His work is much more abstract. I mean, my work is abstract too, but his is—I would never be happy with such flat paintings as he makes. I don't want my paintings to be flat. I'm struggling somewhat against that over time.

And you know, I don't so much think about contemporary painting, but I like Catherine Murphy's work very much.

WILLIAM WEISS: Catherine Murphy?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: She's a very close friend of mine. A lot of people who do subject matter today, and expressive landscape, they use photography and so that takes it—it changes it. We have nothing in common because it's totally different—but it does result in a totally different experience.

WILLIAM WEISS: What painters do you look at now? I mean, historically, through books or going to museums, are there any painters that really—that you feel drawn to?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Cezanne, love him. I've always liked Mondrian, early work and, you know, late too, because that—I liked the realness of the space that he deals with, whether it's abstract or not—real or figurative. Edward Hopper is a real one with painting, for me.

WILLIAM WEISS: Edward Hopper?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Right.

WILLIAM WEISS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: And Lovis Corinth, who is a German painter I like very much. And Morandi.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes, I can see that.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: But in a different—you know, I way the way Morandi would be painting the same bottles all the time.

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes, over and over, like they were individual personalities.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Correct.

WILLIAM WEISS: In different lights—such different placements and different light. That seems very similar in some ways.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Except he painted a lot smaller.

WILLIAM WEISS: He did, yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: My life would be a lot easier if I did. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM WEISS: Yes, yes.

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: I think he's been inside. But I wouldn't like it. I would feel confined. So I do what I do because it satisfies my need.

[Audio break.]

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I think I have a lot more to say, then I forget it. So it will be nice to have this audience. [Laughs.] You all want to hear what I have to say about it.

WILLIAM WEISS: Well, do you have to talk that much?

SYLVIA PLIMACK MANGOLD: Well, I've chosen to do work—a visiting critic—

[Audio break.]

WILLIAM WEISS: It's the quietest air conditioner.

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]