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Oral history interview with Cynthia Schira,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Cynthia Schira on July 25, 2001. The interview took place in Westport, New York and was conducted by Margo Mensing for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Cynthia Schira and Margo Mensing have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

MS. MENSING: This is Margo Mensing interviewing Cynthia Schira at her home and studio in Westport, New York, on July 25th, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Cynthia, when and where were you born?

MS. SCHIRA: I was born in 1934, in June, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

MS. MENSING: Describe your childhood and family background.

MS. SCHIRA: My childhood was very much influenced by the death of my father when I was nine. We lived in Bronxville, New York, up until that time. And when my mother became a widow, we moved back to her family's area in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. The whole childhood was influenced by the fact that she was a widow, influenced by everybody, so she always tried to get everybody's opinions.

My family background was New England, in a sense. My father was a manager of Corn Exchange Bank in New York City when they lived in Bronxville. But it was like middle class background in New England, which is not said very well, but that's what it was.

MS. MENSING: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to add to that, or any other relatives that were important in your family? Did you have siblings?

MS. SCHIRA: I have a sister who's five years younger than I am, and then there were siblings -- I mean, not siblings, but cousins when we lived in Pittsfield, and that was quite important. And actually, Nancy Graves lived down the street across from us, who was well known as an artist and has since died.

MS. MENSING: But she wasn't an artist then. She was your --

MS. SCHIRA: No. No. She was playing in the sandbox with the rest of us. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: Okay.

I'm going to give you this whole question at once and then you can respond to it.

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: Discuss your early education. I read your 1988 interview for the Columbia University Oral History Research Office project. How did your scholarship -- and you might tell us about that -- and your experience at Northfield School for Girls influence your subsequent education choices?

MS. SCHIRA: All right. Starting at the beginning of that question, the early education was in the town school in Stockbridge, Mass., where all classes from K through 12 were all in the same school. The reason I went to Northfield for the last two years of high school was that my mother was very interested in trying to be sure that my sister and I had good educations. And there was a scholarship. It was through the minister at the church, he found a scholarship. Anyhow, I went to Northfield.

MS. MENSING: And would it have been impossible for you to go there without the scholarship?

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, absolutely. It was totally on scholarship. Totally on scholarship. And it was very influential in the fact that I really learned how to study, I learned how to write, I learned all the things that they don't do that much of now in many schools -- you know, how to do a research paper and all those kinds of things -- as well as to think.

It was a very, very formal school at that time and very restricted, so it influenced my subsequent educational choices in the fact that I did not want to live that kind of a restricted life anymore. And by restricted, I mean that it was a boarding school and you got two weekends a year to go home, and you saw boys from 2:00 to 3:00 on Sunday afternoon with a chaperone. It seemed that there was much of life that was missing, so I wanted to pick somewhere that had more openness. And at that point in my life and my thought, it seemed like an art school would do that.

MS. MENSING: So then that influenced the college that you selected.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. And so I selected, rather than where I was supposed to go according to the advisors and my mother and everybody, like Vassar or Smith, which makes fine young women, I wanted to do something else. And I had done some art, just unimportant art but, I mean, you know, drawings and doodles and things like that.

MS. MENSING: Did you feel that you were encouraged at Northfield to do this sort of thing?

MS. SCHIRA: No, not at all. Not at all. Actually, when I wanted to do it, my mother sent me to Norman Rockwell, and he was to talk me out of the fact that I might want to -- because he lived in Stockbridge at that point -- to talk me out of the fact that I might want to go to an art school. But he didn't. He said, "You should do what you want to do." And so that's what I did do. And then -- I think we're getting on to the next question.

MS. MENSING: Right, about where you went to college and how did you select this institution.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. I selected it because I wanted a different kind of life than I was offered at Northfield. I don't think it was really conscious, totally conscious. I mean, now we're talking about things in a way that you make it a conscious decision about everything, but in actuality, life doesn't work that way. Or at least mine didn't. So that college seemed different. And then I had to get all the scholarships for that college.

MS. MENSING: Which was? The college?

MS. SCHIRA: Rhode Island School of Design [RISD] in Providence, Rhode Island.

MS. MENSING: Okay. And so what year did you begin your studies there?

MS. SCHIRA: 1952. No, no. Yes. Wait a minute. I graduated in -- '52, yes, and then I graduated in '56. I started in '52.

MS. MENSING: Okay. The next question is, what motivated your interest in textiles? And I said after that, you've spoken about the financial connection of the scholarship money because that did come up in this previous interview.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, right. Right.

MS. MENSING: Are there other reasons that you were attracted to the study and making of textiles? And I guess really my underlying question that I perhaps didn't say here is, at what point did you begin to make the connections between art and textiles, or craft and textiles? Was this when you were still in school? Can you sort out any of this for us?

MS. SCHIRA: Well, as I told you, I needed the money to go to college, and I had gotten lots of small amounts of money. I got some nice scholarships from RISD; I found a relative way back somewhere who had DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] connections; one of my cousins was married to somebody in the Metallurgical Society in New York, I got some money from there. But I still was \$500 short, and I got this Textron scholarship for the \$500. I knew nothing about textiles. I had never even considered textiles as anything.

So the first year at the college, I didn't have to do anything with textiles at all, because you have a foundation. The second year I went in and I thought, "Why not?" And it was interesting. I don't think I questioned it. I don't think I questioned in the way I would question now. I don't think I made conscious decisions that way.

MS. MENSING: Were you obligated because of the Textron? What were the strings attached to the scholarship?

MS. SCHIRA: The strings attached to the Textron were that I would study textiles.

MS. MENSING: Okay. They didn't expect you to know anything; they just expected you to explore it.

MS. SCHIRA: And to be in that -- you know, that would be my major.

MS. MENSING: Oh. Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: And then, you know, textiles were quite different than they are now. This was pre-Procion dyes, because that was '52; they were developed in '57. It was more industry oriented in the fact that there was one whole floor at RISD that had the big machines, and we learned how to use dobby looms. And we wove one thing on a jacquard. So they had that, but then there was the freer aspects. The printing was totally different than it is now. It was a whole different world.

MS. MENSING: And it was clear that if you did this, you were being trained, then, for industry, not as an individual artist.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Much more so. And they also had textile engineers, an area of textile engineers. So it was very, very specific.

MS. MENSING: In fact did you learn to do things on your own? I'm thinking now of other programs, like in Philadelphia, where the students didn't even thread their own looms.

MS. SCHIRA: No, we did learn to do things on our own as one part, and that was sort of considered the art design part. The other part was the more textile industry part. It was quite divided, but we did get both sides.

MS. MENSING: Well, it makes me think of things, like was there anybody in particular that you studied with at that time that encouraged you and helped you to enjoy this, or was it more just the methodology and the program itself that was enticing?

MS. SCHIRA: I guess that rather than some particular teacher, it was more that you would get strokes from your peers if you did a good design, from the other students in the class. And some of the classes were very, very boring. It was pre-Xerox, and so he would dictate all this technical information. And the teachers who taught the art -- Marie Howell was somebody who was there -- but they weren't there enough of the time to be --

MS. MENSING: It was very different than --

MS. SCHIRA: Very different than now.

MS. MENSING: Well, I guess what I'm thinking is RISD has this program, a strong foundations program.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, and that was influential.

MS. MENSING: And I was wondering that then when you started to do textile studies and had been in the foundations program, did you relate what you were learning in textiles? Did it become interesting because you were working out some of these formal properties? I'm thinking of Albers, people like this --

MS. SCHIRA: Right, right, right.

MS. MENSING: -- who use the things, you know, the formal properties in --

MS. SCHIRA: In their work.

MS. MENSING: -- in their work. And I wondered if people made that connection for you or you did that or --

MS. SCHIRA: No, I don't think they did in that. No, I don't think that happened. I think that so many of the things we were asked to do were so specifically textile that we didn't realize we had as much freedom. But there still were some classes that were very important. There was a philosophy of design class that was very important, but important because it was really intellectually interesting. And some of the things he was asking us to do, like to stand in front of a case in the museum and look at a pot or a silver pitcher or something and be able to draw it exactly.

MS. MENSING: From visual memory.

MS. SCHIRA: Looking at it, while you're looking at it, to make it exactly the same size, and he talked about that kind of thing. So it wasn't in the textile program that the interesting things were happening. But the textile program, it seemed possible for me to excel in that program more so than when I had to take beginning painting and drawing. I had a lot of trouble with that. I had -- this is talking about gender. One of the teachers, John Frazier --

MS. MENSING: John Frazier.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes.

[Tape paused.]

MS. SCHIRA: Anyhow -- is it ready? It's going.

MS. MENSING: Yes, it's going.

MS. SCHIRA: He looked at one of my drawings and he said, "Well, Ms. Jones, you are never going to get it, but it doesn't matter terribly much because you're going to get married anyhow." So you get that kind of encouragement and you run back to textiles.

MS. MENSING: You weren't treated that way in textiles.

MS. SCHIRA: No.

MS. MENSING: You were seen as somebody --

MS. SCHIRA: Just as a person.

MS. MENSING: As a person, and a person --

MS. SCHIRA: And did rather well.

MS. MENSING: -- who could weave and have a career.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. In that sense. And then, of course, I did get the textile scholarship from RISD afterwards. And instead of -- are we into another question? [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: That's fine. That's fine.

MS. SCHIRA: Because I had done well, I did get this Textron scholarship. And this other woman, Patti Zoppetti -- [Tape paused.]

MS. MENSING: Could you speak up a little?

This is a slight correction that Cynthia and I have discussed while the tape was off and we were spelling Patti Zoppetti's name. I asked her about the Textron scholarship, and she said in fact she received that at RISD. The scholarship that she received which was for the last \$500 was not the Textron scholarship, was it?

MS. SCHIRA: No, it was not the Textron scholarship.

MS. MENSING: Was it --

MS. SCHIRA: I don't remember. I don't remember what it was, but it was for textiles.

MS. MENSING: But it was for textiles, which is the important point.

MS. SCHIRA: Definitely. Right. Right.

MS. MENSING: Okay. So you were talking about Patti Greenman --

MS. SCHIRA: Zoppetti, yes.

MS. MENSING: -- who was a student at RISD with you at that time.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. And with this Textron scholarship, we were supposed to go to New York and to try to work in industry and work as apprentice or something of that sort. But Patti had this idea, and it really was Patti's idea, that really we should go to France and study tapestry weaving in Aubusson. And so we did do that. We went six weeks first to the Sorbonne, and then we traveled through Europe for two months, and then we went and studied at Aubusson for maybe three or four months.

It was a long time ago. It was a hard time. The Hungarian Revolution was going on. There was feeling that possibly we might be taking all these techniques back to the states and put them out of business, which, of course, wasn't true, because nobody would do that.

MS. MENSING: So you didn't feel particularly comfortable in the situation you were in in Europe.

MS. SCHIRA: Well, when we were studying in Aubusson, it was very, very cold and it was winter, and we were apprenticing, but we weren't with the regular apprentice group because that was young, 13- and 14-year old kids. We were with a French man and a Swiss woman. So there were four of us, and we were being taught by

Michel Toulriere.

MS. MENSING: Well, this is definitely related to one of the questions I was going to ask you, and that is to tell me about your travels and what impact they've had on you. So I'm wondering how learning tapestry weaving then later or even at that time became influential in your career path.

MS. SCHIRA: I found that there was a tightness in the technique of tapestry weaving, that you actually have the enjoyment and the interest in making the cartoon, and then there's a lot of work to make the cartoon into a tapestry, which is quite boring. And for years and years it was always done by other people. It wasn't until Jean Lurcat in France began the whole idea of designing the tapestry, having control over the design and the weaving of the tapestry that it was no longer divided.

That's a terrible sentence.

[Tape is paused.] So we're going to start with another question at this point because I got confused.

MS. MENSING: All right. You want me to rephrase that question.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes.

MS. MENSING: My reason for bringing this up is, you mentioned that parts of the apprenticeship were quite boring. You were restricted and controlled. And so since you did become a weaver and since being a weaver has been your life as an artist --

MS. SCHIRA: Absolutely.

MS. MENSING: -- very influential --

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: -- I'm wanting to know if you can sort that out and tell me what was intriguing to you with this apprenticeship that did keep you going and, you know, was -- [inaudible].

MS. SCHIRA: Well, I don't think it was just the apprenticeship. And actually, my weaving was not just the apprenticeship either, because I'd had all the experience weaving at RISD. I had woven on hand looms and I'd woven on mechanized looms, jacquard, dobby, I had seen many, many different aspects of weaving. So in a sense, this was simply one aspect. What I didn't want to continue, because I felt it was so tight as far as the actual weaving of it, was in that particular technique. It seemed to me that I could have more freedom than that.

When I came back from Switzerland -- I mean from France, I did do some tapestries. And I found then that I truly didn't want to do it. I found that I couldn't get to the loom and somehow I had to do a million other things instead of going to the loom.

I was married to a painter. It was the time of the abstract expressionists. Everybody was very involved in their ideas and in their process, all of which had nothing to do with sitting at the loom and slavishly copying an already made cartoon. So I began to think that there had to be another way to express myself or to do the visual things that I wanted to do.

The part that I liked about being a weaver or weaving was that there was a physical structure that held you, that made it possible to do things. Somehow, the empty space of a canvas with no structure was frightening to me, but the actual making of something, of crossing the vertical and the horizontal threads, allowing myself to not worry about the visual for a little bit and to work with the technical side of it, satisfied me in a way that the painting didn't.

There's something about weaving that has the intellectual side. You have to know all the things about the math to set it up and all that kind of thing as well as the more spontaneous and visual thing. And that coming together of the two sides I found really interesting.

MS. MENSING: I'm going to return to these in a minute, but --

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, it's easier.

MS. MENSING: -- your statements sometimes make me think of new questions, and one of them would be, did you use preparatory drawings at all when you did this, when you were first a weaver back in this country after being trained, or were you completely spontaneous? Did you warp the loom and then just --

MS. SCHIRA: Huh-uh. [Negative.]

MS. MENSING: -- you know, use it as an abstract canvas --

MS. SCHIRA: No.

MS. MENSING: -- or did you work, in fact, with some form of a cartoon that maybe you changed later? And I'm using cartoon loosely.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I know what you mean by the cartoon; not cartoon that you see in the newspaper, but the cartoon which is the preliminary drawing for the tapestry.

Well, in actuality, I was doing this weaving when Dick was getting his master's up in Seattle, so we were there. And we had a young child at that point. And what I was finding out over a period of two or three years was that I wasn't making time to weave. I wasn't making time to do anything creative. And it wasn't that my life was so busy, it was that I was running away from the fact that I didn't like what I had been doing in tapestry and I didn't know what to do next.

So when we moved, when he got the job at the University of Kansas and we moved to Kansas, I started in the graduate program there, getting a master's degree. What that did was open up possibilities and techniques that I hadn't done before. You know, when you're a student, you can open up in a way and you try to finish things or you set yourself a problem that you try to solve in multiple different ways. And I did my master's thesis on ancient Peruvian textiles. So I read many books, d'Harnoncourt's [René d'Harnoncourt] book and other books of that type, and tried to do a lot of those techniques. So I was actually always going from techniques. Then I would try to take the technique further.

This was a time when everybody was experimenting. This was, the early '60s, and everybody was doing quadruple weave and feathers, and I mean, it was a marvelous time because it opened up something that to me had been very, very tight. It had been tight at RISD and then incredibly tight with the tapestry.

MS. MENSING: And Peruvian textiles were very influential in --

MS. SCHIRA: Incredibly influential, and not just to me, to everybody at the time. I think I might have taken it a bit farther than some people of by really trying to understand and see how they were done. I went to the Peabody Museum at Harvard and photographed many of the textiles that Junius Bird had collected. This was before they were really uptight about everybody being really proper, you know, and they let me down there in the stacks to do the photos. And then I tried to do some of those. And then as I was trying to do some of those techniques, then ideas started to come into my head about what could be done.

Also at that time I was very jealous of Dick having -- and our friends, who were all painters -- having a freedom that I didn't have. I wanted to have the structure, but I needed more freedom. And so that's when I started doing the brocaded works with the wider tapes.

MS. MENSING: Maybe you could just explain this briefly, the technical aspect of --

MS. SCHIRA: Of brocade?

MS. MENSING: Well, or what you did that was so different and innovated at that time.

MS. SCHIRA: Well, actually what I did was very much based on a piece of Lenore Tawney's that I saw. The name of the piece is *Jupiter*. And it's been reproduced in many magazines. But this woman, who was the first art representative or dealer that I worked with, Marna Johnson, had this piece because she was also selling Tawney's work. It had many of the horizontals, or wefts, floating. I had never seen anything that was as open as what Tawney did or as floating in that sense, because everything that I had seen before that had been very tightly structured textiles.

MS. MENSING: For instance? I mean, can you tell us --

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, I mean like regular tapestry is very, very tight.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: And even some of the things that I had seen, the Scandinavian tapestries, which are not like the French and have eccentric wefts, but they were still tighter than hers. There just seemed to be this possibility. And seeing that particular piece brought it up to my mind that I could play more. I knew that I could make a structure underneath and have a secondary, supplementary horizontal or weft and that could play because I would have that structure. So that seemed to me best of both worlds. And then I found tapes at this surplus place in Topeka, Kansas.

MS. MENSING: Cotton tapes that --

MS. SCHIRA: Cotton tapes.

MS. MENSING: -- are used in sewing, that sort of thing?

MS. SCHIRA: No, they were used for bandages in the war.

MS. MENSING: Oh.

MS. SCHIRA: To go on fingers. And they even had the metal thing that goes over the finger and then you bring the bandage down over the metal thing. And I found out that those could dye.

MS. MENSING: By now, Procion dyes were available?

MS. SCHIRA: No, it wasn't -- well, I was using hot dyes. I used hot dyes, the Cushing's. So much was serendipitous. I didn't want it to be this horrible mess when it came out of the pots, so I would wrap them up really tightly putting them in a tight ball when I was dyeing them in the hot dye. It turned out they were resisting just from the fact that they were really tight. Then you can go with that. Well, it did this by chance, but then you can take that chance and turn it into something. So I used all that for a long time.

And I'm sure we're way past whatever question. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: Well, that's fine.

MS. SCHIRA: It's easier to do it this way.

MS. MENSING: That's fine, then, if you don't mind me just asking the questions.

MS. SCHIRA: No, I like it better than trying to -- you know.

MS. MENSING: Well one thing, to just maybe go back a little, that isn't in here but I'm interested in, and that is, were you aware of Anni Albers' work at this time? This was, again, in the, what --

MS. SCHIRA: I was aware of [Johannes] Itten's book, and I was aware of Josef Albers.

MS. MENSING: But not Anni Albers' weavings?

MS. SCHIRA: At some time in there -- I don't know whether -- I mean, it's all fuzzy to me as to what happened when. I even have to think about -- [laughs] -- my children as to when things happened. But certainly her book on weaving and the other book on designing were very important. And M.C. Richards's book, which was -- I think *Centering* was the name of it.

MS. MENSING: Right.

MS. SCHIRA: And those books were really important.

MS. MENSING: So you knew about Black Mountain [Black Mountain College, Black Mountain, North Carolina] and --

MS. SCHIRA: No. I'm not sure I knew about Black Mountain. I think I found the book or somebody had the book. You know, there were bible books that you had to read. Everybody was reading those books.

And I don't know now what we're doing.

MS. MENSING: Where are we now, early '60s?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, but see now also the other thing is -- and this comes as a question later -- that this was a time when *Ms. Magazine* was starting. Betty Friedan had written her book, *The Feminine Mystique*.

MS. MENSING: And you're out of graduate school.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I'm out of graduate school.

MS. MENSING: Are you at home with the children?

MS. SCHIRA: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. MENSING: Are you working?

MS. SCHIRA: No, I'm at home with the children. I didn't teach until '76 at the University. I did do some workshops. And I sold through this woman, Marna Johnson.

MS. MENSING: This is in Kansas?

MS. SCHIRA: No, in Chicago.

MS. MENSING: In Chicago. Okay. She was a dealer in Chicago.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. And that's how I met Christa Thurman Mayer [Christa Mayer Thurman], when Christa first came to Chicago. It was that long ago.

MS. MENSING: Really.

MS. SCHIRA: So I'm going to be -- I can't be straight on dates and things.

MS. MENSING: Well, I'll just try to ask you things like that.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes.

MS. MENSING: Was Marna Johnson only a textile dealer?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. And she did it out of her house.

MS. MENSING: Oh, really?

MS. SCHIRA: And it was very genteel and very, very quiet, and only to some people. She handled mainly Lenore Tawney. Well, she did also to -- she sold to -- oh, Bertl [sp]. You're asking me questions that are making me remember things.

MS. MENSING: And actually, I think very soon we're going to stop because I don't want the tape to run out.

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: But maybe you could start, just tell us who Bertl [sp] was.

MS. SCHIRA: He was the store decor person for Marshall Fields, and he bought many, many of my pieces for the store.

MS. MENSING: Okay. Well, let's stop right there.

MS. SCHIRA: Yeah. Okay.

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

MS. MENSING: Testing. Trying to see whether or not this is recording. Testing with Cynthia, trying to see if this recording is working. This should be Side B, Tape 1.

[Remainder of Side B is blank.]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A.]

MS. MENSING: This is Margo Mensing interviewing Cynthia Schira at her home and studio in Westport, New York, on July 25th, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This is the second tape.

We were just talking about Bertl Sonnenburg [sp], who was decor --

MS. SCHIRA: Head. He was head of store decor at Marshall Fields. And he was a quite wonderful man who bought the work of many contemporary textile people to be used in this store; not for resale, but to be used as part of the decoration of the store.

MS. MENSING: And you said that he had some connection with Christa Thurman?

MS. SCHIRA: No, he didn't have connection with Christa Thurman. The connection was through Marna Johnson. And he was one of her clients and Christa was one of her clients, but actually their relationship, it wasn't as a

client kind of situation. Marna knew that Christa was a young woman coming into a very important job. She was very kind to Christa and befriended her when Christa was new in Chicago. And then eventually, I think it was several years later, Christa had a quite important show at the museum for Marna's artists. And I can't remember the date of that. Must have been --

MS. MENSING: All contemporary?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. They're like seven or eight contemporary people. Alice Parrot and Terry Ellis, Ulla Mae Bergman, and myself and Janet Kummlein. I can give you that list afterwards of those.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: And I can't remember the name of it.

MS. MENSING: Maybe we can look it up.

MS. SCHIRA: But we had all the galleries. It was quite --

MS. MENSING: All the textile --

MS. SCHIRA: In the textile galleries.

MS. MENSING: In the Art Institute of Chicago.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes.

MS. MENSING: Right?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. So it was a very important show. And then Christa also bought several of mine. And as time has gone by, she now has four or five -- five? -- I think she has five pieces, which is really nice. I'm really pleased about that.

MS. MENSING: Okay. So this was sometime in the '60s, though.

MS. SCHIRA: Right, because when we were talking earlier off tape, we were talking about the Biennale and the international relationship of the artists versus the American. And the first Biennale [6th International Biennale of Tapestry, Lausanne, Switzerland] I was in was 1973.

MS. MENSING: And this show predated that.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

So actually what happened was that we talked for quite a long time and found out that the tape recorder was not taping our conversation, and we both felt that it was a very good conversation. We'd like to reconstruct as much of that as we can, so Cynthia and I have just talked about how we would like to see if I can't prompt her on that line of questioning because many of the questions that came up were not questions that were actually in our list.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: And so I was asking her at this time what was going on in her own life. I asked her if maybe we wanted to move to the question about her involvement with the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts [Deer Isle, Maine], and she said no because that takes place a lot --

MS. SCHIRA: Later.

MS. MENSING: -- a lot later. And so then, I think, Cynthia, you were talking about your career at this time, about working in your studio. I think you talked a little bit about the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award.

MS. SCHIRA: Let's see. Now, going back and trying to place ourselves, I'm trying to think. I had come to Kansas with my husband, he was teaching at the university. So I'm just trying to go back to give us a context. He was teaching at the university, and my role was a faculty wife, which I found stultifying. And the very thought of -- even though at this particular time Betty Friedan had written *The Feminine Mystique* and *Ms. Magazine* was happening.

So what I decided to do was to go back to school and get my MFA, which I did do in two years. And actually, I got

credit for the time I had spent in Aubusson, so I did a 24-hour [sic] master's. So I wasn't taking advantage -- and I think I mentioned this before in our conversation -- I wasn't taking advantage of the university at that point through the schooling, even though I was going to concerts and things with my husband in my other role as a faculty wife. [Laughs.]

At the end of getting my MFA, I applied for -- even though everybody said I couldn't get it, I thought, "Why not?" -- I applied for a Louis Comfort Tiffany grant, and I did get it and then worked for a year. There were no strings attached to the Tiffany grant, so I worked as much as I possibly could for a year, feeling great responsibility for having received this, and ended up with a lot of work. And so that's what took me to Marna Johnson and why I hunted around -- and it was through somebody and somebody that I got the name -- I sent her some slides and then she was interested. And that began the whole thing going back to Bertl.

MS. MENSING: Right.

Another question I had asked you was if you were teaching at that time, and you talked about the nepotism and not teaching.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Right. And so in my head I was thinking, no, I wasn't teaching, but in actuality I was teaching, because I was teaching short-term workshops. I think that there was such an aura of how one thought of oneself at that time.

Is that going? [Referring to the tape.]

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm.

MS. SCHIRA: That you asked me if I was working towards teaching and working towards being more professional, and I said, well, I didn't know. I think it was more a case of not admitting the fact that I really wanted to teach, I really wanted my work to be better, I really wanted it to develop, but because of the role that I was cast in in the Midwest as faculty wife and also what was happening with Betty Friedan, I just couldn't admit it.

MS. MENSING: But you were beginning to be involved in what we would call both the textile and the craft scene at that time.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. And even now I can't think back.

MS. MENSING: But you talked a little bit about the Deliberate Entanglements show in 1966.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: That that was the first time that you really met your contemporaries.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. And now I'm thinking back, when we're talking about it again, that actually there was a woman in Kansas City. She would have these, like, six or seven women to lunch, and we were all textile people in various ways, all local. But I wasn't thinking of it, you know --

MS. MENSING: Was she a guild person?

MS. SCHIRA: No, she was just -- she was a textile person herself and she had a little extra money, and was older than we were.

MS. MENSING: And interested in contemporary textiles.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: In the same sorts of things that you were interested in?

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Right. And all the people there were. So that was another connection that I was having, as well as teaching at the guilds, which I think -- I don't know which tape it's on, but we were talking about the fact that the guilds were much more interested in adding vocabulary to their dictionary of textile techniques more than pushing forward, more than trying other things. They were not particularly experimental.

MS. MENSING: Was Convergence around then? Did you ever go to a Convergence?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. I went to one Convergence, and that was 1974.

MS. MENSING: Which would have been a little later.

MS. SCHIRA: That's right.

MS. SCHIRA: And did you show your work in that 1974 one?

MS. SCHIRA: I can't remember. I did a work, I did some kind of -- there was a reason. And the kids were young, because I went out by myself. I taught a workshop afterwards at Mills College. I met Trude Guermonprez. Talk about somebody interesting.

MS. MENSING: Wow. Yeah.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, that was really, really interesting. And there were several other people. Truthfully, I don't think about all this that much. [Laughs.] That's how I'm dragging up things from 30 years go.

MS. MENSING: And you actually met her? You actually talked --

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, and we talked to her. She was teaching too.

MS. MENSING: And talked to her about her work?

MS. SCHIRA: Well, I can't remember, but we talked. We talked. And I can't remember. And also, I don't know whether I ever even asked her anything intelligent. [Laughs.] You know. I mean, I don't know what I said.

MS. MENSING: But it was important to you to meet her.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, it definitely was. I respected her work so much. She was doing things way ahead of everybody else in weaving. Weaving is my language, and it's still, has always been my language. And it's what I want to talk in, you know? I mean, it just is the most natural thing. And so when I see somebody like that doing something really interesting -- she was printing on her textiles.

MS. MENSING: And she had done a famous piece of the flag waving in the wind with the song lyrics, the one that is often pictured?

MS. SCHIRA: No, I don't think -- yes, that's not the one I'm thinking of. I'm thinking of the one of the mountains, where the twills went along with the painted mountains.

MS. MENSING: Right.

MS. SCHIRA: And then there was one where it was all white. I can't remember what that was.

MS. MENSING: Yes.

MS. SCHIRA: Anyhow, it was very impressive.

So I guess I was influenced by a lot of people in various ways. It was never continuous, somehow, and it just sort of came in. I don't think I always noted that I was being influenced. That might be egotism or something. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: But you began to have connections with people. You met some people, you mentioned, in the "Deliberate Entanglements."

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: You met Lia Cook for the first time.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: In 1966. Did you meet Gerhard Knodel then?

MS. SCHIRA: I'm trying to remember when I met Gery. Gery has always been very influential to me and I've always looked up to him. Actually -- I don't know whether this should be on this thing or not. I used to look up to him so much, and I think he was at -- I'm sure he was at "Deliberate Entanglements." I know he was. I looked up to him so much, I thought he was really tall. And then I grew up and I got older and we got to be good friends, and I realized he's really the size that he is. [Laughs.] It was so funny that that happened. You know. I truly believed that he was really much taller than he was. I did do things later on at Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan]. And of course I led that tour to China, you know, and they were all on that, too.

MS. MENSING: Right. And that was later.

MS. SCHIRA: That was much later.

MS. MENSING: That was much later. That was in the '80s.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, '83, I think.

MS. MENSING: Right. That was right before I came to the School of Art Institute as a graduate student.

MS. SCHIRA: Was it? Yes.

MS. MENSING: So at about this time, then -- well, I asked you the question about do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition or one that is particularly American, and you wanted to talk about, I think, the Biennale?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. The Biennale. We had talked about that. I guess that I want to think about myself as part of the international grouping, but in reality, and especially then, I was part of the American. And we were more of a group and a point of view than I was thinking before we started talking. I think that in actuality, the American work was more innovative, more experimental. Different materials, different techniques than the European; except then you brought up the fact that Magdalena was there and Jagoda Buic and Ritzi, Ritzi --

MS. MENSING: Ritzi and Peter Jacobi.

MS. SCHIRA: Peter Jacobi. And they were my heroes. I mean, their work was so fine. I couldn't even think of myself being anywhere near them. I remember the second -- that might have been the Biennale -- well, I guess maybe it was the second Biennale, one or the other, that Ritzi came over and was asking me questions about my work, and I was really -- it was so important to me to have a conversation with her. And as far as Magdalena Abakanowicz, I never really even spoke with her. I just stood in awe at a distance and watched her arrange the backs of her figures at the Biennale. Just so fantastic.

MS. MENSING: So when you returned, then, after that first Biennale, it must have affected your life. I don't know about your career, but it certainly must have affected --

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, it affected the career enormously.

MS. MENSING: It did?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes.

MS. MENSING: In what ways did it affect your career?

MS. SCHIRA: It opened up -- people asked me to do things and be parts of shows and everything. I mean, it was a real card to ask you to be part of it all.

I think we need to stop this just for a minute.

MS. MENSING: Okay. [Tape paused.]

MS. SCHIRA: [In progress when tape begins] -- thing. It was so fantastic talking to her.

But you have to ask the next question.

MS. MENSING: Well, when we turned it off --

MS. SCHIRA: Wait a minute now. Is it going now?

MS. MENSING: Yeah.

[When we turned it off, Cynthia went and picked up her resume because she was talking about trying to sort out the Biennale, exactly which one it was, and we established that she was in the sixth Biennale, in 1973, which was the first one, and then the eighth Biennale in 1977.]

But also, just having your résumé, I think you wanted to bring up some other shows that you had forgotten, like "Objects: USA."

MS. SCHIRA: "Objects: USA" was probably the most important thing I was in. And that was Paul Smith and, I think, Lee Nordness going around the country picking various people. I think they saw my work at Marna Johnson's in Chicago and asked me to be part of it. And then I was in that book as well as in the show in New York. And that made -- you know, that opened doors. Each one of these shows, the really big, important shows at that time opened doors for the people who were in them and started to make their career. And probably around this time when you said you might have heard my name, it might have been from the Biennale or from

the "Objects: USA."

MS. MENSING: "Objects: USA" was 1970?

MS. SCHIRA: No, '69.

MS. MENSING: '69, okay. Do you remember what your piece was in that show?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I certainly do because it was a two-sided piece and it was jute. One panel I had dyed the jute -- it was white jute that I dyed black, and the other panel was black jute that I had discharged to white, I had taken the dye out of. And they were next to each other with a wooden board top and bottom so that you could see through. They weren't woven. They were vertical. They were just weft twined a little bit, so they were very open. They photographed it in the book backwards. So it was forever in the *Objects: USA* book with the back side forward. And then I saw it. It was given to some museum -- I don't know which one, I don't know, some museum -- later, and I saw it. It was in a show somewhere. And it had, of course, being jute, disintegrated, practically. It was still together, but it had almost no color in it.

MS. MENSING: Yes.

MS. SCHIRA: Such is life.

MS. MENSING: Such is life.

MS. SCHIRA: [Laughs.] It was funny.

MS. MENSING: Okay. So we'll go back to this question. Do you find that American fiber -- that is, from the United States -- is a cohesive field? Is it moving? Or at this time -- we'll place it in this context -- was it moving in a particular direction? And if so, what direction would you say that is?

MS. SCHIRA: I think at that particular time it was cohesive in the fact of the excitement and the direction of just exploring anything and everything, of trying all the things that you could do, and using materials -- and I didn't bring that up before -- using materials that nobody ever used before; you know, feathers and metal. And I mean, a lot of it was really awful as far as what the result was, but we all thought we were fantastic. We were just so excited about it. And it sounds silly at this point to say that, but then it was something that was going through the community. And everybody was interested in the magazines and seeing what was happening.

MS. MENSING: Now, what magazines would those be?

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, those were Fiber -- what is it? -- *Fiber Arts* when it was in the newspaper phase.

MS. MENSING: Still was in the Albuquerque, New Mexico --

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I think. I don't know where -- I guess it was.

MS. MENSING: -- in the early days.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. And then there was *Craft Horizons*, which is quite different from *American Craft* now. *Craft Horizons* had lots of articles in it that were thought-provoking. It wasn't so much a coffee table magazine.

MS. MENSING: Do you remember any of the writers or any of the artists that perhaps you were introduced to through your reading?

MS. SCHIRA: I think Dominic Di Mare, that I saw his work first, when he was doing the many-layered things all those years go. And I'm not thinking -- and I should be able to think of it more readily than I am now. And the writers. Well, actually Rose Slivka was very good at the time, I thought.

MS. MENSING: Yes.

MS. SCHIRA: And Betty Parks.

MS. MENSING: Yes. Right.

MS. SCHIRA: And I'm trying to think of who else. Can you think of anybody?

MS. MENSING: Well, I was wondering if you would mention Rose Slivka because she always is, and has been so important to so many artists who were coming of age at that particular time.

MS. SCHIRA: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. MENSING: And, of course, Betty Parks. Were you ever interviewed by Betty Parks?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I was. She did an article -- somewhere. Let me look at the thing again. Maybe I could even find it. [Looking through materials.] She did an article for *American Craft*, and it was the cover, too, as a matter of fact. Let's see, which way are we going? Backwards. Oh, here it is. Oh, my goodness, it was later, 1985. "Poetic Evocations, the Woven Cloth of Cynthia Schira," by Betty Parks.

MS. MENSING: By that time it was *American Craft*.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, it was, *American Craft* in '85. Yeah. And then she died a couple of years --

MS. MENSING: Very shortly after that, yes.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Right. Cancer, of course.

MS. MENSING: One of the questions comes up later about influential writers, or writers who were influential to you.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, it does.

MS. MENSING: And I'm wondering what it was about her style, her interviewing style or how she wrote or, you know, what --

MS. SCHIRA: To me, she was very down to earth, and that she wasn't going to write things with many, many adjectives and -- I can't think of how to say it politely -- a lot of stuff that was just made up. She really wanted to find out what you were like, and then when she wrote, it was very, very direct, I thought. I thought she wrote well.

MS. MENSING: But not interpreted; more you felt that it was --

MS. SCHIRA: There was some interpretation, but it was closer, I think, to what I was actually doing rather than somebody writing an article and making up what you were doing.

MS. MENSING: So would you say that you actually gained insights into your own artistry?

MS. SCHIRA: Work at that time?

MS. MENSING: -- or your own work through reading what a good writer critic said about it?

MS. SCHIRA: I think that's happened more since. I don't think it happened as much then. There was an article just recently in *American Craft* [Vol. 59 No. 4, August/September 1999 p. 80] that was a review of a show I had a couple years ago at the Sherry Leedy Gallery [Kansas City, Kansas]. And I can't remember his name, but I could look that up [Glen R. Brown]. I thought that what he wrote was very helpful to me. And I think it can be very helpful. I truly feel that a lot of craft writing is very superficial and it's very pushing the person forward or pushing the show forward rather than actually trying to think about it and critique it -- in a positive way. I mean, critiquing does not mean negative, which it seems sometimes that people think.

MS. MENSING: Well, how would you characterize, then, shifts in critical writing in the craft field from those early days of the '70s?

MS. SCHIRA: I thought there was more critical writing at that time and more trying to figure it out. I'm feeling very lacking in words at this point. I think that so many of the magazines now, like our culture in general, have become much more on the surface and have become like lovely magazines that you could possibly sell things from or something of that sort. So the advertisements and the color pictures seem more important than what's actually written in the books. If you look back at *Craft Horizons*, a lot of it was black and white, and there were pages of writing.

MS. MENSING: There weren't so many advertisements from galleries.

MS. SCHIRA: No. No. And certainly not this wham-bang of the bright, bright colors and all that kind of thing. So that I think a lot of the magazines have become coffee table magazines in a cloaked way.

MS. MENSING: Would you say that this just pertains to craft magazines, or do you think that it's also true of art magazines?

MS. SCHIRA: I think it's true of our whole culture, truly. I haven't read the art magazines that much. I stopped reading *Art in America*, mainly because I didn't have time to do all that. And the one magazine that I kept

reading, and just stopped, was *New Art Examiner*, because that was interesting. And some of those things. I like Kathryn Hixon and some of the writers in that I found --

MS. MENSING: Why have you stopped it now?

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, because I --

MS. MENSING: Do you think the magazine has changed?

MS. SCHIRA: Not that much, actually. Because I was having so much trouble keeping up with everything, and I just stopped it when we moved up here, and I don't know whether I will restart it.

MS. MENSING: Well, the reason I ask that is that I think at one time, the *New Art Examiner* was one of the few mainstream publications that actually paid attention to craft.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, that's true. Absolutely. Do you think it still does?

MS. MENSING: No. I think occasionally they'll have an issue in which they --

MS. SCHIRA: So the [ghettoizing ?] --

MS. MENSING: Well, they pay attention to it, but not in a regular way, the way that they did. And it seemed like they covered many things. And now I can't remember the name of the first editor, who later went to Washington, who was very instrumental, I think, in covering a lot of these shows that you were in. So it was a high-profile publication, I think, at one time.

MS. SCHIRA: Well, also as well as just covering crafts, I thought that many of the articles were very interesting, and apropos to anybody involved in the visual arts.

MS. MENSING: Well, maybe we could talk about, since we're on publications, the two magazines that still do relate to textiles, *Fiber Arts Magazine* and *Surface Design Journal*. Maybe you'd like to talk a little bit about how they've changed.

MS. SCHIRA: I think they've changed, too, in a sense. I actually think that *Fiber Arts* has grown up and had more interesting articles in it. And some of the articles, I think, actually were yours that I thought were interesting. *Surface Design* also has some interesting articles sometimes, and I find that I read it quite through. I like *Textileforum*, the German magazine, a lot. I read that a lot, for the information more than it is for a point of view, but I really enjoy that. I don't know, maybe I'm just getting to be a curmudgeon. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: Maybe. But maybe things have changed, too.

MS. SCHIRA: Well, I think that they have, in a sense. It seems to me that so much of it seems sort of easy and top-layer things rather than really trying to figure something out. And I do think it has to do with our culture. I think it has to do with our sort of spectator, TV culture, where people are wanting things fed to them in a way that, before, the process of learning and questioning was as exciting as getting to the end; and now it seems always that the emphasis is on the end. And I found that true in my teaching, as well, and one of the reasons I'm not sad to stop teaching.

MS. MENSING: Because you feel the students have changed?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. I feel the students have changed. I feel that they aren't getting the wonderful excitement of reading and working their projects through. And it might just be the university situation. It might not be true in other places as much. But it used to be, you know -- well, see, that does really sound old, but it used to be people would really work and question and sit together and talk about issues, and that just hadn't seemed to be happening.

MS. MENSING: An issue, not just necessarily the critique where you look at each person's work.

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, yes. No, no, no.

MS. MENSING: You talk about issues.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. And it might not even be an issue of a textile concern. It might be an issue of global concern.

MS. MENSING: Yes.

MS. SCHIRA: But they would really care.

[Checking the tape remaining.]

MS. MENSING: It's okay. We're still okay. We have a little more time.

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: I would like to ask you this question. And maybe I'll just ask you this question, and then we'll stop the tapes.

Who are the artists that you believe to be instrumental in the development of fiber in the United States today? And I think I will -- originally I wanted to go back 40 years, but we talked a little bit about that when you talked about Lenore Tawney. So maybe you'd talk about it historically, and then more recently. All right? So let's see here. [Checking the tape.]

MS. SCHIRA: Is there enough time?

MS. MENSING: There's enough time, yeah.

MS. SCHIRA: Well, I had written down some of the things, looking at this question before, and as you said, it was [Claire] Zeisler and [Leonore] Tawney and [Sheila] Hicks were the main people 40 years ago, and then maybe 20 -- maybe almost 30 now, it would have been Sherri Smith and Gerhardt Knodel and Dominic Di Mare. And there were others, I'm sure, but I'm not being able to think of them.

MS. MENSING: Well, you mentioned --

MS. SCHIRA: Who?

MS. MENSING: -- Barbara Shawcroft --

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, Barbara Shawcroft was important.

MS. MENSING: -- at one time, and Lia --

MS. SCHIRA: And Lia Cook. And I think she's very important now, as well. And I don't think just because you were 30 years ago, it means that you have to drop off now. I think Lia's very important and influential at this point, as well as Anne Wilson and -- I'm drawing a blank, but mainly that's just my own memory, because there are other people, I think. Can you name me some names and I can say yes or no?

MS. MENSING: Oh, Joan Livingstone.

MS. SCHIRA: I think she's more important in the field of art in general than she is in the textile field per se, even though she certainly came -- you know, I think I would put her back to the 20 years when she was doing many more fiber things.

MS. MENSING: What about Jane Lackey?

MS. SCHIRA: Um.

MS. MENSING: Another one that's gravitated, has had more --

MS. SCHIRA: Yeah, I would put her back --

MS. MENSING: -- in the art world.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. I would put her back into the 20, 30 years ago, 20 years ago.

MS. MENSING: Uh-huh, more recently.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, because she did incredible woven stuff.

MS. MENSING: And she stopped being a weaver.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. And Emily DuBois, I guess, is a part of today.

MS. MENSING: Who has continued as a weaver.

MS. SCHIRA: Weaver, right.

MS. MENSING: But now Anne Wilson you mentioned, and she is somebody who started her career as a weaver and is no longer a weaver.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: But you still think of her as an important textile artist.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I think that because she's shown that you don't have to stay where you were. She's shown that you could continue and grow.

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B.]

MS. MENSING: [In progress] -- American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is our second session, first tape.

Yesterday afternoon, Cynthia, we concluded and you were talking about your views on the important fiber artists, both in more recent times and also looking back as far as 40 years. And when we concluded, you mentioned a couple of other people that we thought it would be nice if you added to the record this morning. And you want to go ahead and talk a little bit about Olga and Kay?

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Olga DeAmaral was very important, an artist from Bogota, Colombia. And she was very influential for all of us, as was Kay Sekimachi. They did very, very different kinds of works. Olga's work was very large, very simple, in a sense, dependent on texture and repetitive qualities. And Kay's work was quiet and technically sophisticated, many layers working together, and very spiritual.

MS. MENSING: And the fact that you are a weaver --

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, they were both weavers, too, so they were very important to me.

MS. MENSING: -- and they were both weavers, and so this would have been especially important to you.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: Are there any instances that you can think of in terms of when you actually saw a work? We talked a little bit again yesterday about the different experience of going to the Biennale and actually seeing the work.

MS. SCHIRA: Mm-hm.

MS. MENSING: And I'm wondering if you can or want to recollect when you actually saw their work and the impact it might have had on you, or was it through publications?

MS. SCHIRA: Well, with Olga's work, it was really interesting because I was living in Lawrence, Kansas, and I went to Kansas City to buy something at a department store and ended up downstairs. And there was a very small exhibit. I don't know the date, but it was probably early '70s. And here was this exhibit of this really quite incredible work, woven work, but with many, many crossed warps, something I'd never seen before. It was Olga's work, her very, very beginning work. Then I knew the name, so I began watching her work.

It was very influential at the time because the majority of work that was being done was very conservative and very much within a realm of -- within the parameters of what was accepted. Her work was quite different and it opened up possibilities. So it was just incredible to see. I think that I didn't see Kay Sekimachi's work in the flesh until much, much later. I saw it mainly in magazines.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

I wonder if you would discuss your involvement with the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts.

MS. SCHIRA: That came, actually, later in my life, the last, oh, 15, 20 years. I've taught there. I taught there about four times. I started in 1976 teaching a session. Haystack is a summer school. It's now in its 50th year. And it exists in Deer Isle, Maine. They're short sessions, two and three-week sessions, a couple of one-week sessions. It's a wonderful, wonderful place, I have to say that, because there's a chance to connect with people in your media and other people in other media. It's small enough that there is a real interaction among everybody.

Then because of the teaching, I came onto the board, and I was on the board for nine years and I was chair for three years of the board. The connections that I have made there, with the people and with ideas and with media and with the landscape, were incredibly important to me.

MS. MENSING: Okay. Thank you. You are no longer on the board; is that correct?

MS. SCHIRA: No, I'm no longer on the board. I taught there last summer and had a wonderful time teaching a beginning class. That was incredible. The lovely part about Haystack and some of these summer programs is that you have people who really want to be there and they're really, really interested, and they're perfectly willing to work 24 hours a day. So that you have an intensity that you don't have anymore in a university much of the time.

MS. MENSING: And do you find it is different in terms of what happens afterwards? In other words --

MS. SCHIRA: How do you mean?

MS. MENSING: Well, do you keep up with people that you meet at Haystack the way that often happens with former students? Is there a difference in that?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, there is a difference. I think I keep up with them less because there's something about the whole experience having this beginning and end and intensity during the time that you could never keep up in real life. So I bump into them, but it's not the same kind of caring you have for your students that you've spent a length of time with.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

Now we're going to go into some more intellectual and conceptual issues that we began to explore a little bit yesterday. And I'm wondering if you would talk about how you feel that fiber fits into the history of craft. Quite a difficult question. And for instance, perhaps what is the importance of the object in fiber?

MS. SCHIRA: I think fiber has a hard time fitting into the overall definition of craft. And I think that's shown in many of the shows and the marketing and the whole thing. It fits beautifully, of course, into the history of textiles, but somehow, in my mind I see it differently. Although it's a very three-dimensional thing -- the weaving part, not printing, necessarily -- the concept of object seems different. It seems quite different to me. It seems to spill over into some of the issues of painting the more illusionary idea of the image and the illusion that happens, even the illusion with the physicality of the surface.

It just -- when I think about metal and glass and wood, all those, their objectness is paramount, and it doesn't seem to be always paramount with fiber art. If you're dealing with baskets, then it does, but then there's this whole realm of the two-dimensional pieces that hang on the wall and do play with this illusionary quality, even with their physicality. So it's a little bit -- you know, it seems to be slipping on the side to me.

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm. It's quite different than other mediums.

MS. SCHIRA: It is, I think. Yes, I feel it is. I don't know whether other people do.

MS. MENSING: And do you feel that this is reflected sometimes in exhibitions that try to include many areas of craft into one exhibition?

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Yes.

MS. MENSING: Fiber is sort of the odd person out?

MS. SCHIRA: Right. But they're good for covering the walls.

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm. Well, then let's talk about whether or not the function of objects plays a part in the meaning in your work.

MS. SCHIRA: In my own personal work?

MS. MENSING: In your own personal work.

MS. SCHIRA: Not really. Not really. I've been married all these 43 years, the majority of our friends, especially when we were teaching, were painters, and my husband is a painter. The conversations have had much more to do with painting and those concerns than the object making. I think that when I go to make an object, I don't actually know what to do. So that I don't think that the objectness --

MS. MENSING: You've never really done three-dimensional work?

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, I did some three-dimensional work -- well, I did do -- I forgot -- I did do all the aluminum pieces that were at least reliefs that were in the first Biennale in '73. But actually they were reliefs. They were always

having the wall as support. And I really never have made anything totally free-standing.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

Does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art?

MS. SCHIRA: No.

MS. MENSING: Okay. [Laughs.]

MS. SCHIRA: [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: Well, in what --

MS. SCHIRA: Well, I suppose -- [laughs] -- no.

MS. MENSING: Well, then I'm going to go to this one, then.

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: Where do you get the ideas for your work?

MS. SCHIRA: Okay. So then I was going to fix that sentence a little bit. It depends on your definition of religion and spirituality. Many of the ideas for my work over time have had to do with the idea of a sense of place. I think that you can say that that has something to do with spirituality or religion in the fact of the importance of the human being's needs -- there's a gift in feeling a place, that you belong somewhere, or that everyone must belong somewhere in some kind of a way.

This is all fuzzy and hard for me to talk about. But I think that first answer of "No" needed to be qualified.

So my ideas first came from this idea of expressing the sense of place, and I include in that the family, the children, the physical-geographical area. Now I'm really interested as well in this whole idea of developing the structure. As time went on in my work, I went from the idea of place, which was more graphic and visual, to trying to integrate that visual graphic with the structure within the weaving and to make the two things totally indivisible. So that the structure of the weaving affected the visual. So that you couldn't take them apart. So if you took an image that I used it would change without being expressed in the structure of weaving.

Is that making sense to you? You're looking confused.

MS. MENSING: It makes sense, but it's a very difficult concept to follow. And I think it --

MS. SCHIRA: Well, the idea was that the two things, the visual, the composition --

MS. MENSING: Meaning the pictorial?

MS. SCHIRA: The pictorial. That's a better word. The pictorial aspects of what I was doing would be wedded so tightly together with the structure of the actual weaving that those weaves and that structure would affect the look of the pictorial images.

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm.

MS. SCHIRA: That's better.

MS. MENSING: And something was being achieved here through that structure that could not be achieved, say, on a print.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Right. So that if you took those pictorial images and did them in another medium, they would change.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: So I mean, looking at the wall here, what I print out on the wall looks incredibly different than these big pieces that are woven. And I believe -- I hope -- I try to make those weaves incredibly important in the overall visual looking at the piece.

MS. MENSING: Maybe we could stop for a minute and talk about this because it is something quite unique, specific to your work.

MS. SCHIRA: And it has been over time.

MS. MENSING: It always has been. And it's one of the reasons, I think, that you're one of a few really important weavers working in American craft today. And it's a tough one to talk about, but maybe you could talk about how you effect that change or what's involved in this wrestling around with the structure to make it so important where we're seeing this thing happening three-dimensionally through color as well as design to achieve the pictorial that you're trying to do.

MS. SCHIRA: [Pause.] I guess I -- it's a hard question. It's my language. These structures are very much in my head, and the possibility of the structures. I really understand them and I understand what they can do, to a certain extent. So when I'm thinking, when I'm thinking of an image or a form and it being in conjunction with something else, then I will think of -- if I were writing a book, I would think of a word or an adjective that would describe that and amplify that form and make it more important. So what I'm trying to do is use a structure that I might know, or discover one -- I do a lot of sampling, a lot of trying and playing around to get what I want -- to make that relationship between maybe the background and a form or two forms more important. I'm trying to create -- which I'm not very successful a lot of the time -- a tension between the two or an ease between the two.

So I'm thinking the whole time when I'm making the thing, and what is really important and what is really fascinating to me is the potential of having this structure be a very, very strong part, the structure and the material, a strong part of the overall piece.

MS. MENSING: Okay. I think that, certainly not to contradict you here, but to expand on the spirituality aspect, just in talking off the taping here with you for a couple of days, walking in the landscape, it's so apparent that -- you talk a little bit about sense of place, but I'd love to hear you amplify it and maybe talk a little bit more again about those early years. I go back to when I first saw your work, again the tape weavings, and feeling that sense of place and Kansas. But now, living here all year round, you have just been so effusive about how important this landscape is to you. Landscape's always been really important to you. And I think it infuses your work.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. I don't like the word "landscape" because then I always think of this painting on the wall and there you are.

MS. MENSING: I'm thinking of landscape in a larger sense.

MS. SCHIRA: I know you are, I know you are, but I want to bring up this whole idea of place. I mean, it makes you feel full. To me it's very important where I am, and it was one of the things that I had problems with in Kansas. It was fine when I was driving from one town to another, but when I was in the town where we lived, I mean, you had no sense of it. I had a sense of just a town. And if you went down the street, it was the street with McDonald's and Blockbusters and all that. It was an Anywhere street. There is a lot of the area of the towns -- and I think it's true all over the country now -- where they're Anywhere places. And you wouldn't know, going down that road, where you were.

But there are places in the world where it's just really special. And I think that over time, when we lived in the West Indies for a while and India and various places like that, and now especially here, place is just incredibly important; and not so much for my work, but for myself, for loving it; for getting up in the morning and going down and getting the newspaper and feeling fine because you see these things, and I see, even when I go up to get the car, the woods behind us, give pleasure.

I'm not explaining it well, but I can't. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: But it does go back, would you say, to where the ideas come from for you?

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, definitely, yes, but not specifically. I mean, the ideas are not -- I mean, I don't see a tree and want to make a tree.

MS. MENSING: No.

MS. SCHIRA: And I never tried to make pictures of the land or place. I tried to give much more a feeling of place.

MS. MENSING: Have your sources of inspiration changed over the years?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. I think more recently and since I've been involved in the technology, that I'm even going deeper into the structure. And I've done some pieces, which you saw last year, I guess, where I was really mainly playing with the idea of structure and doing away with a complexity of image. Remember those eight squares or whatever they were?

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm. But you have also borrowed from textile imagery --

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. Right. Right.

MS. MENSING: -- that's been important at some times in your life.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. And I did a whole series. And this was probably the most specific set of ideas I had, of the series called *Drawing on Tradition*. In those, I was working with the traditional textile images that I would find throughout history and the traditional fine art gestural painting, trying to wed those two. And this would not have been possible without working with the computer and the jacquard because I wouldn't have been able to translate these and put these together without the computer.

MS. MENSING: You mean the photographic capabilities.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: We're going to talk quite a bit about technology because it is very important to your work, but first there's a couple more things I'd like to finish up with here.

MS. SCHIRA: Sure.

MS. MENSING: I'd like to know if gender issues are important in your work. And can you speak about your work in relation to your development as a woman artist? Is it important to you --

MS. SCHIRA: Okay. In a sense, it's two different questions.

MS. MENSING: Right. So let's do the first one.

MS. SCHIRA: I've never used gender consciously. I've never tried to make a statement about gender. But I realize now looking back, when I was doing a lot of the aluminum pieces in the '70s, I was doing a lot of -- and this was when I was being very influenced by *Ms. Magazine* and trying to come out of the so-called "closet" of hiding my gender as a woman. That I realize now looking back at them that many of them had very sexual visual overtones. There were lots of long forms that were very penis-like, and there was lots of fringe that certainly could be reinterpreted as pubic hair. I had at that time people ask me about that, and I said, "Of course not. Of course not." But now, of course, I realize that, it was subconsciously there.

MS. MENSING: Okay. And it was certainly a sign of the times.

MS. SCHIRA: It definitely was. It definitely was. And the "of course not" was also a sign of the times, especially if you were a New Englander. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: Yes. Depending on your lifestyle.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, really. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: Can you speak about your work in relation to your development as a woman artist?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I can, because in the beginning I was trying -- this is until that period, maybe -- that I was trying to emulate the men. I was trying to emulate what I -- this was the abstract expressionist time, the macho time, the Mark Rothko, the Jackson Pollock, when I was in --

MS. MENSING: And in craft, Peter Voukos.

MS. SCHIRA: And Peter Voukos and Rudy Autio and all those people, and they seemed, very macho and strong, and I wanted my work to be strong like that. And I was never satisfied with it in that sense. It wasn't until I started realizing -- I think I had been at Snowbird or somewhere -- that my strength was in seeing the land and loving it and loving my children and being where I was and accepting the fact that I was as I was. When I started working from what I really loved, from the land, then my work became stronger because it was more honest. Before, I was trying to -- it wasn't a question of copying, but it was a question of trying to be something I wasn't.

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm.

MS. SCHIRA: So it has a lot to do with my being a woman.

MS. MENSING: And personally acknowledging this, to yourself, at least.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. It didn't change until I personally acknowledged this and was proud of it. And it was fine to be a woman, which I think that when I was growing up and everything, it was okay to be only, you know, part of a thing. That a woman wasn't valuable enough by herself.

MS. MENSING: Well, and part of it certainly was that we were fortunate enough to live in a time when things changed.

MS. SCHIRA: Changed. Absolutely.

MS. MENSING: And then the world came around to acknowledging that yes, this is valuable.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Yes.

MS. MENSING: Is race or ethnicity important in your work?

MS. SCHIRA: No. Too bad. I've always felt that I -- I mean by --

MS. MENSING: Well, I've got to push this --

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, wait a minute. I wanted to say something first, is that I was very, very active in CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] and in many of the other things, did a lot of standing in lines and marching and during the whole thing with the movement to try to get the black people to have -- I'm trying to think of the word -- during the civil rights, during the civil rights. I always felt that I could do a lot more with civil rights to help by doing this kind of thing, by being part of the telephone chain and the marching and writing and all that kind of thing than doing it in my work. I never would think my work would be of any use that way. And just being a Caucasian, middle-class Caucasian, it didn't seem that I had a point of view to make in my work.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

We're going to go to the part about technology now --

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: -- because I think that this is so important in your work. We seem to be fine. [Referring to tape remaining.] We have a few more minutes left.

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: I hate to start with this huge, broad one, but then maybe we'll break it down.

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: And that is, what impact has technology had on your work?

MS. SCHIRA: Okay. If you're a weaver, you are using technology right from the very beginning. Every loom is a technological thing. I mean, you are not just working with your hands, like making a clay pot with your hands or something. You are always using some kind of technology. So now that I'm using a computer and a jacquard loom, which are quite sophisticated kinds of technology, it's simply an extension of the technology that I have always used, always used.

The essence of a jacquard loom, is still interlacing the vertical and the horizontal. When you use a hand loom or foot-powered loom, you're working with groups of threads in the harnesses, and so that you are restricted to some extent as far as the images that you can make. The jacquard loom also is interlacing the vertical and the horizontal, but instead of working with groups of verticals, you're working with each individual thread. So it gives you more options, but it also makes it necessary to do more preparations. You have to pre-think much more. It's less flexible, in one sense.

MS. MENSING: But then that's an important part of weaving for you always. I mean, it seems you didn't just warp the loom and sit down and just --

MS. SCHIRA: No, I've always had a small overall cartoon or composition. I've always also -- even way back with the tapes -- given myself a palette both of structures and materials and then allowed myself to pull more spontaneously from those. But I've always started with this palette. So that I'm not just taking any structure, but I have predetermined maybe 20 structures and predetermined a set of colors or tapes, hung them up, so that I would have a palette like a painter of those things, and then used those in conjunction with the composition that I've determined. And then as I'm working in the process, if it starts to change, if because of the technological things a form begins to change, then I go with the form as it changes.

Still going? [Referring to tape.]

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm. So --

MS. SCHIRA: Wait a minute. Let's stop.

[Tape paused.]

MS. MENSING: Would you say that your interest in the jacquard, learning that technology, stems mainly from your desire to increase your vocabulary of weave structures and how you can use that integrated with your developing ideas of the pictorial and design?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. Yes. So it's both the weave structures -- I mean, actually the weave structures are the same that you might use on your foot-powered loom, but they can be more complex. But they have the same basis.

MS. MENSING: Right. But there are more possibilities.

MS. SCHIRA: There are more possibilities. And there are more possibilities being able to combine the composition along with structures, to push that idea of the images being mitigated by the structures.

MS. MENSING: Rather than the use of photographic imaging.

MS. SCHIRA: I do not want to use photographic imaging per se because that's used in every single jacquard throughout history. I mean, before it being a jacquard, when it was a draw loom, everybody used photographs. So somehow, I will be using some kind of photographs in scanning in, but I don't want it to depend totally on the fact that here we have a woven photograph, because that seems very banal to me.

MS. MENSING: And something that has set your work apart from --

MS. SCHIRA: Possibly.

MS. MENSING: -- the way others are interested in this.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. No, I think that's possibly so.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

You have just written -- or interviewed Garth Fletcher for *American Craft* magazine, a person who developed the JacqCAD [Computer Aided Design for Textiles] system.

MS. SCHIRA: Mm-hm.

MS. MENSING: And we talked a little bit about this ourselves off tape. And I wanted to bring up or have you speak about your own definition of collaboration, and then whether or not collaboration has been important in your work in the past, is important now.

MS. SCHIRA: I've always thought of the definition of the word collaboration as two people doing things equally. So I'm not sure --

MS. MENSING: Stop.

MS. SCHIRA: Stop. Okay.

[TAPE CHANGE. BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A.]

MS. MENSING: This is Margo Mensing recording Cynthia Schira at the artist's home and studio in Westport, New York; session two, July 26th, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Cynthia, I believe we were talking about collaboration and cooperation.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. My definition of collaboration has always been each person doing something equally. Actually, I think there are many different kinds of collaboration. Until I started working with the jacquard loom and the CAD [Computer Aided Design] program, I think mainly I worked by myself and not in collaboration with anybody. In order to use the CAD program on the computer -- well, I had to learn to use the computer first, and then to use the CAD program on the computer -- I needed enormous amounts of help from the developer of that program, Garth Fletcher.

And as well as his helping me with the program in particular and his book that teaches you how to do it, my conversations with him and the thoughts that he provoked through those conversations I think is, was, is truly a collaboration even though he has nothing to do with the designs or the visual expressions that I use. But I couldn't do what I'm doing now without his help and without his program, JacqCAD.

When I was in Santa Fe getting the Gold Medal, I had to do an acceptance speech. And I pointed out that my husband has been the most helpful and the most I have collaborated with. And I want to go back to that in a minute. But also I pointed out Dick, my husband, and Garth Fletcher and Jack Lenor Larsen, who had been incredibly helpful to me in the beginning as far as opening up; not as a collaborator, but just helpful in opening up possibilities, sending me these silly notes from various places in the world, saying, "Are you interested in being in this, are you interested in being in that?"

Going back to Dick and collaboration, my husband has influenced me enormously over the 40 years that we've been married. He's spent a lot of time critiquing my work and helping me understand the basis of things, simple things. They're not simple, but I mean basic things like field/ground relationships, relationships of forms, very much in the modernist point of view. Most recently, in this group of works called *Drawing on Tradition*, I have used his drawings for the gestural drawings when I've been combining the textile images with the gestural drawings. So I've used those directly.

Some of the forms, a lot of the forms that I use in my work are very much influenced by him. So I suppose that's the greatest collaboration, even though, he's not specifically doing it, but the critiques. And then having him there and seeing his work. But is that a collaboration? Is that cooperation? Is that just simply influence? Who knows?

MS. MENSING: Okay.

What is your working environment? If you would describe your studio space.

MS. SCHIRA: My studio space is and has always been attached to the house. In the beginning, when I was in Lawrence, Kansas, it was the back of a garage area right on the property, and that was because I had young children and I wanted to be home when they came home from school. Up here, it's the back part, upstairs back part of our house, again. I guess the thing I want to say is that it has never been separate, that all my studio work and all my art work has been totally integrated with my life. And I've never been able to, nor wanted to, go to a separate studio.

Right now I have a beautiful studio that's maybe 20 by 20 that looks out on the woods behind my house, that has a skylight that looks at the sky, that has a crazy drunken chimney right in the middle of it. And the washer and dryer, which I do use for my work but I also use for the family wash, is right in the studio. And so it's all combined.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

If you would describe your working process and how it has changed over time.

MS. SCHIRA: I'm not exactly sure what you mean by that, my working process.

MS. MENSING: Well, I'll rephrase it just in my own words, then, and I guess your cycle, your working cycle, either daily, weekly, that sort of thing.

MS. SCHIRA: I think my working cycle is that I'm very obsessive and I'm very even. So I work continuously. And I spend ridiculous amounts of time trying to get what I want, especially now that I'm working on the computer. Other people will do a lot of designs -- let's just talk about now. A lot of people will do a lot of designs and simply pick one, so that they're editing. And I'll spend days trying to get it to where I want it to be and many, many pieces trying to do that. I don't know why it has to be so long for me. And then the weaving. So that it's just so incredibly regular. Very, very boring. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: So do you work on the computer every day?

MS. SCHIRA: It's not always regular -- as to what the specific activity is, but it is regular in that I am always doing my work..

MS. MENSING: Well, another thing I guess I'm interested in is, is this the computer here that you work on, or is this a computer that's only hooked up to the loom?

MS. SCHIRA: This computer is hooked up to the loom and that computer is hooked up to the loom. Those are specifically hooked up to run those looms. The computer I do the designing on is in the front room.

MS. MENSING: Okay. So when you're in the design mode, do you specifically work in designing all the time, and then when you're not in the studio, you go somewhere else? Or do you design and then weave on something else in the afternoon?

MS. SCHIRA: No. No. No, I'm much more together. It's sort of like our granddaughter, who eats all the potatoes

first, then all the beans and then all the meat. [Laughs.] But I have to get the design. And it's hard. That's the hardest part, and not pleasant, necessarily. I mean, it can be pleasant momentarily, then you come back to it and you see that it isn't as good as you want it to be.

Sometimes I'll do some weaving at the same time, you know, like, in the afternoon. That seems really sensible to me, but I usually don't work in that way.

MS. MENSING: And was this true in the past, before you were using JacqCAD but you were designing? Would you spend all this time in the design process?

MS. SCHIRA: No. No. No. I spent much less time designing. The weaving was so slow before. You know, those big pieces I did before, I was lucky if I wove an inch an hour. And then there was a lot of time when I was painting the warps where they had to batch for 24 hours, so there was a lot of downtime as far as working on the weaving process. And then I would be doing other things as far as developing other designs and also doing office work. So, you know, so it's not always even. I guess the main thing in my weaving process, or in my working process is that I tend to do something completely before I go to the next thing.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

Do you work with, or have you ever worked with studio assistants?

MS. SCHIRA: A long time ago I had studio assistants. I had Bethanne Knudson for three months, and I had Bhakti Ziek for two months or three months. But in general, I don't. And they helped at the time. What they were doing was, labeling slides and doing office stuff, and then Bethanne helped me warp the loom, dress the loom.

MS. MENSING: But not actually weaving?

MS. SCHIRA: No, they never wove for me. Never anybody.

MS. MENSING: Say, for instance, somebody like Helena Hernmarck.

MS. SCHIRA: No, never in that sense.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: So they never did anything like that.

MS. MENSING: We spoke a little bit on one of the earlier tapes about in your first days as being recognized as an artist, after you got the Louis Comfort Tiffany, and your relationship with Marna Johnson, but that was only the very beginning of your career. And perhaps we could go back now and talk about dealers and your relationship with the people who have marketed your work from that time to the present.

MS. SCHIRA: I've always worked with only one set of or one individual dealer at a time. I've worked generally with them for long lengths of time and I've made a close relationship with them so it's become friendship, dealer, the whole business. The most important people to me were Hadler Rodriguez [Hadler Rodriguez Galleries, New York and Houston], and they started in, I think it was, '76, '77, around there, maybe earlier. But I was with them for about seven years. They had a gallery in New York City on 20th Street, and they also had a gallery in Texas. They introduced me to lots of people. They showed so many people in New York at the time. They showed Claire Zeisler and Betty Woodman and -- who is the one who just died that was 100 [105], the ceramicist?

MS. MENSING: Beatrice Wood?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, Beatrice Wood. And all sorts of people. They were really wonderful and they were really involved in trying to do something good with the work. I was just incredibly fond of them. And they died. They both died, and the four people who worked with them died. So they all were gone.

MS. MENSING: How did you come to be involved with them first?

MS. SCHIRA: I don't know how that started. I don't know how it happened.

MS. MENSING: Was that through Jack Lenor Larsen, by chance?

MS. SCHIRA: Could have been. Yes, it probably was. It probably was. Jack said, "There's these young guys in New York starting a gallery; are you interested?" They worked a lot with Lenore Tawney, too, and they did the little postcard exhibition of hers that made the little book. They were very, very important in the whole movement of American craft.

And after they had died, then I didn't do anything for a while and then somehow I became connected with Miller Brown [Miller Brown Gallery, San Francisco] in California. They also worked with many, many people in the field. It seems that the dealers that handle textiles things worked with what I considered the best people in the field, and then you got to know the other people through that, through the openings. I think I was with them for four or five years. Ed Brown died, and then Michael went on and changed from a gallery to a store. So I was with them before that -- maybe five or seven years.

MS. MENSING: When was that, about?

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, God.

MS. MENSING: Do you know or remember? Would that be in the '80s?

MS. SCHIRA: The '80s, yes, more in the '80s. I can't remember exactly.

MS. MENSING: Did you sever your relationship with them?

MS. SCHIRA: No, they closed the gallery. They closed the gallery when Ed started to know that he was going to die, and Michael went to the store.

Then again I didn't do anything for a long time. I've never been really good about going and presenting myself to various galleries. Just haven't done it that much. Then I worked with Parrasch [Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York] for a while, and that was a bit more of a bumpy relationship. I liked him a lot as a person, but some of our business relationships left a bit to be desired. But I was with him for four or five years in New York.

MS. MENSING: Can you characterize your sales through the years? Would you say that in the '70s, in the beginning, that you sold more work, or did you sell more work as time has gone on?

MS. SCHIRA: The Hadler Rodriguez sold everything, I think, and Miller Brown sold everything. During the '80s, I mean, you know, everybody and their brother was buying work. So we sold almost everything during those years. And then it stopped. It stopped when there was more or less the recession, and it stopped when people weren't as interested in these big corporate commissions, I think when they realized -- [laughs] -- that half of them were dust catchers and it wasn't something they wanted as much.

MS. MENSING: Maybe we should move to commissions now.

MS. SCHIRA: Okay.

MS. MENSING: Do you want to talk about --

MS. SCHIRA: Sure.

And going back to the dealer thing, the person I'm with now is very good. His name is Bruce Hoffman, and he's at the Snyderman Gallery [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]. He's done a lot with textiles. Where most of the galleries stopped carrying textiles totally, he has just really used them, and he's had these shows yearly -- he's in Philadelphia -- and worked very hard and is incredibly enthusiastic about.

MS. MENSING: And your work sells through the Snyderman Gallery?

MS. SCHIRA: They've sold, yes. It doesn't sell all that much, but it's really what I'm doing, and especially since I went to black and white, which people don't like to buy. And, thank God, I don't have to worry about it.

MS. MENSING: Do you show there in regular exhibitions or does he just handle your work? How does that work?

MS. SCHIRA: I show in the group exhibitions there. I've not seen the gallery. I haven't had a one-person show there. I don't think I'm worrying about that.

MS. MENSING: Well, where have your important one-person exhibitions been?

MS. SCHIRA: Well, at the Renwick. I had a one-person exhibition there and that was really important to me. And also I had it at the Hadler Rodriguez. Let's see. Oh, and the Museum Bellerive in Zurich in 1979. I had the whole museum. It was absolutely wonderful. And talk about place. It's on the edge of the lake there. Just beautiful. Just beautiful. I also had a one-person show at the Spencer Art Museum.

MS. MENSING: In Kansas.

MS. SCHIRA: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] At the university. But somehow that seems different because, you know, it's

at the university you teach at, so it doesn't seem as big a deal to me.

MS. MENSING: Because your work is often large scale and it can be used architecturally, I'm interested to know in terms of American craft, how or if commissions have been important in your development as an artist.

MS. SCHIRA: I did a lot of commissions in the 1980s when they were all buying, for banks and corporate buildings and that kind of thing. I'm not sure that the commissions were -- I'm sure that the commissions were not important as far as developing my conceptual ideas or my work.

MS. MENSING: Do you think they were actually holding you back?

MS. SCHIRA: Probably not holding me back, but repeating what I had already done. They were long and they were not all that interesting, usually, to do. But I did a lot of them, and some of them worked out, you know, and looked quite good. I did a lot of them, as a matter of fact. That's repeating myself, but still, there were quite a few. And I do think maybe it was holding me back. It was helping a lot financially at the time, and I thought that it was a nice stroke that somebody was willing to pay for my work.

The nicest commission I ever did, and the last commission I've done, was for Arrow Corporation [Arrow International] in Reading, Pennsylvania. I had a connection with the CEO and president through the board at Haystack, Marlin Miller. And he said, "Do what you want to do. Here's the space. I want you to do it for this wall." And he did commissions, or we did commissions for him, and it was Wayne Higby, Gerhardt Knodel, Bill -- I can't think of his last name right now -- Anne Currier, Bill Daley. So it was wonderful. He really appreciated them. He had already bought four of my pieces for his house. So he gave me total freedom. And I did a piece that was 18 feet by 7 feet for the boardroom, and it took me a year to weave, and he loved it.

MS. MENSING: How did this commission come about?

MS. SCHIRA: Well, he built a brand-new building for Arrow Corporation, which deals with small medical devices used by cardiac surgeons and anesthesiologists.

MS. MENSING: But did you do this through a dealer of some kind?

MS. SCHIRA: Well, that's a part I don't want to talk about --

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: -- but that was some of the awkward part with Franklin Parrasch that didn't work out.

MS. MENSING: Hmm. Okay. But there was an intermediary.

MS. SCHIRA: No, but there wasn't really. That was the whole point. That he asked me directly, I worked with him directly and the connection came through Haystack school originally.

MS. MENSING: Okay. Any other? And that's the last commission that you've done?

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Right.

MS. MENSING: And that was still in the '80s?

MS. SCHIRA: No. Well, let me see; '94.

MS. MENSING: '94.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. And then I hadn't done anything since '81, that was the last one I had done.

MS. MENSING: And you're not working on any commissions now.

MS. SCHIRA: No, and I don't think I ever want to again.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: I don't need to do those.

MS. MENSING: Those are two chapters you feel are closed, commissions and teaching.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I do.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: But then that leaves room, doesn't it, for other things. [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: It certainly does.

How do you feel that your work has been received over time?

MS. SCHIRA: Nicely. I mean, it seems that people have liked it all right. It's nice to have people like your work. And I believe very strongly that visual art demands a response from the viewer. I mean, I think that you can't just do it in isolation, that the response is very important as to how the work will develop. It's important to me to try to communicate something, I don't know specifically what, but something to the viewer.

MS. MENSING: And so then how do you feel that these responses have come out? I mean, I guess publications here it comes back.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, publications and extra exhibitions. And it's funny, as time goes on, I can remember the first review I got I was so excited about, and it was incredible, and now it doesn't make the same kind of difference what kind of a review. So that the review, to me, has to have some kind of meat to it or else it doesn't mean anything.

MS. MENSING: Just having it in print isn't enough.

MS. SCHIRA: Not at all. Not at all. And I can't answer any more than that. I don't know how to answer that.

MS. MENSING: Okay. We talked about asking this question a little earlier. What do you see as the place of universities in the American craft movement, and specifically for artists working in fiber?

MS. SCHIRA: I think that the universities have really, really changed the whole basis of craft in America. Without the input of the university and the teachers in the university, it would have, I think, continued in a much more conservative guild kind of way. The universities bring in the whole academic aspect to the student, so that they are not just working on technique, but they're working on the concepts and the ideas, and they are taking courses in academic areas which, are feeding into what they might be doing. I know that with our students at KU, their taking the art history courses were incredibly important, and the philosophy courses very much changed the visual aspects of their work. I've seen a lot of self-taught artists, and there is an interesting difference -- especially weavers, the work can be really beautiful, but they don't seem to evolve and change and grow. They seem to stay much more within a single realm.

MS. MENSING: Well, looking at the history of different programs looking at fiber, you mentioned a little bit about Gerhardt Knodel. One thing I know about his program is he spent an enormous amount of time teaching the history of textiles to his students.

MS. SCHIRA: Mm-hm.

MS. MENSING: And I'm wondering if you want to say anything about that. You talked about the history of art, but also fiber and craft and the history of textiles. And also besides Gerhardt, maybe other teachers that you feel have been influential.

MS. SCHIRA: I think Gery has probably been the most influential teacher in the United States over time. I mean, he taught for 18, 20 years, so he influenced an enormous amount of the people that have gone on and done well in the textile field. And I feel, as you say, that the history of textiles class that he taught was really important to everyone. I think many people emulated him in trying to get the history of textiles into their programs because I don't think it was in a lot of the programs.

MS. MENSING: Maybe we could just pursue here, you are not a Cranbrook student.

MS. SCHIRA: No, I am not a Cranbrook student.

MS. MENSING: So this is interesting that you feel so strongly about the Cranbrook program even when you didn't partake of it.

MS. SCHIRA: Right.

MS. MENSING: So how --

MS. SCHIRA: Because the Cranbrook program is in the background of the people that I respect, that I think are really good artists. And they are the people that actually made a difference in the field, the overall American fiber field. So it's not just Gery, but it's the ones that he taught, and then of course they went to other universities and then they taught the next group. I think they were very -- and I think Lia Cook has been very

important.

MS. MENSING: Yes, there is that whole West Coast --

MS. SCHIRA: There's the whole West Coast.

MS. MENSING: Ed Rossbach.

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, yes, I forgot, totally forgot about Ed Rossbach, who would come before Lia Cook because he was Lia's teacher. And he was incredibly important.

MS. MENSING: But then, of course, Ed Rossbach went to Cranbrook. [Laughs.]

MS. SCHIRA: Did he? I didn't -- that's right, he did, didn't he, years and years ago.

MS. MENSING: Yeah, but before Gerhardt Knodel was there.

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, yes, obviously, since the age difference.

MS. MENSING: But did have this same vision about the importance of textiles, the history of textiles.

MS. SCHIRA: It's funny, now when we're sitting here talking about it; how could anyone not think it was important? How could anyone not be interested in it? That always surprises me because to me it's the most fascinating thing in the world. And not just what I'm doing. I just picked, you know, one small area. But the history of it, the totality of it. We both were talking about wanting to buy this new book out about stripes which is in the New York Times Book Review. I mean, it's such a fascinating field. And historically, it's told so much about the various cultures that, you know, you learn about the various cultures through the textiles. I mean, it sounds sappy to say all that, but I feel it's very true.

MS. MENSING: It brings up the fact that the history of the textiles and the history of craft have now permeated the fabric of art in amazing ways, and you think of contemporary artists from other countries, like [Yinka] Shonibare, the Nigerian artist, living in England, having really nothing to do with textiles or the fiber movement but using textiles to make his work.

MS. SCHIRA: Well, a long time ago there was Richard Serra used it, and Sam Gilliam. I mean they were considered abstract expressionists, except Serra was more, I suppose, a minimalist. [Laughs.] I can't say it. [Referring to her pronunciation of the word "minimalist."] It's just been used for a length of time in a way. But not even going into art, staying away from the whole idea of art, the whole thing of textiles, the Peruvian textiles and where and what it was, and the connection to the culture, the Chinese textiles, I mean, is so interesting.

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm.

Going back to publications now, we had talked somewhat about writers and *Craft Horizons*, how it was different before it became *American Craft*. Do you think that there's a difference between critics who write as critics and critics who are also artists, in their approach to criticism generally, and maybe to your work particularly?

MS. SCHIRA: Generally I guess there could be, is. I don't know about generalizing in that sense. But sometimes I feel that people who write the articles for the magazines that we know about like *Fiber Arts* and *American Craft* who are artists tend to be not rigorous. They tend to not -- "not rigorous," that's not correct English. But it seems to be a gentle kind of promotion rather than rigorously trying to understand and place the work that they're talking about, or even describe it in a way beyond a superficial way. But then I think you could also say that about some critics who just write, too. So I guess I don't know. I think the basic thing is that I don't read all that many critics, what's written, so probably I'm not a good person to say.

MS. MENSING: What involvement have you had with national craft organizations; for example, the American Craft Council?

MS. MENSING: My main involvement has been getting the magazine every month. And then some years ago I was inducted into the College of Fellows, which is very nice, which is a group of people who are older, they should have been working 25 years, and they're nominated by other people in the group. I guess it says that you're a good craftsperson in general. And a very nice thing last year was that I got the Gold Medal. They give two a year from the College of Fellows.

MS. MENSING: First you have to be in the College of Fellows.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. Yes. And they pick from the College of Fellows for the Gold Medal. And that was nice. It was a lovely stroke.

MS. MENSING: Mm-hm.

Are there fiber organizations that have played a meaningful role, in your thinking, of professional development?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, the Textile Society of America. And maybe that's not playing an important role, but I love it. It's really interesting to me. It's a group, a large group, actually, of -- [tape side ends mid-sentence].

[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE B]

MS. MENSING: [In progress] -- 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Cynthia, we were just speaking about you being chosen as a Gold Medal fellow for the American Craft, and you were going to talk a little bit about that, and then you were going to also talk about your honorary degree at RISD, I think.

MS. SCHIRA: It was very nice to be chosen as the Gold Medal fellow. It was nice to have people that I respected choose me, because the people in the College of Fellows are people that I respect. And that the nominating committee chose me, it pleased me a great deal. It was nice to go down for the ceremony and the weekend in Santa Fe, although it was a really long trip. It was nice that they seemed to enjoy it. You know, it was nice to be a star for a weekend. [Laughs.] "Queen for a Day" or whatever. I liked it a lot.

I had to do a presentation of my work. And I also had to do a thank-you bit. I decided to present my work over time. It was 15 minutes I had, so I did a really quick 15-minute thing with 80 slides, and I included my family. And I showed my children growing up in the midst of it and my work and everything. I put it together like my life has been together, where the family and the place and my work were all sort of mixed up together. I really loved the response. I liked the fact that people thought that was nice and interesting. That pleased me, you know, and it didn't seem pretentious. And I was glad that I had written my acceptance speech, because I did it well. Otherwise, I would have gotten up there and not been good at it.

When I got my honorary doctorate at RISD, I was very pleased that the school honored me in that way. It was funny, because they gave two honorary doctorates that year and the other one went to Lalo Schifrin, who is a musician, a composer, and has written many scores for movies in Hollywood. He did a Clint Eastwood movie. But both our names started with -- "Schira" and "Schifrin," or however his last name is, and they got mixed up and they gave the honorary doctorate to him. You know, they mixed up our papers. So we had to afterwards -- [laughs] -- go exchange them back, which was sort of funny.

MS. MENSING: I realize actually we were in the middle of talking about fiber organizations that had been important to you.

MS. SCHIRA: Oh, that's right, we were.

MS. MENSING: And you were talking about TSA, the Textile Society.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Right.

MS. MENSING: You may have concluded that, but I was wondering if other organizations, fiber organizations -- of course, you've mentioned your involvement with Haystack.

MS. SCHIRA: Right, which isn't a fiber organization but a summer school.

MS. MENSING: No, it's a summer school.

MS. SCHIRA: Summer craft school.

MS. MENSING: Summer craft school.

MS. MENSING: Are there any more broadly craft schools? Have you ever been involved with Arrowmont [School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee] or Penland [School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina]?

MS. SCHIRA: I went to Penland once, and I prefer going to Haystack and the fact that Haystack tries to balance out their classes and tries to bring people of various ages and geographical locations together into the class. Penland tends to take everything on a first come, first serve basis, so that you oftentimes have people who totally have no background. A dentist. I mean, it can be interesting, but not for me. It seems to be more rigorous at Haystack, and that's because, I think, it's a northern school. It makes a difference. I'm not very good at going slowly in the southern tradition.

I can't think of any others. I'm not part of the Handweavers of America. They have too many people. It's too big

an organization.

MS. MENSING: Do you ever participate in the Surface Design conferences?

MS. SCHIRA: No. I haven't ever gone to any of those. I don't really want to go to conferences of either the Handweavers or the Surface Design. I love the Textile Society of America because it's talking about things from many different aspects I think if I were newer in the field, I would like the Handweavers and the Surface Design. But now since I've been around for so long, it's much more interesting for me to hear somebody speaking about the aspects of something from a dig in Iran or something of that sort. And I like meeting new people, and I don't know these people.

MS. MENSING: And that's also an organization that has changed in the past few years -- I least I feel it has -- to try to include contemporary artists more.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Much more so. But I hope that it doesn't go overboard. I hope that it stays an academic organization and starts to bring the two together. Like, I'm on the board now and will be for the next couple of years, and I think that the input -- and so is Vicki Rivers, an artist from Davis California will make a difference. But it's really interesting to have that range of interests involved. There's enough of the artist thing, so I don't want us to be prominent.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: But very much a part of things.

MS. MENSING: Please comment on your relationships with curators and museums. And you've mentioned the Renwick, and I'm wondering if you would like to reflect on your experience with your retrospective at the Renwick in terms of a curator, and any other museums where your work has been shown.

MS. SCHIRA: At the Renwick, I found them very supportive. At that time, Michael Monroe was the curator in charge.

MS. MENSING: Maybe we should just ask when your exhibition was.

MS. SCHIRA: Well, I'll have to look at my thing.

MS. MENSING: At your resume.

MS. SCHIRA: [Laughs.] I don't remember when it was, but it must have been sometime. [Referring to resume.] 1987.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

MS. SCHIRA: It was a lovely experience. I thought that they hung it beautifully. They painted all the walls -- I appreciated their painting all the walls -- black and made special places for my pieces to hang. And they did a lovely job on the thing.

MS. MENSING: And you worked with Michael Monroe.

MS. SCHIRA: I worked with Michael Monroe. But I don't demand a lot of "work with." I sort of arrive and the pieces arrive and everything goes up. I'm not very complicated as far as having to deal with. I'm not doing an installation or anything of that sort. I didn't work with him, but, I mean, Penelope -- I can't remember her last names. There's two last names [Penelope Hunter-Stiebel]. Anyhow, she was at the Metropolitan for a while, and she bought a lot of our pieces and took them into --

MS. MENSING: Who is "our"?

MS. SCHIRA: I'm trying to think who else was in that. I think Lia was. I can't remember the other people. But she bought a lot of contemporary work and brought it into the Metropolitan Museum. So she was --

MS. MENSING: But you didn't show there specifically with an exhibition, but the Met purchased some of your work.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. Yes, they did. [Referring to resume.] I actually didn't work with any -- a lot of these people, even though they own my work. I haven't had that many exhibitions, solo exhibitions, in museums. In February I'll be in a museum. I'll be in the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., in a show curated by Rebecca Stevens, a show based on technology. I can't remember the title. It's slightly awkward. The title is something like "Technology as Source: the Cutting Edge" or something of that sort. She's been lovely to work with. She has

given each one of us a space and we can do what we wish within that space, which I think is something lovely.

MS. MENSING: And this work we're looking at --

MS. SCHIRA: And this piece, yes, I decided I would take this whole wall and just do one piece. I think everybody else is doing multiple pieces and will take their space in a different way, but I just thought I've always wanted to do a really big piece, so this is the time to do it.

MS. MENSING: Okay.

How has the market for American craft changed in your lifetime?

MS. SCHIRA: Originally, I think I wasn't terribly aware of it when I first started, but in the '80s, in the late '70s, everybody was buying textile art, and they were all very excited about it. There were lots of commissions. There was extra money. This must have been Reagan -- was it Reagan years? It must have been. Anyhow, there was lots of money around and there was a lot of desire to use fiber art. There was the idea that it would warm buildings. A lot of hotels used it. A lot of big commissions. And a lot of selling.

And then it dropped off almost totally in the beginning of the '90s. It was a hard time then. People weren't buying in the same kind of way, and now I don't think they're buying textiles in the same kind of way that they used to at all. So you have some people, some collectors who are still buying because they believe in the piece or they're particularly interested in a piece, but it's not this wholesale buying it used to be.

MS. MENSING: So are you selling your work today?

MS. SCHIRA: I sell occasionally. I sell occasionally. Just recently something was bought by Sprint. I sell to individuals.

MS. MENSING: Was that through the Snyderman connection?

MS. SCHIRA: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And I had that show at the Sherry Leedy Gallery in Kansas City, and I think she sold, like, six or seven pieces. But not a lot.

MS. MENSING: Do you have any collectors that you sell directly to?

MS. SCHIRA: I would never sell directly to a collector. Well, except friends.

MS. MENSING: Unless it would be somebody like Bob Pfannebecker. [Laughs.] You know, a really famous collector of American craft for years, has bought directly from artists.

MS. SCHIRA: I wouldn't do it if it was in a gallery. I wouldn't ever undercut the gallery. So I guess I would talk to the gallery. I don't have an exclusive with the gallery at this point, which I did with Miller Brown and with Hadler Rodriguez, and "semi" did with the Franklin Parrasch, and that's why it didn't work out so well. I have done a few things directly, and mainly to friends. And then I, you know, cut the price for the friends.

MS. MENSING: Do you ever trade your work with other artists?

MS. SCHIRA: Nobody really wants my work. Very few people ever asked me to trade. [Laughs.] And my work is rather big, so it isn't the most tradeable thing. I did trade with Jean Caciado [sp]. Is that how I say her name? And got a lovely vest. And she got a little, small piece. That was nice. That was fun. But I haven't done that much.

MS. MENSING: So today you think that the marketplace for fiber is quite different than it was.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, I think it is. I think people are more discerning now, and they're not buying it just for decoration. I think that some of the great big pieces they bought then were, as they called them, dust-catchers because they were incredibly physical. They had lots of stuff hanging off them. I mean, even at the National Museum of American Art [East Wing], the Joan Miro, I notice, is not up. Maybe it's still up. But it has all this stuff hanging off it, which is probably catching dust like crazy. I don't think people are buying in the same kind of way. I don't know how to amplify that.

MS. MENSING: Has your teaching experience been important to your artmaking?

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. It's been important in the facts that -- well, directly and indirectly -- it's been important because I've had to answer their questions. I've had to deal with their ideas and try to understand their ideas as well as answering the questions, and that's made me, of course, question what I'm doing. So I think it's pushed me and kept me more alive than if I were just in the studio by myself. I think it's been incredibly important,

actually. So what will happen to me now that I'm not teaching? [Laughs.]

MS. MENSING: Because you don't have that -- well, you'll have other input, things through the Textile Society of America.

MS. SCHIRA: Right, and I have things through here. I'm doing things with the Depot Theater, the equity theater in this small, teeny town, and the library. And I think maybe I need other kinds of input at this point. I don't know.

MS. MENSING: You do have a large circle of friends in your world that you are a part of. I mean, you have certainly in your personal life, but I'm also referring to your involvement with Lia Cook, and you do go to Montreal.

MS. SCHIRA: Right. Right. Yes, I do. I go into Montreal a lot. And Lia and I talk every two weeks, at least, and usually end up with a very long conversation about some kind of thing rather than just chatting, even though we're good personal friends. And we went together to Poland. You know, there's been a lot of those kinds of trips.

MS. MENSING: Important travel experiences, actually.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes. Yes.

MS. MENSING: We talked about apprenticeship wasn't so important but you had experiences in Europe. We didn't talk about the one in Germany in the '80s.

MS. SCHIRA: Yes, with the Muller Zell [Mill] when I first started getting really involved with the jacquard weaving. And actually, the connection has been kept to some extent because -- actually, he just called last week, the owner of the mill, who has since sold the mill. But there's been that connection, has continued on. Then his sons I got -- went to RISD, and so there was that kind of connection. And when I did a lecture at RISD, I would see the sons.

I mean, so things continue and circle around a lot and, I am assuming, will continue to. I see you.

MS. MENSING: Well, this concludes my questions to you. And I want to just invite you to add anything that you think we've skipped or want to bring up, any other comments or responses.

MS. SCHIRA: No, I can't think of anything else we should bring up, but I wish that I were more articulate.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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