



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Sheila Hicks, 2004
February 3-March 11**

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sheila Hicks on February 3 and 10 and March 11, 2004. The interview took place in Paris, France, and was conducted by Monique Lévi-Strauss 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.

Sheila Hicks and Monique Lévi-Strauss 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

MONIQUE LÉVI-STRAUSS: This is Monique Lévi-Strauss interviewing Sheila Hicks at her home in Paris, France on February the third, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disc number one.

SHEILA HICKS: This is Sheila Hicks and I think it would be interesting if I introduce the interviewer briefly: Monique Roman Lévi-Strauss, who is married to the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, since 1954, and who has an American background. Her mother was American, her father Belgian. We have been friends in Paris since 1967 – '68. She wrote a book about my work in 1973 [*Sheila Hicks*; Paris: P. Horay, 1973]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, you were born in 1934. Can you tell us where you were born?

MS. HICKS: I was born in the United States in Hastings, Nebraska. I was the oldest of three children. My mother was Frances Barbara Weingart [1912–1993] and my father was Ray Eugene Hicks [1913–1993]. I had another name when I was born. My name was Francine Rae. I wonder if this anticipated that I would be coming to France.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you tell us more about your grandparents and their origins?

MS. HICKS: My mother's parents [Ida Andressen (1879-1960) and William Walter Weingart (1874-1953)] – my maternal grandparents, were from German pioneer immigrant families. They came to Nebraska very early on, farmed, and established a general store in the town of Hastings, and my childhood memories are very much centered around Hastings, Nebraska.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: What about your paternal family?

MS. HICKS: My father, I know, was born in Herrin, Illinois, and moved out to Hastings, Nebraska when his mother became widowed. His mother [Agnes Lauder], I believe, was married twice and widowed twice. He was of the second husband [John Hicks] who died in a mine cave-in near Carbondale – or wherever the coalmines were in southern Illinois. He went in on a rescue party. My father had a commemorative medal honoring his father – not much to have when you're only seven or eight years old.

When his mother had to find a way to make her living – I don't know how she did this – she ended up working in a mental hospital outside of Hastings, Nebraska, and he was boarded in town so as

not to live on the hospital grounds, and he was lucky because he was boarded with a family near my mother's family. As a young boy he went to work in my grandfather's general store [J. Weingart & Brother on First Street].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Now, can you tell me what your father's profession was when he was an adult – how he made his living?

MS. HICKS: Well, fast forward. When he was a young adult it was already the nineteen-thirties Depression in the United States, so I think he had many kinds of jobs. I know he went to college, thanks to a scholarship of the local Rotary members in Hastings, so he must have been a worthwhile young person they felt like supporting. As a matter of fact, he and my mother married when they were in college, just as they were finishing [May 1933]. And he went to work for my uncle – my mother's older brother [William Harm Weingart] – and they moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa. Her brother ran a grocery store. In the Depression it was important to be able to eat, and that would have been a good job. Later he moved about and established branch offices for some companies. I don't know exactly what kind. My brother, Bill [William Ray Hicks, 1935–1996], once told me it was for Firestone Tires.

Bill was one year younger: his memory was better than mine because he stayed in the United States near the parents and talked to them more often. As children, I remember we lived in Corpus Christie, Texas, Tallahassee, Florida, and Clinton, Oklahoma. And, I know, we lived in St. Louis, Missouri because my youngest brother [John Eugene Hicks, 1939–1991] was born there.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, now, Sheila, where did you go to school?

MS. HICKS: At the very beginning?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Tell us your schooling from the very beginning.

MS. HICKS: I began my schooling, if I can trace it correctly, when my grandparents insisted that our family – in this migratory existence – come back to live in Nebraska, and we located in Lexington, Nebraska. My brother and I went to a one-room schoolhouse in this small town, and we fed the goats on the way. We pleaded with the farmers to not drive their tractors over the corn we planted on the dirt roads. So we had a rural, prairie childhood until we moved from Lexington to Detroit.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In what year was that?

MS. HICKS: It was before the war, because I remember when war was declared. We stayed in Chicago briefly; I went to a school which was quite different from the little schoolhouse in Lexington because I took big bars of Ivory soap to school and carved them. It was my favorite class. I don't remember learning anything else in that school, but I carved a whole village with houses, churches, tall buildings.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In Ivory soap?

MS. HICKS: Ivory – big bars of Ivory soap. And saved all the shavings so I could take them home for my mother to do the laundry.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, so it must have already been 1941 maybe?

MS. HICKS: Yes, in '41. President Roosevelt spoke on the radio as we were driving in a Ford car and I distinctly remember hearing that declaration of war. We were in Detroit living on Navajo Street

where I had joined a street gang, which, when you speak about schooling, was an education also.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: There were race riots in Detroit at that time and the schools were often closed, and my brother and I fell in with a group of Yugoslavian children – mostly Serbian. I remember their names. They were our best friends and we marauded around the neighborhood on our bicycles and did terrible things to all the neighbors – terrible, like dumping garbage cans at their front doors. Well, I shouldn't go into education – bad example – but that was an education: to be part of a street gang in Detroit during the nineteen-forties.

My mother tried to be a good influence and took my brother and me to the Art Institute in Detroit for art lessons in the big fountain room where there are the spectacular Diego Rivera murals – impressive, overwhelming.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So, Sheila, when you discovered the Art Institute, that was when you were about seven or eight years old?

MS. HICKS: Probably closer to nine years old. We religiously went to art classes weekly and at home we made posters – very large posters for the geography class. They took up the entire dining room table. My mother would help us paint and my brother and I would win most of the poster contests in the school for Columbus Day, for Thanksgiving, for Memorial Day, for Poppy Day. We collected bits of string everywhere and knotted them into big balls. We collected tinfoil from discarded cigarette packages in the gutters and made immense balls of tinfoil. This was all for the war effort.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Recuperation of metals?

MS. HICKS: Metal and string. We thought we were crocheting washcloths for the soldiers and collecting metal for bullets – that was a full-time occupation, too.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Now, tell me, at that time were you already dreaming of becoming an artist?

MS. HICKS: Possibly, but I didn't know what kind.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But you already toyed with the idea that it would be a profession?

MS. HICKS: No.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No?

MS. HICKS: I didn't know what a profession was. I just sensed you had to know how to do a lot of things to get along in life. My father opened our eyes considerably because every Saturday he took us to live musical stage shows. We looked forward to that – the Saturday matinees. If I tell you who we saw – do you know who the black singers the Mills Brothers were?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, I don't.

MS. HICKS: The smooth singers, the Ink Spots? Do you know who Tony Armstrong was – I mean Louis Armstrong?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Ah, yes. Louis Armstrong, yes.

MS. HICKS: Do you know who Ed Sullivan was who had a –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. Yes.

MS. HICKS: Well, we were big fans of the Ed Sullivan Show and we had the first television on our block – Magnavox, it was called. And all the neighborhood –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you tell me in what year you had your first television?

MS. HICKS: Must have been around 1946. My parents were trying to broaden our interests. We became very involved in swimming. You wonder why I don't speak about scholastics. [Laughter.] Our lives were extremely full with extracurricular activities and it didn't take us much time to do our homework, so we had extra hours to get involved in other things. I joined a synchronized swimming team – precision swimming, and my coach was Ruth Watson. I think she had been a member of the Billy Rose Aquacades. Do you remember Esther Williams?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Well, you asked me what profession I was preparing for, it was something like that. And my brother was a fantastic swimmer. In fact, he went to the Olympic Games in Helsinki, but that was in about 1952. If we get off on swimming I can talk for hours.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: May I ask a question on this synchronized swimming? Was it with music?

MS. HICKS: Of course – very intricate formations, musically timed. And we were a perfectly matched group of four girls. Marilyn Stanley was the best. We had to be the same height and the same weight and coordinate the same physical gestures, and then we all grew into different shapes.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So it went to pieces?

MS. HICKS: There were replacements along the way. My brother, Bill, and I kept being sent back to Hastings during the summer to paint, draw, sew, and hang out with Lizzie [Elizabeth Ann Weingart (1868-1961)], Emma [Emma Jane Weingart (1862-1940)], and Gertie [Gertrude Genette Weingart (1879-1960)]. They were my grandfather's sisters.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. So they were your great-aunts.

MS. HICKS: They were my great-aunts and they were all spinsters. Emma, who was the oldest, lost her fiancée in a buggy accident, so none of them married. Lizzie and Gertie took care of us during the summer, entertained us, and taught us to do a number of things. That balance – between Detroit and the atmosphere I've described – plus annual stays at the homestead, the prairie living –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In Hastings?

MS. HICKS: In Hastings, and listening to stories by and about Willa Cather [1873-1947], a contemporary of these great-aunts, who was from Red Cloud, near Blue Hill, which was a neighboring town. She was a woman of achievement whom Gertie admired. We were bouncing back and forth between a rough city existence and mellow rural existence.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And from what you say, also artistic existence in the country – your great-aunts were interested in art?

MS. HICKS: Lizzie played the piano – one of those big, old melon ball legged pianos, and Gertie was an accomplished painter.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did she paint with oil?

MS. HICKS: Oil painting, and she initiated us to watercolors.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Your brother too?

MS. HICKS: Of course. Everything I did, my brother Bill did, and everything he did, I did, until 1952: there was a rude awakening and a parting of the ways. [Our choices of schools, career paths, and personal lives diverged.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, but in 1952, you were already 18.

MS. HICKS: That's what I mean.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. And he was slightly younger? Maybe he was 17?

MS. HICKS: I cite 1952 because it's the year we graduated together from high school; life choices were made.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: May I ask you if in 1952, when you were 18, you knew what your profession would be?

MS. HICKS: I don't remember anyone ever speaking to me about a profession, and I don't remember ever thinking about a profession.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But did you think about earning your living?

MS. HICKS: My thoughts turned to earning a living at age 14-15, back in Detroit. I went to a junior high school called Foch [Foch Junior High School, Detroit, Michigan]. When I graduated from Foch, I was to have gone to the neighborhood high school. Instead, Rae Okomoto, a Japanese classmate, and I went downtown to Cass Technical High School. My father drove us there, or, at least, drove me there; or maybe the fathers took turns. It was quite far.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: There we were in a different atmosphere studying and where people thought about making their livings. They were training to get hired to make money. I signed up for after-school jobs. I did it to earn money, but I did it for experience too, so I had a wild assortment of jobs. I was broadening my repertoire of things I could do.

Cass Tech didn't last very long though because my father found better work and we moved to the north shore of Chicago, to Winnetka. This was an abrupt change. We could walk two blocks to school, and it was considered – we learned later, because *Life* magazine put it on their cover when they did a survey of schools in the United States – the outstanding public high school in the United States. We were 15 – 16 years old and in an extremely protected atmosphere [New Trier High School].

I should mention that my brother had skipped a semester earlier, so he was only half a year behind me. When we tested for placement, my little brother was as advanced as I was and they put us both in sophomore year of high school. Humiliated, in a way, I was also relieved because we had to make friends in a new place; it was easier for us to have parties and attend events together.

That high school had 2,500 students. We knew no one in September of '49. We did well scholastically. And the best thing of all: we both took art classes from Frank Holland. He was on the faculty, but he moonlighted: he was also the art critic for the *Chicago Sun Times* newspaper. He was very much in the know about what was going on in the art world, wrote about it, saw all the shows, and led us down the art path. We also went on canoe trips up in Minnesota during the summer, putting out at Ely on the Canadian border. That was another landscape. We felt liberated, my brother and I, and we even had a car between us and driver's licenses at age 15, 16. Naturally, that increased our having a lot more friends, too.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I can imagine.

MS. HICKS: Much of our lives revolved around scheduling the car, and I reserved time pretending I had events to go to, but really just drove downtown to Chicago, where I had discovered a foreign cinema house on Michigan Avenue not far from the Art Institute. I told my parents I thought I'd like to spend one school semester in Brazil. There was a foreign exchange program for students.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In high school?

MS. HICKS: In high school. They didn't say no. I filled out the applications to go to Brazil, but then I was having so much fun in the high school, I sort of cooled in my plans. I decided to stay where I was but I already had the inclination of wanting to take off.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So when you graduate in 1952, you don't yet know that you're going to become an artist?

MS. HICKS: Frank Holland continued to be an influence.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You saw him even after you had graduated?

MS. HICKS: Actually, while still in our senior year, it became apparent that my brother and I were going to face different realities. Pressure was put on my brother to go to a good school and to think about a profession. He was recruited for Princeton. I did not want to go to one of the eastern girl's schools. I thought: they're not going to have foreign films, boys, I won't have a car, I'll be stuck in a nunnery with my head locked into the library.

I found an alternative plan: a man visited our high school on college day, and he looked like Cary Grant. He represented a school – see how things influence you at that age – Syracuse University. That sounded Greek to me. Maybe that was interesting. It was in New York; they had a big art department. Well, I convinced my family that's where I should go. They didn't think it was a very wise choice.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: How did your family react to art? I mean, your father and your mother. How did they react to your inclination toward art?

MS. HICKS: They didn't think it would interfere with my getting married because in the community where we lived, Winnetka/Kenilworth, most of the women went to school, met a nice fellow, got married, and had a family.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So the ambition of your father and your mother was to get you married? To get you well married?

MS. HICKS: No, it was for me to be happy: their projection of happiness was security and safety.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and that meant a husband?

MS. HICKS: And that meant having a husband and a family. They didn't think that an art program would interfere with that, especially when they visited me at Syracuse. The dean of the art school, Norman Rice, spoke highly of my endeavors so they knew this choice wasn't bad after all. I seemed to be moving along. I joined a sorority. I embraced the whole program at Syracuse and was there for two years.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I loved the art department. We were doing lithography and woodcutting and oil painting and figure drawing – nude figure drawing – and I had a professor who taught Greek mythology. It was wonderful. Those two years were a real pleasure. Then a girl – probably the best art student in the school; her name was Lonnie [Madeline Jean] Sommer, who hadn't joined a sorority and was a different kind of person – I must remark, too, that I made a lot of Jewish friends.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Do you think it was because it was closer to New York and –

MS. HICKS: Some people have told me why and I won't –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Why?

MS. HICKS: I won't go into that now, but my freshman dormitory was mostly Jewish. I remember the parents driving trucks or trailers bringing standing hair dryers and chests of drawers full of extravagant clothes. It was a New York scene, which I hadn't known in the Midwest. Lots of spirit, parties, group activities and awareness. They had traveled and were more sophisticated. A window to the outside world: to Europe or somewhere. It may sound strange to say that now, in 2004, but it was a real awakening for me.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Oh, no. I can understand that. I remember, at that time, the difference between Chicago and New York. It was striking for anyone who went from one to the other. When you got back to New York, you felt much closer to Europe and to other countries.

MS. HICKS: At Thanksgiving I took the train to New York City – I thought Syracuse was near to New York City. Of course, it wasn't; it was quite a ways away. My parents, my two brothers, and I met-up. My younger brother, John, was still in high school, but he came to Princeton a few years later. We'd go and see everything together. I was already putting a little foot into New York City.

The trouble was – I'll go back to Lonnie Sommer. She was very intense and brilliant and she was fun. She was from Tenafly, New Jersey. She approached me and said she was going to take her portfolio and apply to another school and leave Syracuse. Well, I said, "But, you know, things are great here. Why consider leaving?" "No, no. It's more challenging. You'll see. It's much more interesting." "Well, why is it more interesting?" She said, first of all, the dean, whom we both liked, was going to leave our school, Syracuse, and the rumor was he was going to Carnegie Tech. That meant we would have an unknown in our art department. Did we want to go to Carnegie Tech and follow him? Oh, no. She had a better idea: we would go to Yale. I knew about Yale because other New Trier students – all boys – had gone to Yale. Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. She took my portfolio and her portfolio, at Easter time in 1954, and went over to New Haven where she filled out the applications and got us both accepted at Yale University School of Art. Interesting idea, because I could challenge my brother at Princeton. The idea of coming to Yale through the backdoor like this seemed an entertaining idea to me.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Syracuse was already familiar to me. Okay, move on, closer to New York, it would be exciting [audio break].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, we are very interested to learn that you were accepted in the Yale art school, but we would like to know how was it possible? What was in your portfolio that convinced the jury that admits new students to take you, because we know that the Yale art school had a very high reputation?

MS. HICKS: Possibly we know that now, but you must realize I did not know that then. When I was at Syracuse, I had good teachers: people like Doug Wilson teaching us printmaking; we were grinding large lithographic stones and making lithographs – colored lithographs, too. We were doing figure drawing with John Davies. He opened a school down in Lima, Peru, where I ran into him later. And we had Jim Dwyer for painting, who was a very attentive teacher and a good painter.

I think that my portfolio was quite fleshed out and had a variety of techniques showing experimentation, and I had not been brainwashed into a way of looking, like you could be if you'd gone to – I don't know – art school in New York City. Therefore, they took both Lonnie and me, I suppose, because we were not alike nor like a lot of the other students they were reviewing.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But maybe the fact that the two portfolios showed different aspects and different talents made the professors at Yale think higher of Syracuse as a good nursery school for art students.

MS. HICKS: Probably. But when I went to Yale – what I have to tell you is, Lonnie didn't come with me. After she got us both accepted – bravo – that summer she committed suicide. So this gay college life I have been describing really changed. A thunderbolt struck: it put everything in question. Why would she commit suicide? We were both going to Yale, thanks to her initiative. Why would she end her life at such a young age? It was very perplexing.

My father went to her funeral with me. He accompanied me because he knew I was confused and sad, and he said, "What are you going to do now?" He thought I'd go back to my comfortable existence, and I said, "I'm going to go to Mexico because there's a summer program in Taxco, and I'd like to go and think about what I'm going to do."

It was the beginning of my realization that everything was not one big lark unfolding, the waters parting, and having fun in life.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And if I may recall, you were just 20 that summer when you went down to Mexico after the suicide of your friend.

MS. HICKS: I went alone and rented a tiny house in Taxco, from a Mexican family, and I painted in the patio of and hung out at Casa Humboldt. I still have the paintings I made that summer: one of them's hanging in the living room. And when I came back up from Mexico, I said to my family that I would go to Yale. I didn't want to go back to Syracuse; Lonnie dead, Dean Rice leaving, the sorority involvement, the classes and the football games – the whole scene had lost its magic.

I was prepared to go and see what else was out there. I went to New Haven, checked in the school, and learned the director of the school was German. And his name was Josef Albers.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: A famous name.

MS. HICKS: There were very few girls; it was practically all boys. There was no place to live in university housing because it was a professional school. Yale Art School was not the undergraduate university with dormitories and eating facilities. It was like the drama school or the architecture school – [audio break, tape change] – so you were on your own. In fact, you were totally on your own.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you tell us exactly who was Josef Albers?

MS. HICKS: He had been a professor at the Bauhaus in Germany. He and his wife, Anni Albers, had been helped by architect Philip Johnson to leave Germany at the critical period and to come and teach at Black Mountain College. And from Black Mountain College [Asheville, North Carolina] Josef Albers got the position of director of Yale Art School but Anni was not invited to teach because there were no women faculty members and no one was studying weaving at Yale.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: She was a weaver?

MS. HICKS: I forgot to mention, yes, she was a weaver and he was a painter and a colorist and a brilliant teacher with strong ideas about the curriculum he taught. It was well structured. It was not only one professor's philosophy, it was a whole –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: School.

MS. HICKS: Whole school and a program that was clearly articulated –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: The Bauhaus.

MS. HICKS: – sequentially. And as assistants, Albers had – and I studied under them – Sewell Sillman –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: What did he teach?

MS. HICKS: He taught introductory studies: visual perception, how to look, register, understand, draw, and paint. We painted with watercolors. I had Bernard Chaet in painting, where we learned about media, mechanics, and process, but we also had required classes like lettering, basic design, structural organization, and color with Albers.

I spent all my time in that school. I had no extracurricular activities. You could find me in Street Hall, day or night. That's where we studied and did our visual exercises. I would venture out once in a while into the law school dining room or the medical school dining room. I'll refer to that again later, but we mostly ate peanut butter or toasted cheese sandwiches, Hershey bars, and drank tea and plugged along in school.

The second year, half my class was gone. And the following year the same thing.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Is it because they had graduated? Or because they had given up – it was too tough?

MS. HICKS: They just, for any one of a number of reasons, were leaving or being asked to leave, but one student, whom I'd met the first year was still there when we graduated three years later. His name was Ernest Boyer; he's a friend till today. Two of his drawings lean against my fireplace. There were 54 students programmed to graduate in 1957, which would have been my year. However, only 32 graduated, but that included the graphics department. When we graduated, there were seven

women, but only three of them were in the art department – all the others were in the graphics department. It's changed: now, there are women teachers and many more women graduate from the art school. But we weren't very many then.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: There's one question I wanted to ask you earlier – it pertains also to your high school years. When did you start weaving and thinking of yarn and tapestries and works of art made of fiber? When did that enter your imagination?

MS. HICKS: To answer that question I'd like to explain that I have always made yarn-based things. I learned, from my grandmothers and from my mother, to sew, to embroider, to knit, to crochet, to cut patterns, to drape. These were normal pastimes.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Activities.

MS. HICKS: Not associated with art. However, when I was at Yale I had exposure to art history. We took art history courses every semester; we were required to write term papers. I took "Art of Latin America," with Dr. George Kubler, and I chose to write about textiles because he had given a lecture showing beautiful old Peruvian mummy bundles. The textiles in them made a strong impression on me. And when I tried to write about them, I thought I'd have to learn how they were made – not just how they looked. At that point, Albers – Josef Albers – saw me struggling in my painting booth on improvised looms that were not looms; they were just stretchers – painting stretchers that I used to tie yarns into tension, and he said he would take me home and introduce me to his wife.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Anni Albers.

MS. HICKS: Anni Albers. I'm embarrassed to say how uninformed I was, or naïve as a student, because I didn't know who Anni Albers was. But he said, "She's interested in these things, too." He took me to meet her at their house and that's where I saw someone who was weaving on a floor loom.

She was weaving textiles that didn't appear to be utilitarian. It seemed to me she was giving meaning and expression to this soft, pliable material.

I also took oriental art history courses with Leroy Davidson, and I took "Methods of Research and Criticism" with George Heard Hamilton – professor. We had a lot of exposure to art history, but the most exciting thing was listening to Louis Kahn, who was the architecture professor.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: One day I met a good looking Spaniard [Joaquin Rallo] in an elevator going to the library and I pretended that I spoke Spanish. I had studied it in high school and I had been to Mexico. He invited me to help him build a model he was working on for his Master's in architecture; he had a Fulbright scholarship. That meant I hung out in the architecture department sometimes. When I had all my art assignments done I would go over – it was the adjoining building – and help build the model of an immense city plan for Ceuta, southern Spain.

Louis Kahn was often in the department at night, too. After dinner he would come back and talk. There were only three students doing their Master's, so it was a very tight group, and that's where I became exposed to another great mind. Well, this was amazing.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But that leads us far from weaving. Or would you say that architecture and weaving are structurally related?

MS. HICKS: Maybe I would say that today. But in 1956-57 I was unaware. Architecture enchanted me more than weaving. Weaving was something I could do on the side. I think what you're asking me is did I envision it as something you could make art with?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: No, never.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Not yet.

MS. HICKS: Never. Painting, yes! Sculpture yes! Architecture, yes! Rallo, the architecture student, and I determined to go to South America when we graduated: he would get his Master's and I would get my Bachelor's of fine arts that spring. Well, as luck would have it, Josef Albers said to me, "Apply for a Fulbright scholarship to Chile?" I looked on the map and saw that Chile was at the bottom of South America, which meant if I turned in my air ticket we would have enough money for two tickets to go to Venezuela together.

I didn't tell my parents, of course. They – I mean, they knew I was going to South America on a Fulbright, but they didn't know the route I was taking. In June, 1957, we took a cargo plane from Miami to Venezuela – a Brazilian Airlines carrying refrigerators and it had places for four passengers.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In the refrigerators. [Laughter.]

MS. HICKS: When we landed in La Guaira, Venezuela, they took our passports at the airport. I'll never forget: it was dawn and there were soldiers with machine guns standing on the runway. It wasn't that – I hadn't – I don't know why, but I wasn't prepared for that way of traveling.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You were a simple American from the Midwest and –

MS. HICKS: And they confiscated our passports. I remember, since we were the only passengers getting off in Venezuela. They said we could call for them some days later, downtown. Well, we found a Pension de Familia, and he went job-hunting and I went lodging-hunting. I knew I had to go to Chile on my Fulbright, but meanwhile we had the summer ahead of us. And I found a beautiful brick building by the architect, Jose Luis Sert. We had no furniture. We had nothing.

But we said we'd like to live in well designed architecture, so we moved into an empty apartment, delighted, and he found a job with the architect Tomas Sinabrio in Caracas. I met the interesting Venezuelan artists Jesus Soto and [Alejandro] Otero. The architect [Carlos Raúl] Villanueva – who was building the new university in Caracas – took us on a tour and showed how they had incorporated art in architecture. It was the first time I'd seen contemporary architecture and monumental artworks together. The auditorium was by [Alexander] Calder with all kinds of acoustical baffles in curvilinear shapes and bright colors. They were attached to the walls and the ceiling. That was a big eye-opener.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You must have been thrilled.

MS. HICKS: Thrilled! But not so thrilled about the political situation.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And the passports? I am waiting for you to get back your passports.

MS. HICKS: We recuperated our passports, and we soon made friends with Spanish exiles who Rallo

had introductions to. They were political activists and they were engineers, architects – and they were plotting the downfall of Perez Jimenez [President of Venezuela, 1952–1958], the dictator.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Actively! I had had very little exposure to politics – I was out in the kitchen with the Spanish wives cooking paella or something but what was going on in the other room was pretty serious. I sensed we were being watched by the police. Once we were picked up and taken in for questioning. I was concerned, especially when – is this interesting to you?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It's very interesting.

MS. HICKS: It has nothing to do with art, but maybe it does.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, it – yes, and it explains how you entered in all these fields. Yes, it is interesting.

MS. HICKS: Well, it was the precise period of my life when I tried to understand and deal with how involved I wanted to be in politics, in social questions, and/or how aloof I was going to be or cloistered in art and in singular pursuits.

I remember sitting one night in a ballet performance, in a loge at the National Theatre. We didn't have money so we weren't able to buy tickets to the ballet in Caracas. But here we were sitting in a loge, and the president of the republic was sitting about seven tiers away, I looked around and saw all of the Spanish friends. What are they doing in the ballet? Why are there police in sandals, with machine guns guarding the doors? I was suspicious. I thought, potentially we're assassinating the president here this evening.

Is this what I'm here for? I am leaving and going to Chile. By the time I returned from Chile a year later, Rallo and his friends were preparing to go to Cuba because that was next on their checklist: after, Perez Jimenez was deposed, to go for Batista [Fulgencio Batista Zaldivar (1901-1973)].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: This first trip to Caracas: it was in 1957 and you were 23 years old. The year later, that would have been 1958, you came back from Chile.

MS. HICKS: Yes, but on my way down to Chile – I haven't told you – I travelled in small local airlines and by land. It was economical and I could see and photograph. I was alone; no one was going with me.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But you're taller than anybody else, don't forget that. [Laughter.] Compared to South American women, you must have been much taller.

MS. HICKS: I tried not to think about danger – just coping with immediate problems – getting from point A to point B. How to get from Caracas to Bogotá, or to Quito and Otavalo, Ecuador – that was the only thing that concerned me. And Junius Bird was guiding me a bit.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You haven't told us a word about Junius Bird until now. Do you think it's the right moment to bring him into the picture?

MS. HICKS: Yes, when I took the initial pre-Columbian art history course with George Kubler at Yale and he understood I was interested in Andean textiles, he suggested I meet Junius Bird at the Museum of Natural History in New York and he became the main advisor for my research. He was

the expert.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Junius Bird. Yes.

MS. HICKS: And we hit it off. He was a real treasure house of information.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You owe him a lot?

MS. HICKS: I owe him more than a lot. He made a list of places for me to go and see. He wanted me to try and find out what was happening in certain sites that were being excavated in South America. So when you're alone and have a map with little pins marking destinations, the story becomes how to get from one place to the next. If there is no public transport, how do you make friends with people driving delivery trucks? Can they take you to one place from where you can pick up a ride to the next place?

It's crucial to have names of people who can –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Recommend you or help you?

MS. HICKS: To check in with. Junius had been to South America many times for his research and even spent his honeymoon down in Tierra del Fuego. He prodded me to go and find things and send him reports, and to collect things along the way. I tried to observe. He gave me reasons for going to see the weaving, the Indians, the villages, the architecture, and the archeology in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile. Basically he gave me a more focused way of traveling.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: How did you get your passports back and how did you start traveling alone southwards?

MS. HICKS: The passports were not as difficult as I thought it was going to be. It was a matter of going – three or four days later, after they were able to check their records and recuperate our documents.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And they gave them.

MS. HICKS: They gave them but it was – at the beginning, of course, a shock and I had no – that was an awakening of other things to come. If you've been living in the United States all of your life, you're just not prepared for these kinds of confrontations.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No.

MS. HICKS: Others who have been through wars –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Exactly. That's it – and especially the Middle West. I mean, you had been so sheltered, but you knew one thing: that your American passport was the most precious belonging you had when you're outside of the United States, so to give it up means you're absolutely in the hands of the people who have your passport.

MS. HICKS: All kinds of scenarios flash into your mind, but you have to keep telling yourself not to frighten yourself.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Right.

MS. HICKS: You're already scared, so try not to imagine catastrophes because it's counter

productive.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: It's easy to say that in hindsight now.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Of course, but I'm sure you realized the danger.

MS. HICKS: When you get sick traveling alone it is quite frightening. I caught something labeled the Asiatic flu, when I got to Peru. Everything had gone well in Colombia and Ecuador. The people I had met helped me locate places to see and photograph, but when I got to Peru I came down with a high fever. I was staying in a pension with some archeologists and anthropologists. I had to watch my money, too, because every day you save money means you can extend your trip a day longer.

It wasn't my plan to get sick for 10 days in Peru, but I did and someone helped me out. Miracle of all miracles. I was told about an art school in Miraflores [neighborhood in Lima] and I went to visit it. It was run by John Davies, who had been a teacher at Syracuse University and had married one of his beautiful students, Isabel Benevides [sp], who I think was either the daughter or the niece of one of the presidents of Peru. They lived on a glorious property and they took me in and gave me an impressive bedroom, in an unoccupied part of the house, where I thought I was going to die. This was really going out in style.

I was a sick, lost soul. They fed me and nursed me back to health. I'll never forget this time. When I recovered they led me to beautiful ancient textile collections, so my interest was intensifying.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: It can only intensify when you're in Peru surrounded by amazing archaeological collections. I went to – is it interesting if I tell you the itinerary, because it was –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, it is.

MS. HICKS: Well, from Lima I went to Cuzco, Urubamba, and Machu Picchu. That was the highlight: Machu Picchu, and to photograph there. The photos were published later in Yale's architecture school journal, *Perspecta*. From there I went down to Pisac, Pucara, Juliaca and Puno towards Teohuanaco and Lake Titicaca – between Peru and Bolivia. I continued to Chile, through Arequipa and Tacna by train and by bus. Crossing the border at Arica, between Peru and Chile, someone asked me if I would carry one of their sacks through the customs – maybe five kilos of sugar. I couldn't say no and make a whole bus full of enemies, but when I think about it now, I must have –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Nowadays it would be impossible.

MS. HICKS: Carrying five-kilo bags of sugar across the border – suppose it was something else?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, something white. [Laughter.] And something powder.

MS. HICKS: Well, that's how I entered Chile through the Atacama Desert, down through Iquique and Antofagasta with bleak, arid landscapes. A wonderful way to arrive to Chile; not just to land at Santiago, but to go to La Serena, Ovalle, La Ligua. Chile is a geographic experience. But Chile is a very long country. They were tedious bus rides and –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Tell me, what did you do during those long rides?

MS. HICKS: Wrote.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You wrote.

MS. HICKS: Daybooks, journals, and sketchbooks.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you drew also?

MS. HICKS: Drew, photographed, and wrote.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and you did that consistently all the time?

MS. HICKS: Most of the time, because I had no one to talk to and I had to occupy my mind and stay focused.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And besides, it was a very good means to bring back a lot of information that you would have forgotten.

MS. HICKS: When I was doing this my purpose was just to keep myself on track. I never thought the information might become useful.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But it has.

MS. HICKS: Later it became useful, but back then I just entertained myself; almost like writing a comic book describing what was happening every day.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Nevertheless, you did owe a report to Junius and maybe also to Kubler and maybe also to Josef Albers and to Anni Albers. I mean, you did owe them some information.

MS. HICKS: However, at the time, as I was going down to Chile, my sense and my feeling was I doubt I'll be coming back.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did you think you would – you thought you wouldn't make it?

MS. HICKS: There were times I didn't think I'd make it.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: What was the main danger in your perspective?

MS. HICKS: Fear, loneliness, confusion, and inability to make a coherent plan to get through this uncertain period.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But to be concrete, did you think you would be killed, or did you think you would go crazy?

MS. HICKS: First of all, I had been quite sick in Peru.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That's true. That's frightening, to be sick when you're far from home and traveling in unfamiliar territory.

MS. HICKS: I had been quite shaken in Venezuela with the political upheaval and confrontation. Then leaving my friend Joaquin, saying goodbye. And studying the map every day and moving incessantly. Where am I going?

[audio break].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, would you please give us some more details about the fears you had traveling south to Chile?

MS. HICKS: Chile is very far away from the United States – from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere – and every kilometer you travel is another kilometer to repeat to get back up again, so while you're moving southward, southward, your destination eventually is to go northward to return home.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I felt cut off. Isolated. Disconnected. I had a hard time dealing with the idea of staying alone for a year in Chile. When I got to Santiago I checked into the Fulbright office; it was September [1957]. It was gray, crowded, and ugly – Santiago. It wasn't like the beautiful villages and sites I had seen in the Andes. It was more like a European city, but dark and dingy. Of course, there was the beautiful Cordillera – the mountains. And soon spring arrived so the flowering trees began to bloom in the parks and landscape – once you got out of Santiago – but my impression was Santiago was pretty dim.

It was not easy to find a place to live. I rented an empty furniture store facing Parque Forestal. It had a big plate glass window on the ground floor and I moved up on the second floor and went to the popular market and bought a chair and table made of reeds. The person who had had that furniture store loaned me an old bed. Slowly, I started to paint, and when I started to paint and to get acquainted with the neighborhood, the market, and the countryside – Viña del Mar and Valparaíso, Isla Negra, Zapallar, and other places, it made a big difference. The person who was the key – I had a letter of introduction to Sergio Larrain Garcia Moreno – was the dean of the architecture school at the Universidad Católica.

That letter was written by Albers who was plugging me in – he knew Larrain. He had been to Chile himself – to teach his basic design and color course. Now, I understood why Albers had sent me there. He had promised that one of his students would perpetuate the course he had begun.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I see, but he hadn't told you?

MS. HICKS: No, he just gave me the letter of introduction. He was rather devious in some ways. [Laughter.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Should we ask questions, or should we –

MS. HICKS: Well, when I think about it now, why was I in Chile? I realized when I got there: he wanted me to teach that course. And in Spanish. I taught the young architecture students – all boys – the basic design and color course as I had learned it at Yale: visual phenomena – the difference, as Albers would say, between factual and perceptual.

He had a son – not Albers, but Larrain. He invited me home with his family and I met his son whose name was Sergio [Queco] Larrain Echenique. He was a photographer and had a darkroom downtown in Santiago and he told me I could develop and print all of my negatives that I had shot on my trip. It felt good to work with him in the darkroom and do photography together.

Not only that, he loved to travel – Sergio, the son. And so he and I set up an extended trip through the south of Chile in December [1957] to January [1958].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And that took care of your fears?

MS. HICKS: I wouldn't say that.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No? What would you say?

MS. HICKS: I would say it diluted my fears. Diluted; didn't dispel them.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Not completely, no?

MS. HICKS: I was delighted to have a traveling companion who seemed to know where he was going. I later found out that he felt the same way about me and that he was more fearful than I was, but the two together, we –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Like the two bicycles – [laughter] – which can keep upright leaning one against the other.

MS. HICKS: We made an incredible trip down to Pucón, Villarica and the volcanic regions, and then we went to the virgin forests. We reached the area where Junius Bird had been and where he told me to keep my eyes open for the last Ona and Alakaluf Indians, and to be sure and photograph them.

In Punta Arenas we arranged to fly in two little NA – North American trainers – planes with open cockpits. There were pilots and we would sit behind as their co-pilots. Why two? Because we could fly in between the glaciers and the icebergs and photograph each other with the perspective of the small planes in relation to the masses of ice.

That was an – when I think about it now, I would discourage anyone in my family to do something like that, but it was unforgettable – the experience we had of flying in those planes in that incredible area of the world.

We also went up in another plane with a Plexiglas nose that was diving. It was used for mapping the territory. Argentina and Chile have long had difficulties distinguishing borders and frontiers and –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, whose territory –

MS. HICKS: They were remapping some of the areas down there. The way they achieved it was to fly up in the air and turn the plane perpendicular to the ground so they could take shots from the nose of the plane. We photographed too, which meant we could sell these unusual documents. We had practically no clothes with us, but we each had two cameras and a lot of film. In fact, since we were the same size, the three pairs of corduroy jeans between the two of us were enough. We'd take turns wearing a clean sweater. He was a pretty neat traveler.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You didn't tell us how old he was compared to you.

MS. HICKS: He must have been about four years older than I was.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But he was not yet 30?

MS. HICKS: I don't think so.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No.

MS. HICKS: Chile became fascinating. Through Sergio – once we returned to Santiago – I met artists and writers: Carmen Silva, Nemesio Antúnez, Pablo Neruda. It was a small city and people knew one another.

Living there six, seven months, I began to find my way around in different circles. I met Greta Mosny, the archaeologist, thanks to Junius, and she made an exhibition of my modest weaving experiments inside the Museum of Natural History [Museo de Historia Natural, Santiago, Chile]. She asked me what I was doing and why. I said I was trying to learn how ancient Andean textiles were made by attempting to replicate them. She said, “That’s interesting; let me have your drawings and small woven works and I’ll put them in the Vitrina del Mes,” [the window of the month]. It was a display case in the museum. She thought it could interest students researching on their own in an amateurish way. I began painting, when we came back up from the south, large canvases, and Nemesio Antúnez and Luis Vargas helped set up an exhibition in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Parque Forestal [National Museum of Fine Arts]. That was too good to be true. It was a beautiful museum but rather empty.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So they welcomed your work?

[Audio break, tape change.]

MS. HICKS: They welcomed something different and perhaps it was a way to fill the big spaces. And Vargas, director of the museum, had the attitude of, why not?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: How did the public react?

MS. HICKS: I would say it resembled a real art exhibition, had real critics and press. I even sold half of the exhibition to people who looked like real clients.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So that was the first time in your life that you sold a work of art of yours?

MS. HICKS: Yes, I think so. I mean, I didn’t know if they were works of art, but they were paintings I had made inspired by landscapes in the south of Chile.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And people were willing to pay for them?

MS. HICKS: And hang them in their living or dining room. And invite me over for dinner, too.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Wonderful.

MS. HICKS: Sergio made gigantic black and white prints of his photos of rocks, seaweed, and algae – things we’d seen in Chiloé – wooden houses built on stilts in the water. When the tide was down, we’d walk underneath the houses and see shells and debris washed up making incredible designs. Sergio photographed all this and then blew it up to sizes as large as my paintings. When I say large, they were probably seventy inches high. We didn’t hang the paintings or the photos on the walls, but I think that’s what people liked about the show. We made metal – little metal braces – that we could attach to the bottom of each side of the panels. That way they were freestanding. The paintings and the photographs were scattered in the room, facing each other at angles.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: They were standing?

MS. HICKS: Yes, standing on the floor with braces like small skis on either side. And to enter the exhibition we thought, let’s take people into the world that we had discovered, so we built a white

textile tunnel to walk through, like a birthing channel, moving from the earth-world to the water-world and the landscape-world of the south of Chile.

Someone invited us to do the show in Buenos Aires, so we went a month or two later to Argentina, but the setting wasn't as nice. It was in a bookstore/gallery.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, but nevertheless it was a wonderful opportunity to see Buenos Aires.

MS. HICKS: Which I hated. No, that's too strong.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Why?

MS. HICKS: I am overwhelmed by large cities where everyone is rushing and seeming to be going somewhere important. And since I am an observer, I sit and watch but I'm not a part of it.

I feel uncomfortable, left out, threatened sometimes, so a camera serves me well – and writing. I can sit on a park bench; no one will talk to me if I look as though I'm occupied. And then I can observe around me. So Buenos Aires? I'm trying to remember something exciting about Buenos Aires. The tango and the food, but I couldn't really take advantage of these things. My time and my means were strictly limited.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Was that the end of your South American trip, or did you go to another place afterwards?

MS. HICKS: You can't go down the west coast of South America country by country and kilometer by kilometer without trying to do the same thing on the east coast coming back up.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Uh-huh, that's Brazil then?

MS. HICKS: First I went to Uruguay. But before that I went to Bolivia – a very rugged but interesting trip by land.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But that's not really the east coast.

MS. HICKS: No, but that was the important country I didn't want to miss.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, so on your trip back you went to Bolivia?

MS. HICKS: I moved around in the back of trucks and discovered an abundance of amazing textiles.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, that were actually made there.

MS. HICKS: Handspun and hand-woven llama and alpaca, and people were wearing them from head to foot.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, that wasn't so much archaeology.

MS. HICKS: And hats – wonderful hats. Bolivian markets were full of knitting and weaving, and I saw weavers working on backstrap looms all along in the countryside.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So from what I understand, you became more and more involved with weaving on that South American trip.

MS. HICKS: Yes, definitely.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And is it during that trip that it dawned on you that one day you would be an artist in the fiber world? Not yet?

MS. HICKS: I was unaware that a fiber world existed. I was a painter interested in archaeology and ceramics and weaving and architecture.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: And I wanted to return to Venezuela to reconnect with Rallo, and then get back to Yale. I had received a letter saying that if I returned to Yale in September –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In September 1958?

MS. HICKS: Exactly. That they would count the work I had done as out-of-residence work toward my Master's of Fine Arts. So if I would come and do the last two semesters in residence at Yale, I could have a Master of Fine Arts.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. That was very tempting?

MS. HICKS: That seemed –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: The right thing to do probably.

MS. HICKS: I hadn't done anything very sensible for a long time and it seemed like the sensible thing to do.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And am I right to believe that your parents probably were very much reassured or comforted to know that you were going to have a Master's degree at the end, or didn't it matter so much for them?

MS. HICKS: By then they were quite absorbed in my two brothers' careers which were panning out: both of them, Princetonians, and Bill attending Columbia Medical School.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So it wasn't so much an issue for them to know if you were going to have a Master's?

MS. HICKS: No, it was more of an issue of who I was hanging out with.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, to get married. [Laughter.]

MS. HICKS: To settle down and make a – you know, a –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: A future mother?

MS. HICKS: – a nice life. Going back to school was just postponing that eventuality. Well, I went back to Yale probably because I didn't want to go home.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And you didn't feel like marrying either.

MS. HICKS: I didn't have any viable candidate.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No.

MS. HICKS: I completed the final two semesters at Yale; it wasn't easy. Albers was retiring and a new visiting professor had been named at the school. He was a Neapolitan artist called Rico Lebrun [1900-1964].

He'd come in from the West Coast – California. Albers was slowly leaving and retiring, but still teaching a few classes. His ghost was in every corner and Lebrun felt out of place in the school.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: He was actually from Italy or – ?

MS. HICKS: He was a Neapolitan, but had immigrated to the United States; he was married to an American [Constance Crown] and they were living in Los Angeles.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But he himself was born in Naples?

MS. HICKS: Yes, he had adapted to the Southern California mentality – quite different from the Yale atmosphere or the New Haven winters.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: There's a great difference between Southern and Northern Italy and I suppose he was a real southerner and, of course, that was far from the rigor of the Bauhaus and Josef Albers.

MS. HICKS: Except I soon learned that he had another kind of rigor. That was astounding: coming from South America and checking back into the school under a totally different umbrella. The only familiar thing to me was Ernest Boyer, my friend, who somehow had survived the fallout of others leaving, graduating, or failing. He was still there painting quietly and we struggled through those last eight months together at Yale; we both became friends with Rico Lebrun and his wife, Constance.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Because – did he teach you a lot finally?

MS. HICKS: He taught us about humanity. He was such a warm human being and he cooked spaghetti for us and he invited us over to his house. After dinner he would show his books about art history. He opened our eyes to all kinds of things that were European – especially the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya [1746-1828].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: May I ask one question? Did he teach you about color?

MS. HICKS: Nothing.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Nothing? That's interesting.

MS. HICKS: He only worked in black and white and sepia. And his exuberant, expressionistic, powerful drawings were in, pen and ink, chalk, casein or pencil.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So your talent with colors didn't find a match there?

MS. HICKS: Lebrun believed that drawing was a tool for understanding form and describing movement. His work was figurative. Albers's was abstract.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Lebrun seemed to say, "Let's express ourselves with exuberance and passion."

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So he did teach you a lot about figurative art?

MS. HICKS: Well, he taught us passion. How can you teach passion? What am I saying? It sounds ridiculous.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No.

MS. HICKS: That's when I began thinking seriously about art.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So it's through Lebrun that you started to see yourself as an artist?

MS. HICKS: More that I started thinking about art – looking at the things he showed us, the way he talked, his manner of being unified with his work; everything he did was an extension of his work. Now, I was a bit overwhelmed by his work, too.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did you think it was bad taste?

MS. HICKS: I didn't – who was I to decide what taste was?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, I mean as a way of speaking.

MS. HICKS: My simple way of evaluating his drawings of gross, vulgar, voluptuous, female figures spilling out onto the whole page was that they were grotesque. But they were so well drawn.

He had masterful facility for drawing – real virtuosity! He caused you to confront and look at a figure in space. There was a front, a back, and it was moving and it was heroic! Ernest, who was a conservative person from Dayton, Ohio, with a Greek mother and a French father – so he knew about Mediterranean culture – came alive with this artist-professor.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, it corresponded to the standards he had been brought up in.

MS. HICKS: Most of the students were caught unaware because Albers would cross Lebrun on the stairway at Yale – one going up, one going down – and Albers would turn his head and act as though he didn't see Lebrun when he passed him. We all observed this and felt, how can he be so hurtful to this man who is so expansively friendly?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Each artist was committed to his work and didn't like the others'. We started thinking about choices in art. Albers and Lebrun had no meeting ground, even on which to say hello!

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But it wasn't reciprocal? Lebrun didn't turn away when he saw Albers, or was it reciprocal?

MS. HICKS: At the beginning he was surprised, but as the year wore on he understood that this was war to death and conducted himself accordingly. And these were two strong artists and convincing teachers; we were dependent upon them to graduate from school in May. They would evaluate our work, our attitudes, our behavior. And it was crucial.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But you made it.

MS. HICKS: I felt like a member of the Foreign Legion, somehow, without a clear map.

[Audio break.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: This is Monique Lévi-Strauss interviewing Sheila Hicks at her home in Paris, France, on February the 10th, 2004 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. We are sitting in Sheila's greenhouse and enjoying the sunshine.

Well, Sheila, before closing the chapter of your student years, I would like you to return for a moment to Josef Albers. How did he contribute to your formation? I would like you to sum up everything he gave you and that you are still grateful to him for giving you.

MS. HICKS: I can see you're taking a very positive bent in this enquiry.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I am a positive person!

MS. HICKS: So I will be, too, and recount one small incident – a kind of illumination. On a cold day, waiting for a bus to return from Albers' house – where he had driven me out to work with Anni on a textile session – it dawned on me what this was all about: education, and how much I had learned from both Josef and Anni Albers.

It's funny how things all come together at once. A big floodgate opened: I realized that Josef had awakened me to the world of color and ways of using color. At the same time, Anni had helped me to think about structure. There's a basic structure to everything. Biologists know this, but artists don't necessarily see this right away.

There I was thinking color and thinking structure simultaneously. In addition I was developing my powers of observation – visual.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you be a bit more precise about the way Josef Albers taught you about color – well, taught you the truth of colors. How did he go about it?

MS. HICKS: We can read about Albers's lectures and his color course [Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*. Yale University Press, 1963.]. They're sort of visual exercises. I'll say that my own particular experience was to repeatedly work on all of the exercises over and over again: to realize there was no one way to do them. It meant exercising your eyes and exercising your perception.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And practicing.

MS. HICKS: Practicing to look and to create visual experiences.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I understand. Yes. And so that's all you would say about Josef Albers? That his main lesson was a lesson of colors?

MS. HICKS: For me I think that was the main lesson. Perhaps I would go further and cite his methodology.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, I always think of you as a colorist, so it's very important to know from whom you acquired the knowledge. I mean, the talent you have from your parents, but –

MS. HICKS: These are difficult questions to answer. No one funnels into a person's eyes or brain a certain formula and expects to know what comes out the other end.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: What's important, also, that I learned from Albers, was to be articulate and clear. I was angry by what had happened at Yale the last year I was there, so I think I learned to take charge of my own life and my own future and not depend on scholarships and help from professors. Albers did teach me, but probably by reaction more than anything – to just get on with it and to do my work and not rely on anybody but myself.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So he taught you that, too.

MS. HICKS: I became determined not to teach and not to get caught in academic conflicts; I became determined to make art and to live in an atmosphere in which art can be produced – to get out of the school systems. I think that's what pushed me to go to Mexico right away. I waited until I knew I had passed the Yale jury and then left the United States.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You're speaking of your Master's degree now?

MS. HICKS: In 1959. May. Master of Fine Arts in painting.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You didn't wait?

MS. HICKS: I didn't wait to – this is folkloric probably, but –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, it's interesting.

MS. HICKS: I went to the dean once I knew I was definitely going to graduate. I didn't want to jeopardize that. And I said, "I'm leaving. Will you please send me my diploma? I'm really disappointed by the way you let the atmosphere deteriorate in the art school. Maybe it was beyond your possibility to do anything about it, but we were the victims of a conflict that exploded in our faces." Probably he thought it was good training for a young person to know what the world was like.

Another student went with me, to this meeting and reiterated the same thing. We both said goodbye to academia, goodbye to Yale, and went out and started working. I have Albers to thank for that too, in a way.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, so it's in reaction to him that you went down to Mexico, but who was financing your trip to Mexico? Did you have a grant to go there?

MS. HICKS: No. I had already put out feelers about architecture projects. Don't forget, I was very interested in architecture. I had written and contacted the office of Felix Candela, Cubiertas ALA, in Mexico City. You know, I had been to Mexico before.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I wanted to return to Mexico and work on a creative project and earn my living. I wish I could reconstruct the whole thing for you, and I probably can from my archives. I worked on a documentary film about Candela's hyperbolic paraboloid constructions – experiments of architecture, and I got an advance from a film production company.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That explains where you were getting part of your means to live there.

MS. HICKS: I also borrowed money.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I moved to the Hotel Cortez on the Zocalo [main plaza] in Mexico City. Before going I contacted *Horizons* magazine – Jane Wilson – and three architecture magazines saying that it was my intention to work on this project, and they told me that if I brought back good material they would publish it.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: The three magazines were *Architectural Record*, *Architectural Forum*, and *Progressive Architecture*. I was trying to make a film about architecture. I thought I could do it quickly because it seemed to me that filmmaking was a quick medium. I found out it's not quick at all. It's tedious, laborious, and confusing to put a film together. The producer shot and killed himself in Mexico while we were working on the film. That threw a serious hiatus into the project.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did it end it completely or was it – were you able to –

MS. HICKS: Rescue it?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, rescue it?

MS. HICKS: I couldn't rescue it because I was due to go to France. I had a limited amount of time.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: For what reason were you going to go to France?

MS. HICKS: Did I mention Henri Peyre, the Yale French professor, director of the romance – I know you're starting to laugh because it sounds like I'm on three continents.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Or in three countries.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: My head was in three countries and I was a kind of tripod, trying to learn Spanish and French. French, because Henri Peyre had suggested that I go to France and continue my painting studies on a grant called Fribourg scholarship, and Renault, the car company, was paying for it.

He told me it was the first time that it would be awarded to a woman – to a girl. He said, "I don't want you to mess up and go and get married and have a baby and that we never hear from you again, so promise me you will carry through." I promised and I did exactly what he told me not to do – except for the last part.

But back to Mexico: Candela, the architect, gave me the manuscript of his book in preparation, and I became the courier and brought this material up to New York. The architecture magazines, who I was in contact with, thought it was surprising. I don't think people trusted the mail too much between Mexico and the United States in 1959.

I began to get organized to go to France. I didn't know for how long.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And this was your first trip to Europe?

MS. HICKS: Yes. Henri Peyre had said, "All of this Latin American enchantment is fine, but you'll never be a truly cultivated woman unless you know la France." It was a put-down but I felt he was right when I think about it now, 40 years later.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But he could have said the same about Italy.

MS. HICKS: It was his way to challenge me to move my mind because when you've become totally enthralled with Latin America, it is good to realize there is a bigger world. And when you're young it's the time to keep moving along.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: He was right then? Maybe he was a bit chauvinistic about France.

MS. HICKS: He was a typical Frenchman. That's fine. He got me to France by provoking me. I wasn't excited about going to France. I guess I had been taken with Latin America. But there's one – I don't know whether to divert your attention –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Try.

MS. HICKS: Something happened in between.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So tell me what.

MS. HICKS: Don't forget, I was a young female circulating in Mexico.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I met a man.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In Mexico?

MS. HICKS: He was a beekeeper [Henrik Tati Schlubach] and that influenced my life totally because I decided to marry him.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That summer in Mexico?

MS. HICKS: Yes. It sounds like an abrupt decision.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: The way it came about was he and I were seeing each other and when the time came for me to leave for Europe, he proposed to me. He lived in the country – a beautiful place outside of Taxco. I could envision living there with him as an alternative to the United States. I said "Yes." But then he said, "Well, let's get married before you leave on this grant so that I'm sure you're coming back." Now, that's kind of a lark but when you're young you do outrageous things and when I think about it, it was outrageous. We were married by the local mayor – an Indian from the nearby village who brought a friend who could read and write.

I don't mean to shock you with this story: you can imagine it happening if you fall in love.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. [audio break] Sheila. Now, you're leaving for France. Can you tell me what was your intention in going to France? What did you think you were going to do? Were you going to paint? Were you going to learn about art? Were you going to learn French? Were you going to go on doing photography and films? Or did you want to weave? Could you be precise about what your intentions were to use that grant to go to France?

MS. HICKS: Good question! I was in turmoil and total conflict. I don't think I can give you a clear answer to that question. I was naïve; but that's part of youth. I was given this grant, based on my

record at Yale, because I was first or second in the class. That didn't mean I had a clear picture of what I wanted to do. I wanted to learn about life. I had a poetic bent so my logic was not easy to explain.

Matisse said, "Every day an artist should open his eyes like a newborn child." I was taking this literally and I was living day to day. I was confused: following opportunities that came my way. Is marriage an opportunity?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: It was for me. It was 1959. Friends were getting married. Was this a solution for me? A husband, a house, some place to live and work and be with an interesting man with a European and a Latin American culture, in an adobe house that he had built himself? The manual part of the adobe house appealed to me a lot. He and his world spoke to me.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I can imagine. Yes. So when you left him to go to France, what did you intend to do in the six months that you were to be there?

MS. HICKS: I tried to meet French. It was a little bit difficult. I barely spoke French. Also, I had nothing to offer particularly.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You were beautiful.

MS. HICKS: That part didn't always work to my benefit.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, but it was very important in your contacts with people. You were stunning.

MS. HICKS: That I can't say.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Well, I met you not long afterwards and I can be a witness.

MS. HICKS: That's a woman's problem, isn't it?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It is a woman's problem.

MS. HICKS: It's pretty tough to sort out when people want to –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, but it is an answer – one of the answers to what you just asked. What could I offer them? You could offer your presence.

MS. HICKS: My good company.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And your good company.

MS. HICKS: I fell in with Latin Americans who were living in France. It's a side entrance to come into France through Latin American painters and writers, but it was terrific.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I can imagine. Yes.

MS. HICKS: I didn't have a studio or any place to work. I was living in a maid's room on the seventh floor on rue de Vaugirard that a Chilean lent me. He was a mime with the Marcel Marceau troop and traveled a lot. I wrote diaries and made things with thread, yarn, string.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So there we get to the fiber.

MS. HICKS: I made color drawings and collages and sculpted with shoe laces and stockings. And it was very comforting – it gave me a passport, too. When I'd go to see someone and they'd ask, "Well, what do you do?" I wasn't lugging paintings around; I'd take things out of my pocket and show them. Of course, I was wearing clothes that I had bought and made in Bolivia out of potato sacks. I became known as the Bedouin in the neighborhood – the North Africans were identified as Bedouins. I had a kind of presence – not as a cute number, but as an outsider, I guess. I had found my personality or my packaging in all of these beautiful hand-made textiles from Bolivia and Peru.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you had an exotic appearance.

MS. HICKS: A Bedouin, as the concierge said. Then I found d'Harcourt.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, Raoul d'Harcourt.

MS. HICKS: D'Harcourt was the man who wrote the book about Pre-Incaic textiles – about old Peruvian textiles [*Les textiles anciens du Pérou et leurs techniques*. Paris, 1934.]. He had been at the Musée de L'Homme in Paris.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Exactly.

MS. HICKS: It was one of the books I used to write my thesis at Yale, and it was a special day when I tracked that man down and went to see him here in Paris. His book had opened my eyes to textile structures: it was full of detailed drawings and photographs.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: He had classified them all in a wonderful way so that everybody could understand them and he still is, for France, *the* reference.

MS. HICKS: I would say for the United States, too. His book has been translated and published in English [Textiles of Ancient Peru and Their Techniques. The University of Washington Press, 1962.] I was living very simply. I wasn't painting except in my head.

I didn't have a bathroom, so I'd go for showers on Friday nights with friends to the public baths. Then we'd eat and drink and hang out at the club Port Salut on rue St. Jacques and listen to singers like Serge Gainsbourg.

That was French culture for me, except I figured out – not so quickly – not quick enough, that I was pregnant and that I was going to have a Mexican baby. My days in France were numbered. I would be going back to have my baby in Mexico. I was living the life of the young artist in Paris. I was becoming a mother and I was going back to – literally, going back to the ranch in Mexico.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But can you tell me one thing before leaving Paris? What had Paris taught you, if you want to sum it.

MS. HICKS: Paris is unique: I barely had time to penetrate the first layer. The French know a lot. That's what it taught me: French history, French museums, the whole atmosphere, the architecture, the countryside – it gave me the desire to learn much more about France.

Of course, the food was a discovery. People lived graciously and had a good life. Elegance seemed almost effortless – life was of a certain quality and harmonious. I could see that the professional and personal lives melded together beautifully. Most women worked, had families, and cultural

interests.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, the harmony. May I just make a comparison? When you leave Mexico, you get married because that way you know you're going to come back.

MS. HICKS: I have a solid person in my life.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and when you leave Paris you promise yourself that you're going to come back to France.

MS. HICKS: France has become part of my life.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That's what I wanted to hear.

MS. HICKS: France had definitely become a part of my life and the grant, which was modest, \$180 a month –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: For how many months?

MS. HICKS: It was good for one year.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But you only used six months?

MS. HICKS: I only used part of it and I was concerned about what was going to happen when they found out I was –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Pregnant.

MS. HICKS: Not only pregnant, but leaving and not painting and not doing everything I was supposed to be doing – the program that had been more or less outlined.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Because you didn't follow it at all.

MS. HICKS: No, not at all. The exposure to France stirred my imagination. I was inspired but I was not very productive.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, now we're in March 1960, and you are landing in Mexico because you are about to have a baby. Would you please go on from there?

MS. HICKS: I'm turning my thoughts to living in one peaceful place with one person, having a child, and making my home environment something wonderful. I have been out in space a good long while and I am weary and I want to settle down. Weaving and textiles become more and more important to me.

I am painting intermittently, drawing, but mostly I'm looking for and finding people who are working with textiles. Mathias Goeritz invites me to teach, so I keep my hand in creative communication – something which I thought I was going to avoid. I was hired at the Universidad Autonoma in Mexico City for two Thursdays a month to teach design and color to architecture students. It brings me to the city, which is three and a half hours from where I live. I see exhibitions and meet people and have exchanges. Otherwise, I am with the indigenous population in the valley of Taxco el Viejo.

I began making textiles for my own amusement and for others, too – weaving large-scale. I worked with Polly Rodriguez [American weaver], who had a workshop in Taxco and with Rufino Reyes

[Mexican weaver], from Mitla, near Oaxaca, who would come up and sell his wares. Together we created new designs. We made our own electricity on the ranch, so the diesel engine would be cut at 10:00 every night; you had time to do things that you don't have time for in the city.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You met many artists in Mexico. Maybe you can say something about the crowd you met there?

MS. HICKS: I have to backtrack and mention books I was reading like *The Life of the Bee* [by Maurice Maeterlinck, 1913]. And Karl von Frisch's *The Dancing Bees* [*The Dancing Bees: an Account of the Life and Senses of the Honey Bee*]. These were influencing me. Of course, I read [Miguel] Covarrubias: *The Eagle and the Serpent* [*The Eagle, the Jaguar, and the Serpent; Indian Art of the Americas: North America, Canada and the United States*. 1954], and *Indian Art in Mexico and Central America* [*Indian Art in Mexico and Central America. Color plates and line drawings by the author*. 1957]. But then I also read Marcel Proust. I had the time to sit and read Marcel Proust, Simone de Beauvoir, Henry Miller, and I'd mix that with [William Hickling] Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru*, and *The Conquest of Mexico*, and Barney Rosset's *Evergreen Review*. This was how I continued my education living in the apiculture ranch.

I didn't go on with the Candela project, although I stayed in touch with his office. I was invited to give a lecture to architects in Mexico City showing my slides, for which I was paid. That was phenomenal. I became rather well acquainted with Luis Barragan. I'd go for lunch at his house and then teach at the university every month. He encouraged me to keep working on textiles and gave me ideas of things he wanted me to weave for a convent he was designing and for his own house.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: These were large-scale projects?

MS. HICKS: They seemed large to me: larger than miniatures – things that could be made domestic scale. I was already making everything for my own house – bedcovers, cushions, upholstery, carpets –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did you have a loom in Taxco?

MS. HICKS: I improvised by turning tables upside down and making them into four-post looms, attaching bars to the legs of the tables – predescribed formats. At about that time, my husband started getting annoyed with how much time I was spending on – he thought I should be taking care of the garden and other aspects of country living. And he challenged me. He said, "Enough with these potholders. Why don't you show them to somebody and get an evaluation to see if they're worth anything because it's absorbing a lot of your energy and time and maybe you should get back to painting."

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So he didn't believe so much in your weaving – less than Luis Barragan.

MS. HICKS: Less than Mathias Goeritz. Less than Luis Barragan. Nobody believes in weaving if you think the person knows how to paint. Why are they losing their time weaving?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Well, except somebody who would own a gallery and who would exhibit your weavings and sell them. He would believe in it.

MS. HICKS: Do you think such a gallery existed?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I'm asking.

MS. HICKS: Truthfully, I thought along those lines and I took my weavings – it wasn't very hard to carry them – easier than paintings, and showed them to Antonio Souza, who had a gallery in Mexico City. He said, "Yes, let's make an exhibition." That was my first exhibition of this kind of work ["Tejidos" 1961]. I also took them up to New York.

I get into moods sometimes – a sort of fury, and I remember flying to New York and calling the Museum of Modern Art and saying I was at the airport and that it was urgent to meet and Greta Daniel said, "Well then come right over." Mathias Goeritz had given me the name of Greta Daniel at the Museum of Modern Art. She was a curator in the department of architecture and design. She was from Bottrop, the same town in Germany where Albers had come from.

I spread out my work. Remember these were just small –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you give us the dimensions so that the listeners have a more precise idea?

MS. HICKS: About 25 centimeters by 15 centimeters [10 by 6 inches]. Some slightly larger; maybe 35 centimeters by 30 centimeters [14 by 12 inches].

I had a series of these – layers of them – like pancakes or crepes. The Museum bought some of these small weavings.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Just an interruption here. Most of these weavings must have been with four selvages. Am I correct to believe that?

MS. HICKS: Yes. They were made on a small loom that I had improvised – taking painting stretchers and pounding nails in the two ends and then stretching yarns between the nails. I was using techniques that I had observed in the Pre-Incaic textiles and I was trying out things and learning as I went along. The colors were not Peruvian, nor like tapestries.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: At that time, what fiber did you use?

MS. HICKS: Cotton and wool.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Cotton and wool. And of course in – if you had made them in Mexico they were dyed fiber.

MS. HICKS: Yes. But often they were undyed handspun wool that was very crusty and tough looking. If they were dyed, it was either with natural dyes or aniline dyes, in brilliant, shocking colors.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So those were Mexican colors?

MS. HICKS: No, they were my colors: a mix of Mexico, Albers, and France.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And France too? What you had seen in Aubusson?

MS. HICKS: No. They were sometimes very subtle; I loved the paintings of Vuillard and Bonnard so at times I would use mellow tones – not always high contrast or shocking.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So there was a broad range –

MS. HICKS: Of experimentation.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Of experimentation. [audio break].

Sheila, you have just landed in New York and you have telephoned to Greta Daniel at the Museum of Modern Art. Please tell us how she answered your question.

MS. HICKS: This is in about 1961. She must have been primed by Mathias. They were writing letters. People didn't telephone much between Mexico and the United States.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you were announced.

MS. HICKS: I'm sure Mathias had written her a letter because she was so nice, and she introduced me to Arthur Drexler, who was the head of the architecture department. She also introduced me to Alfred Barr, the director of the museum. There must have been a letter announcing some exotic girl arriving from Mexico with her potholders or something.

They could have been making fun of me and just wanted to see who he was sending them. They gave me a ticket to go and have lunch in the cafeteria on the upper floor of the Museum. When I came back down, they had talked together and decided to buy something.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You had left them your work?

MS. HICKS: While I went for lunch.

Rather than the colors they seemed more interested in the structures of the monochrome weavings, the textures, and the way I was moving the yarn to sort of write individual lines. I was handpicking each row of the weaving. They had predetermined sizes. All the edges were finished. They were almost identical on front and back. Texture would spring loose, then reintegrate – almost like drawing with yarn.

Alfred Barr said, "Can you make this larger?" Of course. With that mission, I set about trying to make larger ones. I counted how long it would take me. Now I felt validated in the work that I liked doing – don't forget, I had a baby [daughter, Itaka Marama Schlubach, born 1960] and it was compatible to be with her and sit and weave. I had many hours to myself. Also I mobilized a few people who worked on the ranch to help me in their spare time. I think that's why my husband was getting annoyed – they should be out clearing weeds, pruning the lemon trees and getting his supper ready.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: About how many people were weaving?

MS. HICKS: Maybe it grew from three to six or seven.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That's quite a lot.

MS. HICKS: Everyone's manual in Mexico in the countryside, and since we were improvising and inventing, no one felt intimidated – we were all learning as we went along.

My daughter had constant attention, too, because our little community was sitting around tying knots, spinning, knitting, and weaving. Well, everyone was happy – almost. My parents were uneasy that I lived in Mexico and was married to an older man, but they soon saw how happy I was.

I met original artists in Mexico City, like Leonora Carrington – English artist who had been with Max Ernst early on. She was married to a Hungarian photographer. Alice Rahon, who was married to

Wolfgang Paalen; they were surrealists. She was a good cook, too – French Breton.

Chucho Reyes [1880-1977], I don't think I mentioned. He was a folkloric colorist and extremely close to Luis Barragan. Sometimes Luis would say let's go together and see a place under construction and we'd discuss color ideas. Chucho had a strong voice in Barragan's architectural projects.

I'd always go and see Inez Amor at her gallery in Mexico City on Calle Milan. That's where I met Carlos Merida, the Guatemalan painter. I visited and photographed the Frida Kahlo/Diego Rivera house in Coyoacan: by now everyone has.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, now everybody knows it. There was a film.

MS. HICKS: I wanted to show my weavings in a New York gallery. Well, that was a wake-up experience. I showed them to Bertha Schaefer. She bought one made of short lengths of irregularly spun knotted wool [*Rufino*, 1961, 16 x 16 inches], but that was it. "Thank you, it's charming."

I showed them to John Lefevre at his gallery where he was exhibiting Julius Bissier's work. I liked the painter Julius Bissier, who was Swiss. He said, "Let me borrow these, and come over to my house to a cocktail party tonight. I want to show them." I was afraid it was going to be like my passport in Venezuela. I went, but it was a cocktail party of three men – vaguely interested in my weavings. I had a hard time getting them back and I decided I don't think I'm going to be able to market my work through a gallery as a painter or sculptor does. It was too modest in every way.

[Audio break.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, you have just told us that in New York you tried but you didn't really succeed to find a *good* gallery that would show your work and you yourself think it's your work that was too modest, but how did you finally get in touch with the public?

MS. HICKS: Well, you mentioned find a good gallery. Of course I was shooting too high.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I was looking for an art public. I didn't realize what I was facing. It was much worse than I realized. It was not an art public that would respond to this work: it was a craft public. I showed it to the American Craft Museum – each time I'd visit someone, they'd give me the name of someone else. Go and see Cora Carlyle at *American Fabrics* magazine. See Jack Lenor Larson of a textile company. Make friends with Mildred Constantine, at the Museum of Modern Art, who loves Mexico. Wilder Green, an architect. I would get positive response, but it didn't go much further than that, "Be sure and show me your new work when you come back."

I received a letter back in Mexico in 1963. Would I like to exhibit in a group show at the American Crafts Museum with four other artists? They were preparing a show called "Woven Forms." That would have been the first museum presentation, other than the painting one I had made in South America. I thought that's a downer and I said "Thank you, but no thank you. I don't want to be in the crafts museum in a group show." I later found out they had gone to the Museum of Modern Art, which was just next door, and borrowed my work from their collection and intended to include it in the show anyway.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: So it was in my interest to cooperate and give them biographical information, photos,

and to just swallow hard. I didn't go to see the exhibition until the last week. It is there I discovered other work, which I liked very much – Clare Zeisler, Lenore Tawney – so much so that on my way to Mexico I stopped by Chicago to see my family and I looked up Claire Zeisler who was living there. We became close friends working, traveling, and exhibiting together, thanks to that show.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That was in 1963? And then that show traveled, or was it another show?

MS. HICKS: Part of the show traveled. I had been in contact with the Kunstgewerbe Museum in Zurich, the director, Erika Billeter, decided to make a show and invite – at first I thought she was inviting me. How self-centered artists are. She was inviting me, plus Claire Zeisler and Lenore Tawney, but not the other two artists from the New York show.

I was grouped with Lenore and Claire. They were much older, but their work was youthful in attitude. It ended up that we three never got out of lockstep for about 20 years. It just kept perpetuating: we would be invited to show in textile art shows.

Lenore exhibited in New York at the Willard Gallery. I have letters from her describing how she's struggling to show her art. Claire had different kinds of options. She wasn't – Claire was never struggling, except in later life when she was intent to confirm her identity as an artist.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did you go back to Europe when your work was shown in Zurich?

MS. HICKS: Yes, I started to migrate to Europe and to slowly leave Mexico.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And your daughter?

MS. HICKS: And to take my daughter with me.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You took your daughter to Zurich?

MS. HICKS: I took my daughter everywhere I went. She was too young to protest. [Laughs.] She saw a lot of places; we were inseparable and she was charming and made friends on trains or planes or – Itaka.

It became clear to me that the rest of my life was not going to be spent on the ranch in Mexico; I decided to leave and come to France. I knew I did not want to live in the United States.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Since when had you decided that you didn't want to live in the United States? When, in your college years, you had made up your mind to see the world and live in other places, or did that dawn on you after you had started to travel?

MS. HICKS: I couldn't envision what my niche would be if I lived in the United States. Would it be to take a teaching position? Probably in a girls' school? I had taught briefly, architecture students, but I wouldn't be able to get hired in the United States at a school like Yale. Where would I teach? Some small or large university, in the art department? I didn't want to do that.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No. And to live as an artist – to live the life of an artist you thought that would be more possible in Europe because you had seen other artists do it?

MS. HICKS: I was up for the struggle. I was not trying to live like an artist. I think I just wanted to do my art. I had to find a way to finance this exodus from Mexico and to land in France. I went to Knoll – a company called Knoll Associates, which was a design company for furniture – first in Mexico City,

then in New York. I showed them my work, my experiments for upholstery, curtains – they were called casements – even carpets or panels. Florence Knoll came into the meeting, saw them – now it had nothing to do with how I looked, because she was a beautiful woman, and it had nothing to do with people writing letters of introduction.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No.

MS. HICKS: She gave an order to a man sitting at the table. I later learned he was the president of the company [Cornell Deckert], but of course she had formed the company. She said, “I don’t want her to leave this office without you giving her a contract to work with us.” And he said, “But she lives in Mexico.” She answered, “It doesn’t matter where she lives; she will be sending us ideas and designs and showing us her work regularly.” So I landed a contract – a consulting contract with Knoll for a modest monthly fee, but it was still three times more than my grant in France as a student.

That was the first, solid financial backing that I could count on, and with that I could move from Mexico to France.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That explains it very well.

MS. HICKS: The contract with Knoll gave me a sense of security, but not of artistic identity necessarily. After I had gone to the Museum of Modern Art, I made larger versions of my work and met with the same group of people. I could see they were disappointed when I brought them because they said, “Oh, we asked if you could make these bigger.” Well, I had made them four times bigger than the ones I had shown originally. That means I turned a large dining room table upside down and worked 30 – 40 inches [almost a square meter]. [Audio break, tape change.] Their response was, “We’ll buy these, but we thought you’d make them bigger.” I swallowed hard. They didn’t know how I made these with a needle and yarn, stitch by stitch: not even embroidery, where you have a base cloth and add stitches. I was constructing the entire cloth from zero – the warp and the weft crossing: up one, two down, over one, three down. And each step was a decision. There was no repetition from row to row; it was as though I was drawing with a cactus needle in the sand. It took an immense amount of time and concentration, but I found a way.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Excuse me for interrupting. This was all in monochrome?

MS. HICKS: Yes. Wool.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: All in wool, yes. So now tell us how that went on. You tried to make even larger pieces?

MS. HICKS: I needed help to do it. I didn’t know it would take me a year to weave this way, but pressure was building. The ceiling was lowering on my head in the house in Mexico. My husband didn’t think this was what he had bargained for in a wife, but I wanted to find my way as an artist. My daughter was about three and a half – four. Connie [Mildred Constantine] visited me at the ranch; so did Claire Zeisler and Greta Daniel.

They each indicated to me that they thought I wasn’t going to be able to live, work, and develop in the way I imagined. My husband was, more or less, of the same opinion, but he put it to me that I should leave because I would surely come back to my senses within short – trying to pursue the idea of being an artist – and that I would return more appreciative of the kind of life he had to offer me. So he encouraged me to go out into the world, but he didn’t want our daughter to leave.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That was a bone of contention?

MS. HICKS: I won't go into this personal story but that was a difficult decision. I kidnapped my infant daughter. As I said she went everywhere with me.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, now you're back to Paris and we're in 1964. Please tell us what made you choose to come back to Paris. Precisely why did you come back to Paris?

MS. HICKS: I've outlined how much I liked the food, the lifestyle, the museums and the cultural climate, but in addition, I liked one man: Enrique Zañartu – Chilean painter, born in Paris. With him I found a dialogue and a way of communicating about art and life. It was a way of moving out of an impasse. I fell in love with Enrique Zañartu and that's what brought me to France.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did he fall in love with your weavings?

MS. HICKS: He took me as an entity. He knew my weaving and my packaging were part of me and he liked it. And he liked my daughter, too. He had a daughter, Pia Zañartu, who was about 10 years old. We formed a solid relationship and had a son together one year later [1965]: Cristobal Zañartu, born in Paris.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, now you're living in Paris' and you're probably married with Enrique Zañartu. You have a child in 1965 and I would like to know how your work evolved. You spoke about a contract with Knoll, New York. Are you going through with that contract? Are you giving them ideas every month? Are they paying you?

MS. HICKS: Yes, that saved my skin.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you lived partly off –

MS. HICKS: I am married to a painter who is also struggling to make his living. We're living in his studio: 57 rue de Seine, on the seventh floor, walk-up.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I remember.

MS. HICKS: I'm in charge of three children. No, they're in charge of me: they determine my time and how I can spend it. And I'm looking for ways to continue my work. The director of the Bath Academy in England had seen the Zurich show. He invited me to teach a course at Corsham, Wiltshire in England. One thing led to another: students came to Paris and continued working with me that summer. I showed the results to Yves Vidal [Director of Knoll International] on Boulevard Saint Germain in Paris. My work was included in the American pavilion of the 13th Triennale of Design in Milano. That brought more people in contact with requests. One was a German carpet manufacturer; another was an Irish workshop looking for a young designer to help with their production.

In Wuppertal, Germany, I found a way to make large wool panels with a pneumatically driven tufting tool. I began developing ideas with new technology and making large monochrome works, not the old way, as in Mexico, but the new way in Germany.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You finally gave them what they had asked you to give a couple of years earlier.

MS. HICKS: Yes, but in a different form: white wool monochrome bas-relief panels.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I would like you to describe technically what this tufting was. How did the yarns that you put through a base cloth with a machine gun – how did they hold?

MS. HICKS: That's the most embarrassing question you've asked me today. You really want to know?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I really want. I insist.

MS. HICKS: They weren't woven and they weren't structured. They were alien to everything I had learned in the diligent study sessions with Albers. They were illusions. They were pretences. They were trompe l'oeil. The wool looked as though it was growing in clusters in an organic way, but it was simply punched into industrially woven cotton and smeared on the back with rubber latex. Then to disguise this, it was carefully covered over with a lining.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: To veil your shame?

MS. HICKS: To veil the technical compromise. I came to abhor this and I suffered the consequences 30 years later as the work deteriorated.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But that convinced you that you had to find a way to make larger textiles with other means than a needle.

MS. HICKS: The challenge to work on a mammoth scale, at Arterior, which was a subsidiary of an immense German company, Vorwerk, was limitless. They could build up support racks 20 feet by 30 feet and I could sit eating wienerschnitzel, make drawings, go to the workshop and have people climb up on scaffolding and punch my designs with profusely cascading textures: any size, any length wool – not the primitive handspun wool, but tough carpet wool.

I made something for the Rochester Institute of Technology. It was one of my first projects for architecture. By the way, it is still installed and I've heard from people who have seen it recently that it looks good. It's on the web.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And it hasn't disintegrated?

MS. HICKS: I don't know why, but it is not disappearing.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Maybe very good conditions.

MS. HICKS: I'm afraid to go and look.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, but it was important in your life because it showed you that there was a public for that sort of wall hanging and architects showed you the way.

MS. HICKS: Architects were becoming my clients. Knoll exhibited things I made in this German workshop. Then an opportunity arose to design for an Anglo-Indian company [Commonwealth Trust] in Calicut, India. The things I made in that workshop, both functional textiles, woven by the yard, and wall hangings, made in series, were sold in design shops – in Georg Jensen's, Crate and Barrel –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And what you made in India didn't have this heretic of latex on the back?

MS. HICKS: No, it was pure cotton weaving.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And that was in harmony with all your beliefs.

MS. HICKS: Beautiful, pure cotton, fine silk and noble flax weaving.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and really weaving.

MS. HICKS: Careful weaving.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, that was another step.

MS. HICKS: It complemented the German workshop production. Knoll showrooms had furniture to sell, and they were looking for things to hang on the walls, in color. Another show I made was at Artek [Alvar Aalto showroom] in Helsinki, Finland. Severe weather conditions influence the attitudes of people to color.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Their need of color.

MS. HICKS: The woman who owned Marimekko, Armi Ratia, invited me to their workshop. Slowly I was getting acquainted with professionals in the design field: starting off in art, migrating into craft, then design. That was 1965, 1966, 1967. I began to sell things, but there was no gallery on the horizon. The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam made group shows showing new developments in textile and tapestry art. One was called *Wall Hangings* [1969], and the other was called *Perspective in Textile* [*Perspectief in Textiel*, 1968]. Both featured my work on the catalog covers, the posters, and invitations. I was fortunate.

Things started moving very quickly then and I had more work than I could do and more children than I could take care of.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That's when you needed a studio of your own.

MS. HICKS: I found an upholstery workshop [tapissier] in the Passage Dauphine, in Paris near rue de Seine; they were repairing sofas, beds, mattresses. An elderly couple – Monsieur and Madame [Jean] Delage were running it. We began speaking. It was raining frequently. They offered that I could leave my son with them in his baby carriage while I went to the nearby food market. I could shop for them, too.

They wanted to retire and to sell their lease; I was the fish in their net. I needed a place to work and so we made a deal: we would co-occupy the upholstery workshop and I could work there, and little by little, as I earned money, I could pay them and take over their lease.

That was my first workshop in Paris, other than one that I had been loaned temporarily on the Quai des Grands Augustins when I was making something for the Ford Foundation in New York. Now I had my own studio in France.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In the passage Dauphine. That's where I met you.

MS. HICKS: I think we met at a dinner.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: We met at a dinner, but that's where I saw your work.

MS. HICKS: I think we met thanks to a Chilean woman.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, who was one of your husband's best friends.

MS. HICKS: You came to see me in the Passage Dauphine at the Atelier. We called it the Atelier des Grands Augustins after the studio I had borrowed on the Quai des Grands Augustins. I made large-scale projects for architects and the Delage family – Monsieur and Madame, and anyone else who came by – got involved and helped me make them. That was 1967, '68, '69.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, but let's go back to 1968 when you made a show here in Paris. A woman by the name of Hélène Baltrusaitis got wind of you. She was the cultural antenna or advisor to the American embassy – to the cultural attaché. She was scouting for American artists in Paris and scheduling shows for them at the American Cultural Center on rue du Dragon. She was enthusiastic, passionate, cultivated. She had been raised by Henri Focillon.

MS. HICKS: The art historian at Yale – so we had a natural affinity. The show she organized for me in 1968 ["Formes Tissées, Formes Architecturales"] was inaugurated by Ambassador Sargent Shriver when he first arrived to Paris. There was a blackout due to the student riots in spring, 1968. I stood there with Sargent Shriver in the dark holding candles – Iris Clert was there. Hélène validated my work.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Were the works of other artists included at the rue du Dragon, or was there only your work? I didn't see that show.

MS. HICKS: Warren Platner joined me and showed his furniture designs; I was working on the Ford Foundation project with him. He was attached to the Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo office of New Haven. That way my work, in soft materials, could be presented alongside hard materials.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: His was metallic?

MS. HICKS: Metal and glass. It gave a lead-in to understand how my work fitted it, could be used or hung. Otherwise, the only thing the public related it to here in France was *tapestry*. And since it wasn't an Aubusson or a Beauvais kind of tapestry.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: At that time did you already show three-dimensional pieces? Like wigs?

MS. HICKS: I've always showed three-dimensional work – even in the first shows. [Audio break.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, you were very kind to tell us so much about how you started a new life here in Europe and also a new relation to the public. Now we feel that all of a sudden you have a public of your own; that is, people who need your work – who come to ask for your work. You're working with architects and you're also being shown in galleries, in the Biennale and you're finding your way.

What we would like to know is: how do you feel about the issue that was so important a few years ago of being an artist or being a craftsperson? How do you feel about that?

MS. HICKS: Or doing commissioned work?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Or doing commissioned work?

MS. HICKS: That was a primary issue at home. I was married to a painter. He asked me if I was leaving art behind. Was I no longer working for myself? Was I working for other people: their spaces, and specific sizes that I had to adapt to? Couldn't I just concentrate on my own work – what I would like to do? I had never stopped making my "miniatures" – small works – while working on large scale projects. I found my voice and my footing in my small work. It enabled me to build bridges

between art, design, architecture, decorative arts, crafts; I have an integrated, multi-faceted personality.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and you did find harmony in all?

MS. HICKS: Not always.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Not always. And would you say that your large-scale work was sometimes a reflection of what you had discovered in your artwork in miniatures?

MS. HICKS: When you receive a commission or when an architect or a client comes to consult you about a space, you don't abandon yourself.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No. Of course not.

MS. HICKS: The color, the look, the feeling, the texture are yours, so while you adapt to certain conditions, you're not a different artist on Monday and Thursday. In fact, I've seldom signed my work and most people say they can recognize it – large-scale, small-scale – anywhere, so there must be a particular look, presence, or identity that I've developed along the way.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and one is not wrong to believe that the work you did on the small scale with your miniatures was used in the large-scale work. I mean, your evolution in an art world of miniatures did serve also your other work, so I have the feeling, but maybe I'm wrong – you should tell me – that there was a link between both even if it was sometimes indirect.

MS. HICKS: It was direct.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It was even direct.

MS. HICKS: Quite direct, often.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: There was a link, so – that was the interior work you were doing with your miniatures. There you were really researching and experimenting.

MS. HICKS: Also just expressing myself.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and expressing yourself in a free way.

MS. HICKS: Totally.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Totally. And you knew, well, some expressions you could then transpose on a larger scale so work was linked.

MS. HICKS: If you're a soloist and you practice every day and experiment when someone invites you to become part of an opera or an –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Orchestra.

MS. HICKS: – orchestra, you don't lose your personal voice.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, no, of course.

MS. HICKS: You have a distinct way of playing and that's why you're invited to join the orchestra.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, so one can say that you did lead two lives: the life of a pure artist and also the life of a designer and –

MS. HICKS: Those are – I don't mean to ignore what you've just said, but in a way I do because it's not the kind of terminology that I relate to.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No. I mean, you wouldn't think of it, but for people to understand how you lived it is helpful.

MS. HICKS: I've found an engaging way to create with fiber and textiles and I enjoy working with people. I'm fascinated with art. I don't –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Disassociate?

MS. HICKS: I don't disassociate or even categorize.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But I would like to ask a further question. Do you think that your large-scale work helped you to further your other small-scale work? You see? Did it go the other way around? Maybe I'm indiscreet in asking you all these questions, but I would like to know if it went the other way?

MS. HICKS: Yes, I'll give you an example: when I was working in India in the hand-weaving workshop [Commonwealth Trust, Calicut, Kerala, India], which is probably the largest and oldest handloom operation in the world, my job was to design textiles – yards and yards of textiles. Their export collection was sold in Europe, Asia, and North America. I asked if I could use a couple of looms and just play. At the end of the day I'd go around and pick up scraps on the floor, leftover cuttings, and I would turn them into three-dimensional small art works.

I could create on an intimate scale after stretching my design vision during the day. To answer your question: the big workshops and abundant material stocks opened my mind. I felt quite free. There was an osmotic cross fertilization – large to small and small to large, continuously.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Everything you have told us today shows that there is unity in your work. That's how I understand what you told us; that everything is like a net – well knitted together. All your activities come together and none of them is against another. There is harmony and unity in all your creations.

MS. HICKS: The test will be if I manage to transmit joy and creating, and willingness to dig the trenches to be able to realize your dreams. To me that's probably the essential thing.

I'm not an artist living alone in a squirrel hole. I don't mean to be pejorative – I could, any day now, be an artist living alone in a squirrel hole – [Laughter.] but my life's had a different folding out, and my work too. [Audio break.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, from what we hear, all of a sudden not only did you have a studio, but you started to have people working for you, and this was not like in Mexico – people who were working for your husband, who would come in and help you. Now, you had to really hire people and pay them and you were the head of a team and this was business. How did you manage to adapt to that new function of being the leader of a team?

MS. HICKS: I had already worked with local craftsmen in Mexico and paid them with the proceeds of our combined work. I found two women willing to join me in the adventure of setting up a studio.

These two French women, Danielle Gatti and Nicole Bonnetain, helped me take over the lease from Monsieur and Madame Delage, and form the Atelier des Grands Augustins. They explained to me what we could do, what we couldn't do, and it consisted of no-nos: *c'est pas possible*. Everything I thought we could try wasn't legal or wasn't the way it was supposed to be done. So I listened a lot and then I would make an end-run around barriers, but without following all of the prescribed rules.

Do you want me to divulge my cooking secrets?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. Yes. [Audio break.]

MS. HICKS: This involved trial and error. There were as many errors as successes. I contacted experts – not only other artists, businessmen or lawyers or notaries, but also people who were running cleaning shops or bakery shops here in the neighborhood. I sought advice. How can we do this? How can we do that? Where can we find this? Where can we find that? I developed a strong listening channel.

You were one of the people I listened to a lot because when I asked you where I could find somebody who could explain or tell me about something you gave me good leads of what you considered to be reliable or honest people.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And were they?

MS. HICKS: Most of them. The problem was I was an American living in France; I was a woman; I didn't have a well-known family or backing here, so it was hit-and-miss. Just when I thought I'd solved a problem, someone else would tell me why it was impossible and I'd have to set the clock back and try to find another way. That was in the smallest things like shipping, insurance –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Customs.

MS. HICKS: Customs, of course, but even to insure a project at the outset – “Madame, how do we know you'll be here throughout the project and if you take a loan at the bank, what guarantees can you give? This project depends so totally on you, your design, your vision, and your signature that it's worthless if it can't be completed.” So I had to find ways that it could be completed with or without me. My solution was to build into the basic principles of the work the concept of a repetitive module. I established the design, texture, scale, and color. Then I would teach others how to fabricate it so they could go on without me. With an error of margin, besides, that could add charm. I said error of margin. What I meant was margin of error. Maybe, in my mind, they're both the same thing.

I had to learn what it was like to be a construction unit, so I talked to people in the construction business: to electricians, plumbers, and small entrepreneurs, figuring out how they wrote their contracts – how they protected themselves when clients didn't pay or when they wanted to change everything en route.

Imagine if someone decides mid-project they don't like yellow; they'd rather have blue. How do you cope with that kind of catastrophe when you've been working for six months for a client and their architects come to the studio, okay colors, designs, and then change their minds? It's both exhilarating and frightening to work on large projects. You feel vulnerable. I am not a businesswoman.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But you have become one.

MS. HICKS: Not really. I shouldn't tell this, but I'm poor in calculating and switching back and forth between inches and centimeters, yards and meters, pounds and kilos, so I have to cover myself by calculating large, which means I sometimes have considerable stocks of material left over after a project. That can be good. But what if I'm short of materials? How do I complete a project in a convincing way? These are the kind of problems that arise: you must become a problem solver, improvising creatively, and hope to surprise yourself –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, because you have an immense imagination.

MS. HICKS: Problems force creativity. What happens if I don't manage to get through a project with unpleasant people? Everyone's positive at the beginning, but things can turn sour along the way. What then? Plan for the worst and hope for the best. Sometimes you don't invite clients to come back. Or you cancel a project in the middle and take the loss because you know you're not going to be able to bring it to a happy ending.

That happened with one architect/client – I won't mention his name. He wanted me to hire his daughter, and his daughter's friends, because he was giving me a project. It wasn't possible. And they didn't want to work much anyway. I'm not always adaptable when it comes to the seriousness of work, and sometimes people are frustrated by my inflexibility and rigidity in terms of professional demands.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Now, Sheila, we would like to know how you feel about all the responsibilities you have when you deliver a work of yours – the responsibility against fire, for instance. What happens if there's a danger of fire?

MS. HICKS: Or if it's falling down?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, or if the wall – [audio break].

Yes, Sheila, I was asking you how you felt about all the responsibilities you had when you deliver a work. We were talking about danger of fire, also of flooding, and of the work falling down, so if you could answer those questions and then I would like to ask you what you do to prevent many dangers.

MS. HICKS: You learn when you're in meetings with architects and engineers; they are up against the same kind of problems. They're examining all of the building components and examining materials. If I look down the list of our projects since 1967, I realize that I based the thinking each time on modules that could be assembled in place that be adjustable. I took into account the demands of working in a large scale and having to make the components in a small studio. My studio was nowhere near the size of the rooms where my work was going to be installed.

Also, assembling modular units meant I could remove pieces if there was damage or an unforeseen maintenance problem: if someone wanted to cut a hole in the textile art wall and install an exit sign. Or, they wanted to change an auditorium and turn it into two conference rooms.

I could take panels apart like tinker toys, recuperate, reassemble, and reuse them as adaptable, soft, bas-reliefs. Artists, making ceramic or glass or metal works, have other problems. Acoustically, textiles have significant advantages, so often I'm given commissions because my material can introduce color and texture into an environment. I usually use four, five, six tones or values of the same family of colors. I assume color will fade over a period of years, depending on the amount of UV [ultraviolet rays]. By introducing different shades of colors from the beginning, I can pre-age it –

have a built-in patina improving the work's longevity.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: But maintenance is another one – maintenance and aging. The question is how many years do you want an installation to last before changes are made?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Does that already appear in the contract?

MS. HICKS: I pose the question very early on so that we know our objectives are compatible.

What is the budget for the space or the wall? That influences choices of materials and construction techniques. Is it a background wall, or is it the featured wall, the major statement in this area? In which case, what is the message you want to send? Is it a private space? How much traffic will it have, and how often will you see the artwork? Is it something you look at every day or only on special occasions – a kind of festival hall or important reception room?

All this figures in when I'm designing. It influences my concept when I'm preparing the original project.

Suppose there is a flood and a work is damaged? I have kept records of all my projects and every supplier of material. On three occasions we have remade walls, 20 feet by 30 feet. Once a building was sold and the new owners wanted to modify the space with other designers and decorators. Then, along the way, they said, "Well, we really kind of like that one thing. Let's keep the textile art." Actually, when I think about it, that's happened on a few occasions. It's gratifying.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Of course it is. That's a compliment.

MS. HICKS: Twenty years later someone says, "That's a keeper. The rest, out." Well, with art – if it's a sculpture – you move it to another place. What do you do with a wall? The Ford Foundation commissioned two immense linen and silk walls [1966]. Recently the building was landmarked, with the two tapestry bas-reliefs, so no one can change that even if the Ford Foundation converts to something else. I could never have anticipated many of these developments: it comes through experience of working.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I've replaced parts of works due to floods or fire damage. I know the fire department pretty well by now: I talk to them when I'm trying out new materials – preparing, conditioning, and selecting materials.

Now, I've made some things that didn't work. This is an open confessional, so I'll say –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Once, in an early Hyatt Regency [1974] atrium hotel, an impossible installation story developed where people were risking their lives trying to work after the construction scaffolding had been removed. We were not programmed in at the right time – when we were to hang. All the dirt and the evacuation of the heavy-duty equipment on the site would have ruined my work. And yet, by the time they'd removed the dirt and the equipment, there was no way to install my three-dimensional, large-scale fabric artwork.

We improvised and the result was it looked improvised in a clumsy way. It just had to be removed because it wasn't good to leave it there.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did you make the decision?

MS. HICKS: I bit the bullet and admitted that even though I liked the material, the color and the work, the way it was hung was awful. Once you make something, how and when do you install it?

Daniel Graffin, a French artist, is good at this; I have collaborated with him on a number of exhibitions and projects. For instance, King Saud University, a very big project including sculpture and tapestry. We made art works hanging from the library ceiling and at the entrances of buildings. He was clever about how to install artwork in complicated spaces. When you bring in soft and precious artwork, the site has to be ready for it. The timing is important.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I remember he was very good at everything that had to do with tension. He always had –

MS. HICKS: And wind. He created work that could be hung outdoors. One I especially liked was for Mexico, when we worked in Cancun with the architect Ricardo Legorreta. I made things using the local cactus material of henequen, and I created 300 different versions of wall hangings for the guest rooms and all of the public spaces, while he made a textile wind sculpture at the water's edge. [Hotel Camino Real, Cancun, Mexico]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: What year?

MS. HICKS: It would have been in 1975.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: This is Monique Lévi-Strauss interviewing Sheila Hicks at her home in Paris, France on February 12th, 2004 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disc number four.

Sheila, we left off when you were starting to speak about the Lausanne Biennale. What was the first year you showed there?

MS. HICKS: The first tapestry biennale I participated in was in 1969. I believe I was the only American and it was not my idea to apply.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You were invited?

MS. HICKS: – invited by Pierre Pauli, the director. He came to see me in Paris and asked me to send my work. It was a bit like putting my finger in the dike and being unable to get it out afterwards, because I became absorbed into the story of what is a tapestry, what is not a tapestry, what is the new tapestry, what is the tapestry that leaves the wall and jumps into space – three-dimensional. And I became a pioneer in the new tapestry movement.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Now, when you were invited in '69 to show in Lausanne, you already had pieces made or did you make them on purpose for the biennale?

MS. HICKS: A bit of both. I took wide, heavy, hand-woven cloth that I call "Badagara"–

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: From India?

MS. HICKS: That I had woven in India, and made what I considered to be a tapestry. It had other special features – additive kind of techniques. It was blue. I was confronted by Madame [Marie] Cuttoli at the biennale, who was a patron of tapestry and who actually caused many cartoons of artists like Picasso and Léger to be woven into tapestries, and I remember she approached me at the opening ceremony and said to me, “I hear you are exhibiting a tapestry” – in French. And I answered, “Oui, Madame. Voila. Voici ma tapisserie.” And she said, “I do not see a tapestry.” Television was rolling. She did it as a provocation to say, “Here is a renegade, an outcast, someone who is trying to denigrate tapestry and she has no business being here.”

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It was a hostile reaction?

MS. HICKS: She set me up. It made me think, “Do I have any place being here?” But I looked around and I saw artists from Romania, Yugoslavia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia: there was Jagoda Buic, Magdalena Abakanowicz, [Wojciech] Sadley and others who were experimenting and weaving textures with heavy sisal and horsehair. Of course, they were all hung on the wall, but very soon in 1969, '71, '73, '75, work became three-dimensional and more monumental in scale –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That means that you detached yourself from the wall?

MS. HICKS: Completely.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Completely. And you hung from the ceiling?

MS. HICKS: Yes, I also made freestanding work too.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, on the floor.

MS. HICKS: When I piled tons of laundry on podiums, as a textile art statement, and exhibited it in the tapestry biennale [1977], it brought the house down and caused quite a rumpus, but now it's considered a major statement in the evolution of the biennale.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It was accepted finally?

MS. HICKS: Hesitantly. It was a turning point.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, what I would like to get clearly from you is when you sent something to one of these biennales, was it always made on purpose for the biennale? Intended for the biennale as a new message? Was that your purpose?

MS. HICKS: Yes. I proposed and made new work each time. It was an opportunity to show the evolution of my thinking in art. Also, I was never completely comfortable being taken over by the tapestry story to the exclusion of other media. I might mention an early exhibition that was held at the Grand Palais in 1972.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That was in Paris and it's where museums show temporary exhibitions.

MS. HICKS: It was an important show organized by François Mathey.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: He was the director of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris.

MS. HICKS: In fact, many people thought he'd become the director of Centre Pompidou, but this controversial show turned into a disaster in many ways – it was a sensational landmark show.

People still refer to it. It was called “Twelve Years of Contemporary Art in France [May 17 – September 18, 1972].” It was programmed to include 200 artists and was edited to about 70 or 80. Only two women were in the show: Niki de Saint-Phalle and myself.

That was a stunning revelation. When I walked in to hang, they designated a major place –and I showed very large works [14 x 18 feet]. All the artists were sculptors and painters. There was no tapestry. I felt comfortable there.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In fact, you were a sculptor.

MS. HICKS: New forms in new materials required new terminology. They redefined my work in a way – they didn’t classify it as painting or sculpture. It was another thing. That was fine: other artists, at the time, were frontier – exploring, too. The tapestry biennales, I spoke about, were a way to show, but not my place. I felt more comfortable with artists who were painters, sculptors, and who worked with new techniques.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: With light and –

MS. HICKS: All kinds of things.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I remember and glass and –

MS. HICKS: Light, sound, video. But very quickly this new tapestry wave came and I was swallowed up in it.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I would like to know if you showed in galleries.

MS. HICKS: Gallery Suzy Langlois on Boulevard Saint Germain and Gallery Carmen Martinez in the Marais, in Paris, and Cora de Vries in Amsterdam.

Another significant thing that helped me was when you brought your husband, Claude Lévi-Strauss, to my studio and he visited it briefly and later wrote a very poignant, interesting text that placed my work – it acted as a key to open the door for many people to see where I was going.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Well, you see, my husband being a specialist of America, of course, recognized immediately the part of your work that pays a tribute to traditional Indian weaving and he was very touched, and that is, I think, what he expressed in this small text he gave you for the Suzy Langlois exhibition [1968].

MS. HICKS: He also mentioned architecture in that text which gave another possible entry to my thinking.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. So you showed your work at the Gallery Suzy Langlois and that was a way you could start selling, but when you showed it in a museum, like in the Grand Palais or at the Lausanne Biennale, of course, you didn’t sell work, but they –

MS. HICKS: Yes, I did.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You did? You did? Were you able to sell pieces?

MS. HICKS: They saw my work and asked if they could come to visit my studio in Paris.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Ah, yes.

MS. HICKS: I had to shape up my studio because it wasn't a very convincing –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Showroom.

MS. HICKS: It wasn't a showroom at all, but people didn't mind to walk into a place where I had yarn piled up from floor to ceiling, where I had improvised racks of two by fours held together with clamps.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Or sawhorses with planks. It looked like a shed of – it looked like a production shed, but it wasn't quite clear what was being produced. I also had a lot of old things from the flea market and utensils that you could use to recycle mattresses – you could shred wool. They looked like torture instruments. The studio had its own charm, but people weren't prepared for what they were walking into. I had many long cords that I was wrapping – hanging from a second-story loggia – and my children would use them like fireman coming down on fire poles.

I had an immense wool carpet I had made in Morocco, but it was too big for this space, so I used it for storage – all the boxes I didn't know where to put I piled in the middle of the room and spread the big Moroccan carpet over them. It became a place where we could all sit, lie down, eat and meet – a kind of salon, an environment.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. So you do find clients through all this showing in museums –

MS. HICKS: When you say clients, it makes me laugh.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Well, how would you call them?

MS. HICKS: Oftentimes they would just be curiosity seekers who when they saw something, wanted to have it. And they weren't necessarily shopping like clients.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But they ended up –

MS. HICKS: They'd be caught in the web of adventure; they would end up helping me make their "thing."

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, but for instance architects who were on the lookout for artists who would make monumental enhancements for their buildings, they would find you through the biennale or through exhibits in museums or galleries.

MS. HICKS: The exhibition at MoMA in New York, "Wall Hangings," brought people to my studio. At the beginning I was uptight about the kind of shows I wanted to be in. I was fragile. I thought by participating in one kind of show would mean I couldn't get into another kind of show. I found out it was good to be in open space and be seen. People who go to the flea market know how to look.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Exactly.

MS. HICKS: They find things. So to be visible meant that I would connect with people who were –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You didn't need to show all the time, but at the beginning it's very important for an artist to show so that he is known. Nowadays you would say that all the architects know about you even if they don't know you personally, so that –

MS. HICKS: We're laboring the architects a bit because some of the odd clients who came – who

were sensitive or visual or interested in art – were the ones who helped me most to further my own vision. Artists or colleagues would come and hang out and we'd end up talking, eating, and trading works.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you tell me the names of a few artists with whom you had exchanges of that sort?

MS. HICKS: Piero Dorazio, Allan Glass, William Hayter, Joop Beljon, Corrie de Boers, Benno Premsele. Mathias Goeritz came from Mexico to see how I was progressing – what I was doing. He brought [Alexander] Calder to my studio. And I worked for him on a project making banners for the Philadelphia Bicentennial. He invited me out to Saché, to his studio.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In the country.

MS. HICKS: He made a funny gouache painting and gave it to me. It was of one of my works of long Lianes – long hanging cords and don't forget I was living with a painter.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you saw many painters.

MS. HICKS: We saw the Cuban, Wilfredo Lam and his Swedish wife, Lou; Bona, the Venetian artist; Matta – Roberto Matta and his companion Malitte.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And Alicia Penalba [Argentinean sculptor]?

MS. HICKS: She came to my studio, and invited me back to hers. I watched how she worked. She was a strong woman and met challenges. She worked with large foundries to cast her work.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I remember her. And what I liked so much about her work too – was that she was able to go from a very small scale of jewelry to large-scale sculptures. She had the same faculty you have.

MS. HICKS: I introduced her to some architects and we worked on a few projects together.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And Barbara Chase-Riboud?

MS. HICKS: Uh-huh, Barbara came to the studio frequently. She was casting metal sculpture and wanted to add fiber skirts to the standing figures, so I helped her find material sources and we enjoyed the friendship we had since Yale.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you name a few of the French artists? There was Marc Held?

MS. HICKS: No, he was a designer. We exhibited together in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Nantes, Brittany. [Audio break.] Give me a moment to remember – you're asking me to recreate a period of the '80s – the end of the '70s and the '80s.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, artists with whom you had exchanges – fruitful exchanges.

MS. HICKS: For a time I was close to a group that Gofredo Iommi, who was an Argentinean-Chilean poet, had formed called *La Phalene*. The group did improvisations in the street and in the countryside. There were poets, painters, writers. They called me the muse – the weaver. And we would go out as a group – reading, transforming a space, and involving the public.

I met [Jean] Tinguely and César, who actually helped me in an important exhibition where another

artist was nudging me out, implying I had no right to be there with threads and fibers. César ordered, “Put her in the middle.” It was the best place! There were some kinetic artists. I know you said French, many foreign artists lived in France and were –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That’s what I meant – the French group.

MS. HICKS: Juliet and Man Ray were important; Balcomb Greene; Jesús Soto, I had met earlier in Venezuela, but then reconnected with here in Paris; Antonio Segui; [audio break, tape change] – Christo was here doing his thing.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and did you feel close to him?

MS. HICKS: To his work, of course. I went over to a little gallery that Iris Clert ran around the corner. I would see the shows and talk to the artists. Yves Klein was doing his thing. When I say his “thing,” I don’t meant to be vague, but –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, but everybody knows.

MS. HICKS: I was aware of what was going on in the galleries that were on the cutting edge. I was unaware of what Eva Hesse was doing, although later, I realized she had been in Wuppertal practically the same time I was, but for different reasons. She was with her husband who had received a grant and they were in Germany together. I saw photographs of the way she was working with string and latex – the “evil” material. We had come out of Yale the same period and gone different ways, but there were affinities with these –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sometimes they were parallel.

MS. HICKS: They were affinities – trying new materials and working in new ways.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Both very open-minded.

MS. HICKS: Here in Paris I went to the exhibitions at the galleries Claude Bernard, Karl Flinker, Maeght, Denise René.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: She was a very good –

MS. HICKS: Following the line of pure, abstract –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, rigor.

MS. HICKS: The Albers line. I visited the museums in Basel, Zurich, London, Rome, Cologne, trying to absorb all the things I was seeing, plus photography and moving images – research for my own work.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You haven’t talked about the Dutch. I think it’s –

MS. HICKS: In 1974 – Wil Bertheux and Liesbeth Crommelin, curators, and Edy de Wilde, director of the Stedelijk Museum, invited me –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam [the municipal museum].

MS. HICKS: They invited me to make a retrospective exhibition. In 1974 I was 40 years old. They showed me the museum. At that time there was a Tinguely show so I walked through it and then

they gave me the dates. “You will be occupying these same spaces.” Wow. Okay. That’s’ –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Those were six rooms?

MS. HICKS: Yes, six – on the main floor.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It’s enormous.

MS. HICKS: It was enormous. It was a major undertaking and a major investment because I had to find a way to occupy those spaces in the way I wanted them to look. That meant not just coming and hanging things on the walls like a painter. Maybe that’s the French way of saying it, but I worked in the spaces, and activated each room and everything I put in the room spoke to the other things in the room. They were interactive, three-dimensional, labyrinthine, and sometimes theater experiences. You looked from one perspective and then from another as though you were on stage staring at the audience.

Lighting – I worked with in that show. Color – I worked with in that show. Earlier I had made a small show [Modern Master Tapestries Gallery] in New York on 57th Street; I hadn’t sold anything, so I brought the work back to the studio and recycled the materials.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, they were made of elements so you could take them apart and rebuild. At this point I have to ask you, what was the raw material?

MS. HICKS: A lot of cotton, linen, coconut fiber, synthetic raffia, some metallics – both reflective and mat. Since I was working with light, I needed mat and shiny. I tried to make everything hold structurally – be handsome in its construction – but not look decorative. Decorative in the sense of gratuitous – added. I wanted it to be integral so that you read the color, the structure and the material inextricably.

Material had to express its own voice and color had to be within the structure, not added on as a painter would on canvas. No armatures. I was dead set against armatures; I was using fiber and soft material. I wanted it to be natural and piled up, not artificially draped over armatures. It had to have a certain inherent truth and observe gravity. I don’t know if I explain this very well.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Well, I know what you mean.

MS. HICKS: Those were my building principles. If it was granite, it had its own laws, and if it was fiber it had its own laws.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and it had its own weight.

MS. HICKS: Which is why, when I look at Eva Hesse’s work and think about it, the glue part probably would have made me balk.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Because it’s not a natural –

MS. HICKS: I’m willing to look at glue now. I’m freer in another way. Everything doesn’t have to be made to last forever, but, at that point, I was allergic to glue or lacquer or spray: I was more of a purist.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, you have told us that you make big three-dimensional pieces that you send to the museums to be exhibited, especially in this one – in the Stedelijk Museum – but these

pieces are not sold when they are shown in a museum, so they come back to your Atelier [studio]. How do you deal with these masses of textile that come back to your Atelier?

MS. HICKS: They're more masses of fiber than textile. Although there is some textile. The Stedelijk did buy quite a few things from that show – amazingly enough – for their permanent collection, and I saw them on display recently, 30 years later.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That must have been a satisfaction.

MS. HICKS: In a room called the '60s. They have an installation right now with work by Jagoda Buic, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Jun Nam Paik's video. In that same period he was doing his early experimental work, too, so they put us all together in a room labelled the '60s.

But that's another issue. To answer your question specifically: the fiber – the delivery truck rolled in with all this fiber, cords, pony-tails, and masses of materials. I sorted it out and if an architect was looking for an idea for a wall I would try and suggest something that would allow me to use some of my materials.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I see.

MS. HICKS: I've had funny experiences where people want to buy a work they have seen exhibited or published. In fact there is one in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I can't find it. It's been unwound, unwoven, and recycled. A lot of my work was. Often they're just the crayons organized in different ways. It is a challenge to think up new ways of building things with colors, lines, shapes.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you give us a brief description of what these elements were? Ponytails for instance. What is a ponytail?

MS. HICKS: Think of a horse and think of a tail. And think of pulling linen strands into that shape and then griping them and wrapping them together or think of the intricately knotted fringe of a Paracas mantle or an ancient plaited wig: the way the yarn ends were handled, and then enlarge it 20 times.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: The cords, for instance. Can you describe a cord?

MS. HICKS: The cords are many skeins of yarn pulled in to alignment – stretching them – made by walking back and forth. There can be varied lengths of cords held together by enveloping or wrapping them.

I continuously look for finishing techniques other than the knot. Invisible finishing is a tour de force. God is in the details. Find a clever way of going around a corner or a new way of moving from one group of yarns to the next – jumping, looping, acrobatically passing from front to back repetitively. It's the handwriting you'll find in Irene Emery's book [*The Primary Structures of Fabrics*; 1966] from the Textile Museum in Washington.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, *The Primary Structures*.

MS. HICKS: The alphabet or vocabulary is respectfully trotted out in that book. The use of glue makes me and conservators cringe.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Because it's a fake.

MS. HICKS: It's the easy way out. Although it does have a validity in contemporary art statements

because the hang-loose, in-your-face sort of out-there stuff – you know, Kiki Smith and others have found incredible ways to create using materials that we didn't particularly want to mess around with formally, because we knew they would disintegrate. The art would simply degrade and disappear. But many artists don't care if their art lasts. It's for now and if it turns to dust, it's inherent in the spirit of the work. Occasionally I have made ephemeral works. I spoke about them at a conference titled "Mortality-Immortality: will 20th century art survive?" It was held at the Getty Museum a few years ago.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Am I right to believe that as your work progressed you always tried to innovate not only in the technique but you always tried to find new ways of expressing yourself and of putting colors together?

MS. HICKS: Innovation and color are definitely my primary concerns. Even if it's white, it's color-intended. But I don't want my work to only be about how it is made – that would be limiting.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, but you do want your work to have a new aspect.

MS. HICKS: Let's say that –the new part shouldn't be emphasized at the expense of the 'whole.' It was exciting to invent a new fiber with the Bridgestone Tire Company in Japan. The textile designer, Junichi Arai, and I worked through an idea resulting in stainless steel fiber. Soft, strong, and pliable, it could be used outdoors as well as indoors. I am always looking for new materials and to push their logic to try to make them do miraculous things.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So your intention is to surprise and to awaken curiosity?

MS. HICKS: To startle.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Startle. Yes, you want to startle.

MS. HICKS: Startle and capture your imagination. And cause you to react. Even violently or passionately.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And Sheila, how can you be instructed about all the progress in industry and the new inventions of thread and material? Where do you find –

MS. HICKS: My leads?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Your leads, yes.

MS. HICKS: In the early 1980s I was asked to direct a magazine in the United States. It was called *American Fabrics* [later named *AFF, American Fashions and Fabrics*].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, I remember.

MS. HICKS: I used to contribute ideas and photographs to Bill Segal, the publisher. He became ill and asked me to take over the magazine. I became the editor-in-chief and the publisher. That gave me entry to textile factories, spinning mills and research laboratories to see what was under development. Why did I leave the magazine if it was giving me this access? I was running the magazine from Paris and going to New York every month or two. It was a quarterly and required constant attention.

Then, another opportunity came and I couldn't handle both things at once, so I dropped the

magazine work. I just moved on to the next project. I feel kind of guilty about that.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: We'll, forget that. [Laughter.]

And this leads us, then, to a question that I wanted to ask you: what did you do when the work was overwhelming and you couldn't deal with it in your Atelier? I think that the university campus project in Saudi Arabia was one of those examples where you had to subcontract the execution of tapestries you were doing.

MS. HICKS: Many people were involved, in the planning stage of that project. I worked closely with Chip Reay of HOK – of Helmuth, Obata & Kassebaum [St. Louis, Missouri]. The architect of the university was Gyo Obata. The construction companies were Francis Bouygues [French] and an American construction company called Blount. So it was B.B. – Bouygues and Blount with HOK architects. I mention all of them because this was an enormous undertaking.

At the beginning I was just a consultant to them for the art program. The architect came to Paris – we sat here on the floor in my living room and spread out the different ideas and approaches we felt would be a coherent art program. As you know, in Islam there are certain things that are more appropriate than others. I knew this from having worked in Morocco.

Then Obata asked me to come to Riyadh with his team to present the project to the university. That was a fantastic experience because at the end of the meeting they designated me director of the art program. I said, "I don't think I – how can I do this? You're asking me to do the mission impossible as a woman, or even as a job." And Dr. [Mansour] Al Turki [Rector of King Saud University] – I'll never forget him – smiled and said, "You will find a way." That was ringing in my ears for days and nights, and I found a way. For three years I planned and designed. I looked for people who could make the things and worked with other artists. Finding materials, sources, and workshops was difficult. Building relations with people who deliver on time and to specification was uncertain. I did my best to go beyond industrial, cold, assembly-line kind of art.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And the next question I would like to ask you is exactly how you execute a project in your Atelier. Would –

MS. HICKS: Take the most recent one; it's the freshest in my mind. It was for the corporate headquarters of Target Company in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They invited me to come and see a space that already existed.

They commissioned me to design and make an art work for the space. I asked the clients – the decision-makers, the president and his group, to come to my studio since the art work was probably going to be made in this place – to be made by hand, and none of us knew what it was going to look like until it was actually installed.

Confidence building – it has a lot to do with confidence-building at the beginning and showing slides of my other projects so that they can follow the spirit, the kind of color, materials and scale. I chose linen yarn and then I looked for something to use as a core that was flexible and could be transported. I might mention that the finished work was about 20 feet high by 60 feet wide and projected out from the wall six to eight feet.

I wanted to experiment with new materials; I chose natural cork and synthetic tube isolation used by plumbers and electricians that would be fireproof. I knew if I worked with materials employed by construction companies, they would pass the fire code.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, which of course is vital for you.

MS. HICKS: Then for color and texture: I can specify the custom dying of linen at a supplier in the north of France. I used the linen as visible outer layer – the skin – and the other materials as the core or the skeleton. Well, now you'll say "armature." Ah-hah. Well, in a way, yes.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You've come to it.

MS. HICKS: I needed a flexible armature, not rigid, made up of additive components fitting one into the other. Ah-hah. Then glue enters. Contradiction. This is –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Your compromise of – well, of a person who is no longer that young.

MS. HICKS: My thinking has progressed. And maybe this art work doesn't have to last for two centuries. Maybe the lifespan of this work is meant to be approximately 40 years. Maybe the budget will allow certain materials to be used and not others. And perhaps this art, is meant as theater.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It's an event.

MS. HICKS: In which case lighting will be important.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And weight? Because probably this is light weight, which has a great incidence on the cost of transportation.

MS. HICKS: This does not give you an adequate description of this recent project, but it's the general, technical approach I took. As for color and composition: I could go on for hours. Nobody knew, including myself, what it was going to look like when finished. Cristobal Zañartu, my son, filmed the different production stages. I could look at the photographs and get ideas of scale. A photograph helps immensely to detach yourself from the material when you're working with it intimately. We installed the final work by using cherry-pickers or hydraulic lifts to hoist it in place and anchor it to the wall. [Audio Break.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: This is Monique Lévi-Strauss interviewing Sheila Hicks at her Atelier in Paris, France, on March 11th, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disc five.

Sheila, the other day we spoke about Saudi Arabia, but I think you'd have more to tell us about all the work you did for King Saud University of Riyadh. Would you mind telling us how you proceeded to accomplish the commissioned work?

MS. HICKS: I mentioned that I was hired to be the art consultant to propose, oversee the fabrication and the installation of the whole art program. That meant I made things in my studio and I chose other people and other places to make things. The program consisted primarily of tapestries or textile art for the entrances of all the major buildings, and large sculptures in front of the buildings, to help identify them.

To divide the work, I took over the textile and tapestry part and assigned the sculpture part to Daniel Graffin, but we made the decisions together and did all of the presentations to the clients together. It was complicated to conduct large meetings in Riyadh. Many people were involved. It was the largest construction project in the world at the time. There were logistic decisions, manufacturing decisions, price considerations, options of an iconographical nature as well as aesthetic decisions.

But someone had to usher the whole art program through from the beginning to the end, and that fell on my shoulders. Now, in retrospect, I think I learned a lot and I enjoyed it, but during the process, 1982 to 1985, I couldn't do anything else but that project. I went there several times.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: How often did you go?

MS. HICKS: Probably 10 or 12 trips in all. It's a whole story in itself, to work in Saudi Arabia as a woman and as an artist in that period.

How did I work? I did research, made the drawings, made presentations, got approvals for the designs, the colors, the sizes, and the budget. Then I went about seeking collaborators to help me fabricate the things. I made many in my own studio, with my own techniques, but I also found two workshops in Aubusson to weave the cartoons that I had painted here in my studio. Aubusson usually works with a small –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Maquette?

MS. HICKS: Sketch or drawing by an artist and enlarges it by projecting it with the aid of an epidiascope onto a wall and traces it. I decided to paint full scale the entire cartoon – the model of each tapestry, with all of the gradations and color nuances. I knew I couldn't be in front of the loom the whole time these designs were being woven; I wanted them to be exactly as I imagined them, without too many decisions of an arbitrary nature.

Most artists and most weaving studios don't work this way. The weavers were quite amazed when I showed up with all of the cartoons completely painted and when I worked on the dying with the dyers. I had trouble with one workshop. They wanted to do it their usual way. And then –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: In Aubusson?

MS. HICKS: Yes. Their way meant, "You give the sketch or small painting to us, we know what we're doing. We will execute it and we will price it by the square meter. We will use cotton warp and we will use wool weft and we will decide on the density of the weave." and the spacing of the warp.

I insisted on examining samples and of trying more than one version, more than one weight, and more than one kind of weaving. They charged me, but it was my learning experience. Aubusson weaving had become so boring and so repetitious that I thought this was an opportunity and a budget that would permit me to experiment and rediscover things that had been done in the past. For instance, I decided to use a linen warp instead of a –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Cotton.

MS. HICKS: They had reasons for not wanting to do this. However, one of the workshop directors was extremely cooperative and open-minded. He spent time trying new approaches. His name was Philippe Hecquet. What a pleasure to work with a true craftsman. In all, I subcontracted fourteen tapestries to be woven. Don't forget, I had to paint them in reverse, too.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: That was necessary so they could be placed directly on the loom, followed, and woven stitch by stitch looking at the painting. When the tapestry would "fall from the loom" [be finished], as though it was a print, because it was the reverse image of what you had seen while weaving, I would go there – it was a ceremony – the cutting of the warp. Hecquet would allow me to make

modifications which would affect the prices, the colors, and the amount of yarn used.

I applied what I'd learned to the following tapestry. There's a variety of techniques within traditional Aubusson weaving. I was working on the [low warp] horizontal loom. Some looms were more than eight meters wide [25 feet] – five, six, seven people worked side by side, and we changed the weavers' positions. So they were not always working in the same place, and they could look at the work of their –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Colleagues.

MS. HICKS: Co-weavers and adjust the tension and expand woven interpretations of my painted cartoon guides.

Ann Sutton, an old friend and English textile designer, offered to make one of the tapestries – to weave it in her workshop. It was a good idea to use something other than the Aubusson weaving technique.

She had a friend living in Malta who worked with weavers [Pat Holton], making what looked like Bedouin bands used to construct tents in the desert. I made drawings, inspired by the Bedouin techniques and colors and she wove them.

It was very much like I had worked in Morocco. I would make the paintings or drawings, choose the colors, initiate the weaving, make adjustments, arrive to a prototype and then proceed. [Audio break, tape change] Each new version often gets worse!

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Why?

MS. HICKS: Because the original version shows the hesitation and the liveliness. Later it starts to become resolved – a perfected formula.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And more automatic?

MS. HICKS: Weavers find ways to cut corners, go faster, lighten the weight, and reduce the colors.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Tell me, in Morocco did you work with pile?

MS. HICKS: Yes, I worked in carpet workshops.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So it wasn't the same technique as the tapestry work in Aubusson.

MS. HICKS: Not at all like Aubusson. It was very different because they had upright looms instead of horizontal ones. We would weave and knot into the warp to build up extravagant cascades of pile. Also it was different because I was helping them make designs that they could sell in their own commercial circuit.

In Aubusson, I was their client, so I could stomp my foot lightly and insist they follow my orders. Actually, I had to approve work and authorize the payments; that gives you some influence.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Of course I know.

MS. HICKS: If you're just the artist designing –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And if I may mention, this was a time where there had been an economic

shock in the whole world and where they were begging for work in Aubusson, so it was also – I mean, it gave you even more power because –

MS. HICKS: Well, you'd think they'd be eager to work; that they'd make an effort. But people are stuck in their patterns and ways.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and of course they didn't like so much that you would come with new ideas and try to change their traditional way of solving the problems.

MS. HICKS: Which had deteriorated in many ways and instead of the glory of the past, it had become a faint shadow of the glorious past.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It did help them a lot by –

MS. HICKS: Only between 1982 and 1985. [Laughter.]

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But that's already enormous. [Laughter.]

MS. HICKS: After that I don't think it became another glorious period.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, but for the time it lasted it was.

MS. HICKS: And I did bring them more clients when I had projects where I thought I could introduce woven tapestry. For instance: Kellogg's of Battle Creek, Michigan – their headquarters – we made a beautiful tapestry of blowing wheat fields in Philippe Hecquet's workshop.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I must interrupt you here. I think you should say a word about the themes of your designs for Saudi Arabia because I remember them very well.

MS. HICKS: Abstract designs with very strong colors.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and no figures.

MS. HICKS: Sun—flooded, full colors and abstract – some faint references to botanical forms. But no figurative, animal or hunting scenes, like Aubusson.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I remember sand landscapes. That was wonderful; like a *Sea of Sand*.

MS. HICKS: One immense tapestry gave the impression of blowing sand in the desert with ripples and patterns [7 x 6 meters, 21 x 18 feet].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I loved that one. And the other one that was quite famous was the *Palm Tree*.

MS. HICKS: I made the original design in an oasis near Riyadh after a picnic one afternoon, looking up into a palm tree at the fronds, as they swayed and unfolded – an impression of what it might be like living inside the palm tree, way up in the top.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. Maybe it's the most figurative work you ever made. Everybody recognized it.

MS. HICKS: Once, when I wove a tapestry for a small church [Kenilworth Union Church near Chicago] I looked at Japanese screens depicting battles of charging horses, warriors and moving clouds. Almost like a Kurosawa film – landscape in very muted colors, with vague figurative references.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Is there something more you want to tell us about Morocco?

MS. HICKS: After I had worked there for a number of years, they organized an exhibition in Bab Rouah, the national gallery in Rabat. That was quite an event. It influenced the people who were designing carpets because I took them off the floor, hung them on the wall, and made them into *Tapis Mural* [Wall Rug] or *Tapis de Prière* [Prayer Rug].

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And what I remember about some of the rugs or wall hangings you made in Morocco is that the pile was of different heights. That was so interesting.

MS. HICKS: I took scissors and hand cut the heavy wool pile into a bas-relief, allowing it to fall in various lengths.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Catching the light.

MS. HICKS: A lot of my work's based on bas-relief – I like working with volumes of yarn and light.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, so that was your experience in Morocco.

MS. HICKS: The American craft magazine [*Craft Horizons*] published an article about that exhibition. Betty Werther wrote the article; she went to see that show. Twenty friends came to Rabat and wrote or photographed it. Museum people, too. The United States Information Service or Cultural Service then toured the show in Tangers, Tunis, Dakar, and Abidjan. I went to help install it each place.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Did that help the Moroccan workshops? Did it give them more work?

MS. HICKS: A lot. It gave them some prestigious clients. The Société Générale de Banque in Brussels [architect: Jules Wabbes] ordered immense carpets from one of the workshops. In fact, they won the prize at the Casablanca artisanat fair that year for the most beautiful carpets. Many were not dyed – only matched natural wools.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, that had been carefully sorted.

MS. HICKS: And knotted in different pile heights, then scissor cut in reliefs.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Sheila, you just mentioned this show of Moroccan wall rugs that toured in Africa. I would like you to tell us about some other shows that you thought remarkable of – another show of your own work. Is there one that comes to your mind?

MS. HICKS: When you say “my own work,” I considered all of the production design my own work, too.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. Yes, of course.

MS. HICKS: I'm going to use that as the trampoline to emphasize that when I showed laundry, which I borrowed from hospitals, I considered it to be my work. I piled it up in the Eighth Biennale of Lausanne [1977] – about five tons of laundry, placed on a platform, and sculpted it in the form of a glacier, or an avalanche, or a cascade. It was textile art composed of white, clean, cotton hospital laundry.

That, too, was my most personal work.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, of course.

MS. HICKS: Some visitors and a few of the show's organizers were disturbed or upset, but I learned from that experience. Many artists were making decorative or functional textiles and tapestry, but this basic material has a profound echo. You can sense the presence; it is powerful. You can use it as art language. I found I could work with it and say meaningful and significant things about the world. When I went to Israel, I used military uniforms and sculpted an environment with them. In the Lausanne Biennale, I used their nurse's blouses. [In the Chateau of Fontevraud I used surgeon's smocks.]

I saw how people could be affected by the silent presence – the physical presence – of familiar textile garments used in a conceptual way.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Ah, death and suffering.

MS. HICKS: Exactly. Life and death.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and also with the uniforms.

MS. HICKS: That helped me discover how to evoke powerful human –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Emotions.

MS. HICKS: – emotions and responses by using textile. I stepped back and took a breather from decorative art, architecture projects, and just worked with this material. In Sweden I had a wonderful collaboration with the director of the Lunds Konsthall [Marianne Nanne-Brahammer]. She obtained truckloads of laundry from the local Swedish hospital. It was in the winter, so it snowed. To see this material arriving in the snow on the main square caused a big stir because the local market also took place in front of the museum. It's a university town, too, so the students walked to school through this plaza, and they saw laundry pouring into the art museum.

I invited them to come in and help me construct the exhibition – to mount it, to mold it, to form it. I worked very hard from then on, on my exhibitions. I went to a space, brought the materials in, and then made the exhibition in accordance with the space, the light, and the sensitivity of the community.

That is how I did an exhibition in Montreuil, near Paris –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, I remember.

MS. HICKS: – it was in a – not an art museum. It was in a town hall and I worked with community volunteers.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And you can also add that Montreuil is a left –

MS. HICKS: It was a communist suburb of Paris and socially progressive. Representatives from the American Embassy came to the opening, as did a few French ministers, who were not necessarily left. They wanted to see what this artist was trying to say with 3,000 nurses blouses hung inside the community center, and why the Montreuil cultural officer [Mic Fabre] had chosen to present this.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: People were stunned; they were awe stricken. People walked in, stood frozen, or sat down, and cried staring at this tombé [falling mass]– at this big curtain of nurses blouses hung with safety pins – pinned together, one to the other. It was a whole fleet or army battalion of ghosts that had come in during the night, through one of the windows, posed like butterflies quivering in the space. It made people upset because they had had emotional experiences with hospitals, or spiritual awakenings, and people came back more than once. Busses brought children from schools to see this and the children thought it was stupendous. They laughed, joked, sang, ran around inside the environment; so it brought joy and it brought sadness.

What did I learn? I learned about the gamut of emotions that can be somehow elicited from the viewer. I won't call it art, but an experience quite equivalent to what some call art. Art provokes an emotion, a reaction: attraction or repulsion. It can be a significant learning experience, or jolt, even a revolting, upsetting experience. And I thought: this is the way I want to work – with this material.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: I want to reinforce its validity. Textiles had been relegated to a secondary role in our society, to a material that was merely functional or decorative. I wanted to give it another status and show what an artist can do with these incredible materials.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But one question I have: did you ever sell one of these assembled pieces of recuperated hospital textiles or army textiles? Did you ever sell them as art that would go into a room – a private room or a public space? Did you ever sell one?

MS. HICKS: They were not created to be sold, but they entered the art commerce in spite of that. A gallery in Amsterdam, Collection d'Art, that also shows de Kooning, made an exhibition and showed my small work in one room and my sculpture, made of recuperated hospital linen, in the front part of the gallery. The gallery director called me and said, "Sheila, I have sold the main oeuvre in the show to a prison administrator of Amsterdam. He wants to put it in his private apartment in the prison. Do you have any objection to this? He can't pay for it all at once. He'll pay by installments, but he's come back a number of times and he wants this piece." I was so touched, I thought why doesn't she just give it to him – [general laughter] – but she's an art gallery.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, of course she has to –

MS. HICKS: And she's a dealer; she wants to pay her rent, her expenses. She taxed this man for months and months. It went into his collection and he lived with it for about 14 years; then he contacted me through the gallery: did I have a museum that I wanted to give it to because he was retiring from the prison job and moving to a small apartment in Amsterdam with low ceilings. I started thinking: what museum would like it? [It is in the permanent collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.]

Not long ago a curator at the Cleveland Museum [Louise Mackie] said, "Do you still have the darned sheets that you originally exhibited here? Our director thinks it would be nice, because people still talk about them, to acquire them for the Museum." That's the long way to answer your question. Yes, these things have wandered into private collections; they've wandered into public museums.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That's really fantastic, I think.

MS. HICKS: It's not surprising: look at what's happening today in art. Exhibitions at the Whitney, or any of the museums that show new proposals – new ways of thinking and looking at art – could

accommodate these works. They wouldn't be shocking at all.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No. Well, Sheila, is there something more you want to say about exhibitions that were sort of highlights in your life as an artist? Is there another one you would like to talk about?

MS. HICKS: An exhibition I'd like to talk about is one I helped to organize: it wasn't specifically my work; it was work I discovered in Japan.

I would like to preface this by saying that I had a serious accident in 1987. I fell in New York and spent about a year in convalescence. I had the impression that I might not be able to continue working on projects in architectural sites or mount large exhibitions. I made small works – miniatures – and looked at other artist's work.

My brother, Bill, who was a doctor and psychoanalyst, came to see me during this period; I was low – demoralized – he said to me, “You've had a wonderful life. You've had interesting experiences, been a lot of places, have children. What is it that you feel you'll miss out on by being immobilized?” I said “I think I'm going to miss the Japanese chapter; I always thought I'd save a period of my life and work in Japan – a place I love.” I'd visited it once and I intended to return.

My brother had had a Japanese roommate in college, who became an influential functionaire [a government official]. He said, “If you feel that way, I will help you and let's go to Japan together.” A year after this accident, in 1989, we went.

Slowly, I could walk again and I began to work in Japan. I made friends, got to know how the Japanese work. I developed a new way of thinking about my own work and collaborating.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You were commissioned to do work in Japan. Can you tell us about that?

MS. HICKS: I started having a series of new commissions; I knew I had to work differently. I needed strong collaborators – Japanese artists, designers, architects, and commercial agents.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But did you collaborate with people over there in Japan, or did you import them to your studio in Paris?

MS. HICKS: Both. Japanese don't hesitate to travel, as you know. One of these collaborators has been with me 11 years and has worked on most of my projects [Taeko Baba, studio assistant since 1993]. Other Japanese have come and I've gone back to their studios [Naomi and Masa Kobayashi, Tanaka, Shindo, Sekkeji]. Junichi Arai came often: especially when we made a big stage curtain [*Doncho*] in Kiryu.

An important installation work was for Fuji City. It was an entrance of a theater with three concert halls in one cultural center. There was a wall that went the entire length of the lobby of the cultural center. Architects were contemplating designs or ideas of artwork for the site. They saw my exhibition in Tokyo and invited me to make a presentation. I won the competition to do a work that was 330-feet long by nine feet tall. It was a long frieze, and it was facing – there were windows the entire length – facing the majestic volcano Mount Fuji. Mount Fuji was covered part of the year by clouds and –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Snow.

MS. HICKS: – snow and storms, so on the days that it was obscured, people looked at my tapestry

– bas-relief. The days that it wasn't covered, they looked at Mount Fuji. [Laughter.] And on a good day they could see both as they walked through the theatre lobby.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and where was that tapestry made? In Japan?

MS. HICKS: No. It was made here in my studio, which is six meters by seven meters – 42 square meters, approximately 400 square feet [Sheila is measuring her studio space]. It's very small. The ceiling is high: about 12 feet high. This tapestry was actually composed of 52 panels abutted, one next to the other, in an invisible, seamless way in the site. It took a year and a half to make, but each panel was exciting. Tuesday we'd twist and sew yellow linen strands with moss green and then move on the following day to emerald and turquoise. As I'd walk over to the market – I live a block from the market – I would see colors all the time. If I'd walk across the Pont-Neuf at night I'd look at the sky. Everything I saw entered the tapestry – the different color impressions and feelings and –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Because this tapestry was not figurative. It was abstract. It was about color, yes.

MS. HICKS: About color, about texture. It weighed 5000 kilos [five tons]. It was pure linen.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and it was an assemblage of twisted linen skeins sewn onto a linen basecloth.

MS. HICKS: If you look around my studio, you will not see mechanical devices except a fax, a telephone, a very old sewing machine. Basically there are no machines.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, it's all manual. And the Fuji project was made by hand with a curved needle. It was linen. There was no silk?

MS. HICKS: No.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No. All the colors were in linen? Yes. And my question is, when you had completed all these panels, they were shipped to Japan and you were there to receive them with some collaborators?

MS. HICKS: I took five people from my studio, including Eva Zeibekis, who has worked with me since 1967. She accompanies me to most of the big installations.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So my question is, when you received these panels in Japan and mounted them, did you find that they could be put in place immediately with no changes whatsoever, or were you confronted with problems, and did you have to adjust?

MS. HICKS: I had visited the site twice during construction. The architects had built models, so I knew what I was coming into; and they're precise. I made one extra panel that was for the error of margin. No, the margin of error.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Ah, yes, the margin of error. [Laughter.]

MS. HICKS: Fifty-two. I had made fifty-two full sized narrow width panels plus one in case there was any change in the construction site. Everything went impeccably and a film was made by Cristo Zañartu during the installation. It showed the way they were mounted and the way they were lifted and fitted in place.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But you had no modification as to the colors? Everything had been –

MS. HICKS: Pre-thought.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, pre-thought and previewed maybe in your courtyard?

MS. HICKS: In my mind. Every night after working all day long on the colors, through the different seasons, I would go and swim and think about the transitions and sequences of one panel to the next panel and visualize it so it would be smooth.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you would swim thinking of the transitions and it worked out perfectly.

MS. HICKS: As far as I'm concerned.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, but did you try them out here in Paris in your courtyard?

MS. HICKS: You are right to remind me. I did take three or four panels at a time, lay them out on the cobblestones. Then I'd go up to the third floor, where I live, look out the window, photograph, and see how the colors would read from a distance.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Because when I listen to your story, it always amazes me how you can switch from one scale to the other. To me it would be something very difficult to have to switch.

MS. HICKS: Photography helps a lot. To be able to back up and look.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I realize photography does help.

MS. HICKS: The way you look through diminishing glasses to simulate a distance.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, so that's how you did – and you had more than one commission in Japan. I remember you also had a curtain –

MS. HICKS: The *Doncho* [stage curtain]. I've had about 14 commissions in Japan since the nineteen-eighties, maybe more, including small ones for private residences. There has been a response to my work in Japan. I feel comfortable working there. Also, I went to Korea four times.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And what did you do in Korea?

MS. HICKS: The first time, I was invited to exhibit my work at the Seoul Art Center: that was sponsored by the French Cultural Service – not the American. Then two or three years later [2002] I was invited to come back and preside over a jury of the Cheongju International Craft Biennale, which included wood, glass, ceramics, metal, textiles. They asked me to come back to inaugurate that show. Crafts are still very strong in Korea.

[Audio break.]

MS. HICKS: When I became acquainted with the Japanese artists and their work, I was eager for other people to see and appreciate it. Once in Japan together, I showed it to Cristo Zañartu and to his wife, Rebecca Clark. They felt the way for other people to see it was to make a film. It took a few years to get the financing, but they showed their rushes of two films to museum curators in Europe and the United States. An important exhibition grew out of this. It began at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and traveled.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: There was also a very beautiful catalogue that went with it. As well as the two marvelous films.

MS. HICKS: The films were the locomotive.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. Yes, no doubt.

MS. HICKS: The first one, called *Textile Magicians*, was poetic and brilliant. It won many prizes. The second film by Zañartu with Clark, was *Basho to Spun Steel*. That included the weaving of banana fiber [basho] in Okinawa. It was magical.

It demonstrated, I think, we cannot live without textiles.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You're very convincing. [Laughter.]

Sheila, can we go on now to the last part of this interview where I would like to ask personal questions about the relationship between you and your work? It isn't anymore your work, but how you live your life and I would also like to ask you a question about transmitting your knowledge; that is, teaching. Can you say a few words about how you have taught?

MS. HICKS: I'm going to combine those two questions if you don't mind because –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: I shouldn't ask two questions at a time, but it comes. [Laughter.]

MS. HICKS: I would say life and work are inextricably linked. There's no cutoff where you can distinguish one from the other. I think my children and my grandchildren will attest to that probably and complain about it, too. Teaching is every day by example. The best way to teach is to do, or, to be. I don't think of myself as a teacher. I think of myself as a doer. Monique, I think of you as a doer, too.

I have been running a studio every day since I can remember. Many people have trained in my studios. The best teaching is showing by doing.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: You do a lot with your hands.

MS. HICKS: I'm working every day. Even if I don't feel like working, I know that some people are coming to work today. I'll go into the studio – I used to live right in the studio and just do whatever comes to mind. Just begin by doing, every day.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Practically, you do teach every day.

MS. HICKS: Schools telephone from Ireland or Scotland, and say, "We'll be in Paris for the Premier Vision or for Expo Fil [annual textile and yarn fairs] can we bring our students?" I answer, "Fine, come by and see what we're doing, but it's not a teaching session."

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No. Now I would like to ask you another question – very personal. Have you ever felt it was hard being a woman as an artist? To – well, to assert yourself as an artist? Do you think it's harder for you as a woman, or do you think it doesn't have any repercussion?

MS. HICKS: I think it's hard being a woman.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Period, even if you're not an artist? Yes.

MS. HICKS: But that is a given.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Therefore, figure out how to make it work in your favor.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Because there are positive sides.

MS. HICKS: Exactly, and make the most of it.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: That's been my attitude.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. You know it's different being a woman than being a man, but –

MS. HICKS: I'm not a complainer.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No, you're not a complainer. I knew you wouldn't be, but I wanted to ask a question so that everybody would know. [Laughter.] And has it been hard for you to gain the confidence of those who make the decisions on a board, for instance, that administrates? You have to deal with businessmen; do you find it more difficult to be a woman, or do you think they have confidence in you?

MS. HICKS: I think they look. People do not arrive at positions of power by accident.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: No.

MS. HICKS: Either they merit them or they conquest them.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes.

MS. HICKS: Or maybe both. Or maybe they inherit them and then have to justify it, but I think if you're presenting something so concrete as I do – which is material culture – my work is not only an idea or a philosophy or a theory –

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: It's very concrete.

MS. HICKS: It's extremely concrete, so I could come in any packaging or any form and it would be secondary to what is being presented.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. So it has never been an obstacle – you being a woman –

MS. HICKS: I don't think of it in those terms. I think what I have to say or present stands on its own.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and it does, obviously, since you get the commissions.

MS. HICKS: In fact, it should stand on its own so much so that the rest is irrelevant.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Exactly, yes. It shows that you don't have any trouble convincing.

MS. HICKS: Well, I just don't do what anybody tells me. I do what I think has to be done.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. Yes.

MS. HICKS: I do what I think should be done and I do it in a way that I think it is so convincing it can only be embraced.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Now, we're coming to my last question. That is, do you feel your work has been recognized as art?

MS. HICKS: Yes.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Can you develop?

MS. HICKS: I go to many exhibitions that are art exhibitions, or announced as such, and I don't find them interesting and they do not touch me. I go to other presentations that are not in art museums – that are in other kinds of public spaces, and they may touch me deeply. Art might be their *secret* message.

Specifically, do I think my work is art and has it been recognized as art?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Mm-hmm.

MS. HICKS: Yes, by some enlightened souls. It's also been dismissed by some other enlightened souls. The world is composed of many different kinds of people with different visions. Should I listen to one group more than another group, or should I just keep doing the thing that I most want to do?

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: And that expresses what you feel? You are satisfied looking back now on the last 40 years where you have worked?

MS. HICKS: Yes, and I'm eager to experience the next 40 years.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But looking backwards, do you feel that you have been able to express yourself?

MS. HICKS: I have no one to blame but myself if I haven't.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: But how do you feel about it?

MS. HICKS: I've worked like hell and I have been expressing myself.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: So you feel that you have expressed yourself?

MS. HICKS: I don't think of it in the past tense. I think I am expressing myself.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes. Well, Sheila, those were the main questions I wanted to put to you and I thank you very much.

MS. HICKS: Thank you for your patience in hanging in there so long. This was to be a short interview, but it developed into a sort of overview of the whole career. No one is better placed than you to be able to do this because we've known each other for a good long while and you've seen practically every single project that's come out of my studio.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: That's true.

MS. HICKS: And you've seen a great many of the exhibitions.

MS. LÉVI-STRAUSS: Yes, and I've loved them.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... *January 25, 2005*