



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Tom Van Sant,
2008 August 14-September 10

Funding for this interview was provided by the Brown Foundation. 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 recorded interview with Tom Van Sant on August 14 and September 10, 2008. The interview took place in Santa Monica, CA, and was conducted by Jo Lauria for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Tom Van Sant has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JO LAURIA: Tom, can you just say your name one more time, please?

TOM VAN SANT: Tom Van Sant.

JO LAURIA: Okay. And let's just establish a general chronology. Tell us when and where you were born.

TOM VAN SANT: I was born in Los Angeles in 1931. My father was born in Santa Monica in 1898, so the family has been here awhile.

JO LAURIA: And how would you characterize your childhood? Do you feel during your upbringing that you were supported in your artistic endeavors? Or do you feel that you came to it totally independently of what your family background is?

TOM VAN SANT: I was brought up during the Great Depression. And though, as a child, that never occurred to us that we were poor. But my dad had an office, which is really a desk in the Roosevelt Building downtown, where he sold insurance. And he paid 10 dollars a month for the rental of the space in the hall where his desk was. And we lived in a little house on South Stearns Drive, south of Olympic, there in the Carthay Circle area. And it was a very wonderful childhood and wonderful neighbors with children. We didn't have a radio, but we could go next door and listen to Joe Louis fight Max Schmeling. I remember these highlight moments.

JO LAURIA: Were either of your parents artists, or were they interested in art?

TOM VAN SANT: My dad is a Sunday painter. He painted nice watercolors. And so it was—art was never anything that was foreign to me or elitist or any of the—or whether I had talent or not. None of that made any difference, which is the way kids should stay, as long as they can, before they become self-conscious.

JO LAURIA: And do you think that, in your elementary education, that you were steered in any way or encouraged to do art?

TOM VAN SANT: No. No. I do what kids do, make drawings. But that wasn't a primary interest of mine. And even through high school, I never took any art classes. I avoided them, really, in preference for other interests.

JO LAURIA: Well, then, why don't you tell us, at what point did you decide that you were going to be an artist, sculptor?

TOM VAN SANT: Oh, I couldn't remember any point. It's a good question because there are moments that we make decisions. But I can't remember such a decision. If anything, it would be after I went to college.

I went away to Stanford [University, Palo Alto, CA] to play football and to meet girls and do the things that college boys are interested in doing. And I took the art classes at Stanford in the art department and—in my sophomore year. But I got hurt playing football. So I couldn't do that anymore. And I took the art classes, and I liked them very much.

And so that might have been a changing point. It's enough of a change that I transferred from Stanford down to Pomona College to go to Scripps Art School, which had a very good art department, with a faculty put together by Millard Sheets, many of which went on to teach at the Otis Art Institute of Los Angeles County, which I then attended after I graduated and after I served in the Marines for a couple of years in the Far East.

Then I came back, and on my GI Bill, I went to graduate school at Otis Art Institute with—which was then directed by the same man, Millard Sheets, and many of the same faculty members.

JO LAURIA: So let's talk a little bit about your military service, because in reviewing your website, I noticed—

well, we looked at some very interesting drawings that you did as a war correspondent. And that was, obviously, done in those years between—or was it done in those years between the undergraduate and the graduate school? Or was that done after you finished graduate school at Otis?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, having served in the Marine Corps for a couple of years between college and graduate school, I was comfortable in the military environment and sort of knew my way around, and had served in a very good and renowned military organization. So like any other young patriotic guy, I guess I figured I was—I knew my way around. And during the summer of my—of 1957, while I was in graduate school at Otis, I went to the Los Angeles Times and said I wanted to go to Europe. I went to Europe, to Paris and London and so forth, with my girlfriend. And then she came back, and I went on to the Middle East as a war correspondent.

And I had—I didn't have a letter of introduction. So when I was in Paris, the Los Angeles Times had a single foreign correspondent, and his name was Waldo Drake. And his office was the American Bar in Paris. And the bartender had his stationery and so forth under the bar. And Waldo liked to drink. And so I went there to meet him and said I wanted to go on to Cypress and cover the Greek Cyprio Turk war on Cypress and then on to the Middle East to Jordan and other places.

And he said, "Well, I'll write you a letter." Then he asked for one of his pieces of stationery, which the bartender handed to him. And he said, "This is to introduce," and so on. And it had Los Angeles Times letterhead. Well, with all the confidence now in the world, I folded this up and put it in my wallet and went on to these different exotic places to have my great adventure.

And the surprising thing was, in all the time I was there, no one ever asked for any credentials or asked to see any letter or anything. And I interviewed the commanding officer of all the British troops in Cypress, and Bishop Makarios, and all the famous persons. And I was, what, I don't know, 27 or something.

And while I was in Cypress, the king of Jordan, King Hussein, all of a sudden was in the headlines because he—it was his birthday. And he was flying to Switzerland to have his birthday with his wife, who was there. But he had to fly across Syria, which at that time was part of what was called the United Arab Republic, which was Syria and Egypt had joined forces to be called the United Arab Republic. And the only country that stood between them to have a unified Arab world, which had been the dream of Arabs for centuries, or the enlightened Arab, was Jordan, under the command of this young, 25-year-old king.

And so they sent up two Russian MiG fighters that were obtained by the Syrians to shoot down and assassinate King Hussein of Jordan. But Hussein was flying a little double-engine Cessna airplane with the royal seal on the side of the airplane, was piloted by a great Irish or Scotsman—I'm not sure which—named Flood, who was a great pilot during the Second World War. And he zoomed down to—not to treetops, but to sand dune tops, and eluded these jets, who didn't like to dive and fire on things so close to the ground, which could change direction very rapidly. And he got King Hussein safely back to Amman, Jordan.

And I was in the bar of the St. George, that famous hotel in Beirut. It's long since burned down. But with some other correspondents, including the Alsop brothers—and a runner came in and said that Hussein had returned back to Jordan after an attempt on his life. So we each pitched in about 30 bucks and got a charter flight on one of the old C-3 or whatever they were. We all climbed in, and the pilot flew us over to Amman, Jordan, to celebrate this birthday celebration, which we got to attend. And it was really wonderful for a young guy like me who—you talk about wonderful adventures.

And off the desert came all the great Bedouin sheiks from the high desert, who came in their Cadillacs and camels and all sorts of vehicles. And the Arab legionnaires would dance and shoot off their automatic rifles into the sky. And I asked for an interview. I asked the secretary of state of Jordan, who was at the party, and also the king's personal secretary who made appointments. I asked for an interview with young King Hussein. And I was turned down by everybody, because the king was not allowed to give interviews unless he was in the presence of his advisors. And I told them I didn't want to ask him any foreign policy questions or anything like that, but a very personal interview about things he was interested in. They said no.

So I waited a few days and then gave up and went down across the Allenby Bridge into Jerusalem. I was in one of those underground churches that had a portion of the pavement of which Christ is said to have walked when he was carrying the cross. It was early afternoon. And in came a bunch of legionnaires, Jordanian legionnaires. And they grabbed me and grabbed my bags and put them into their jeeps. And the whole row of jeeps then took off back up across the Allenby Bridge and up the desert to Amman, Jordan, and deposited me at the palace for an appointment with King Hussein of Jordan.

And I guess I became acceptable because it was a very personal appointment and I was a young person, his age. And our 15-minute appointment ended up lasting about three hours. And he offered me whatever I would like to travel around his country, an airplane. Well, his air force at that time consisted, I think, of three airplanes, and I didn't need to occupy one of them.

And I said, how about just a Land Rover and a driver, which he provided the next morning at six o'clock in front of this little sandy hotel that I was staying at. And the Arab driver didn't speak English, but that didn't make any difference. Off we went to the high desert and visited the Bedouin—he was a Bedouin himself, and he knew his way around the desert. And we went to Shoback and Korak and the great crusader castles out on the desert and to the old French foreign legionnaire fortresses, which are now Arab legionnaire.

And the king's radio system had notified all of them that we were coming, so we'd be driving across the sandy desert, and we'd get within a couple of miles of some legionnaire post, and out from there would appear six legionnaires on camels with the king's colors at the end of their spears, and escort me into this—into one of these great old legionnaire forts. And then I just had a great adventure.

JO LAURIA: I saw some of the drawings that you've now posted on your new website, which is tomvansant.com. And how do you think that your art training prepared you to go out on this adventure and be able to illustrate so quickly your impressions of the local people and the culture?

TOM VAN SANT: That's a good question, because I guess it would be unusual to be so presumptuous, if you wish, as a young man. But it wasn't done out of presumptuousness or arrogance. It was, sort of, the other extreme. I had learned to believe and feel, from what little experience I had as a young man, that a purity of heart and a confidence in your own sense of honor and maintaining a sense of gratitude at all times, and to then have faith in the universe and be fully prepared to accept and accommodate the circumstances that I would find myself in. I remember having that sense of confidence.

JO LAURIA: But you went on in the future. This was when you went to Jordan, I think. According to the website, it said 1957. And you were filing these photos—not photos—these illustrations with the LA Times. And then later you went to Vietnam and you did drawings, because it was a commission for the Library of Congress and the commandant of the Marine Corps.

So I guess what I'm trying to say is the kind of illustration you had to do when you were either on the road or in combat was a very quick sketch. It had to be very precise. Reductivism is important, getting the essence. You have a drawing of a Bedouin where you've gotten all of his traditional garb historically correct. So did you take classes at either Scripps or Otis that prepared you for this kind of quick-sketch, gestural drawing that communicates a lot of information with very—with great brevity, with quick, broad strokes?

TOM VAN SANT: Boy, that's a good question. And when you say "prepared," I think—the answer is yes, but it's partially no, because what I learned later on my own was also very important to me. But that's true of all artists. We all learn in different ways. And we solve our problems—well, in my case, I always felt that if I let things be, the solutions would emerge. But Herb Jepson, who is a great—you know, had the Jepson School, art school, and who was the head of the drawing department at Otis—

JO LAURIA: Could you spell that for us, if you know the spelling?

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah, Herbert Jepson, J-E-P-S-O-N. And Herb was had a very personal view of art. And he was a great believer that what you learn may be important, but not nearly as important as how you feel about what you're doing. If you're totally engaged, you can close your eyes and draw. And I learned this the year before I went on this trip.

I got a little job on the side as an art director of a small magazine. And I was asked to go do drawings of philosopher Gerald Heard. And he was talking to some other people, and I was sitting on the floor and doing pen-and-ink drawings of him. Well, it got dark. And I continued to draw. And I could barely see the page that I was drawing on, but I was so entranced by this elderly man and his beauty of speech and the richness of his ideas that I was really engaged in that when I was drawing. And I was shocked to find when I got home that these drawings pleased me very much.

And it was an illustration of what I'd learned from Herb Jepson. So you would ask, well, here your subjects are moving quickly. How can you capture the gesture and the detail and even the shading, or whatever you want to do with it? And the only answer I have is feeling love for that image and confidence, not in an ability to do anything, but confidence to the gratitude of being able to, because that's the only state of mind that is really productive. And so the image would, in a sense, stay indelible on the back of my eyelids, so to speak. And so the images held.

There's no future in drawing fast. The future is in caring enough about the image that has told you that it wants to be captured, and keeping it in such a way in front of you, even though the subject has long left, you continue to draw the image.

JO LAURIA: Well, at some point you must have begun to build a resume or have a reputation for being successful at illustrating certain scenes, because why would the Library of Congress and the commandant of the Marine

Corps commission you to go out with them to record what you saw in Vietnam, had you not had a certain reputation at this point? So how did you garner—how did you develop this reputation as Tom Van Sant, the artist/illustrator and war correspondent?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, it sort of happened on its own. And of course, it was a decade and a half later. I was in Vietnam in 1968. And in the interim between these adventures on the high desert in Jordan and Egypt, I had done all the illustrations for the film *Spartacus* [1960] and other drawing projects that had ended up in art magazines like *American Artist* and other places that somebody would come across it.

And I think it was actually the *Spartacus* drawings that the officer who ran the Marine Corps combat art program read in the article that I had been a Marine. So he called me, in 1967 or something, and asked me if I would like to go to Vietnam and do that, and go with the First Marine Division. And I said, "No, of course not. I'm not a great enthusiast of your war. And I'm kind of sorry we're there." And a year later, things happened in my life that it was a difficult time for me. And I all of a sudden found that I would like to spend a few months of my life not deciding about whether things were good or bad or whether this project—like, what makes a drawing or a painting better, or a sculpture better or worse or whatever, and spend it in a survival-oriented environment where none of that makes any difference.

Most of the time I was with the First Marine Division operations of one sort or another. When you go in helicopters to a landing zone along with the units that are being deployed there, the first order of business is digging. And you dig a foxhole, and you end up digging it with some kid you'd join who would say to me, "Hey, old man"—I was 38 by then—"Hey, old man, what are you doing out here?" And I'd tell him. And he'd say, "You mean, you're out here and you don't need to be?" [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: [Laughs] So what would you bring along with you on these assignments? Because you obviously had to be very mobile. And you had to have some instruments for drawing, some materials, but probably they had to be pretty permanent. Was pencil good enough? Or was marker or ink better, because you didn't want these things to get on paper weathered or torn? And how did you get these drawings back to where they belonged, which I'm not sure where that was. Was that back to the Marine Corps, or was it back to the Library of Congress? Did you take photographs? Can you sort of walk us through? What would be a normal week in your schedule at any one of these assignments?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, when you ask me what I would take with me, the most important thing I would take with me when I would leave the headquarters in Da Nang and catch, usually, helicopter flights to one location or another, depending upon where the action was, I would take three or four canteens instead of just one. And in the canteens, I would put ice and scotch.

JO LAURIA: Two items not necessarily needed for drawing, by the way.

TOM VAN SANT: And the—everybody—they would drop from helicopters to the units, they'd drop Coca-Colas and stuff like that, sweet, sugar things, but at room temperature. And Vietnam was about 98 [degrees]. And I don't know. I couldn't drink this stuff. But these guys, that's all they had to drink. The water wasn't all that good. So I'd land in someplace. And I'd end up—I'd usually go and introduce myself to the battalion commanders, because they were—most of them came out of the basic school that I had gone through 15 years earlier, and they were all—light bird colonels by then.

JO LAURIA: More your age.

TOM VAN SANT: And they ran—they knew the battalions. And so I'd see a familiar guy, you know, that I knew from basic school in Quantico, Virginia, and to greet him so he'd know I was on his base. But then I'd go back and dig in with some kid. And we'd dig the foxhole or whatever it was.

And then I'd say, "I've got some stuff here in this canteen. Would you like something to drink?" And he says, "Well, I've got some Coca-Cola here." And I said, "Well, what do you wish you had?" And he says, "Oh, well, I wish I had something cold." And I said, "Like with ice cubes in it?" He says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." "How about a cold, ice-filled scotch and water?" "Ha-ha, you're kidding me," you know, "You're putting me on." "Well, hold out your canteen cup." Clunk, clunk, clunk, in would go the little cubes of ice and the scotch.

So that became an essential thing to carry. The drawing I'd carry in just a little canvas knap - a little knap, bag that officers carry - and that little canvas bag and, you know, a dark canvas bag, and pens, just the felt-tip black and brown pens.

JO LAURIA: And do you still have those drawings, Tom?

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah.

JO LAURIA: So they have lasted?

TOM VAN SANT: Sure.

JO LAURIA: For the 40 years hence.

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

JO LAURIA: And did you also create a diary at the same time? Were you drawing almost like a photojournalist, you know, where you write down your impressions and then make the drawing or comment on your circumstances or the person that you might have gotten to know, and write some of the things that were important to that person's life?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes, I did. And I did that in Cypress and Jordan and Egypt and the places I visited in the Middle East. And that commentary was important to accompany the drawings for the LA Times, that printed them after I got back. And—which was wonderful, because after the drawings were published, I got invited to every Arab restaurant in town for a free dinner.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs] Well, what happened with the—I'm just interested in the Library of Congress idea, of how they got involved in commissioning you. I'm suspecting that they got involved in commissioning other people. What was the purpose of these drawings? I mean, they weren't to go to a newspaper like the LA Times. Were they to be deposited in their archives for future researchers? Did you know when you went what the purpose of your drawings were?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. And I—as I remember, the Library of Congress, presumably, invited the commandant's office to have drawings made by any combat artist that they would have, either in their units or retained separately, like I was. And I imagine that air force and the army and navy all had—well, I know they did, because one of our instructors, Richard Haines, had gone aboard ships in the South Pacific, and he did things—he did drawings and paintings for the navy.

But a lot of the people who did that were sort of—they glorified—the implication was, maybe, that the reason they were asked to do this is to show how beautiful the ship was and how -

JO LAURIA: To put a spin, a positive spin, on the war.

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah. Yeah.

JO LAURIA: Probably a little bit propagandistic?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I probably did that, too. I probably put a positive spin. But the positive spin was on the kids themselves and how they became—kids, you know, serving in wars are not critics of the war. We have a war in Iraq. And we have very mixed feelings about it back here at home. Well, there was very mixed feelings about the Vietnam War back at home. And—but they're not engaged—they don't engage in any of that. They're there to do their job, and their dedication is to their self-preservation and to the preservation of their buddies, their unit.

And so their heroism and their—are not—it's not patriotic heroism. It's much more personal than that. It's a love of their unit and of their—the guys they're depending upon and who are depending upon them.

JO LAURIA: But who would see these drawings? I guess that's my point. Once you have done them, and you spent a good part of, what, six months there?

TOM VAN SANT: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JO LAURIA: Did you come back with sketchbooks filled? And then did you have meetings with anybody, or deposit them, or have an exhibition, or have them published?

TOM VAN SANT: No, there was none of that. I sent them back to the people who asked me to make the drawings, which was the Headquarters Marine Corps. Before they—when I said I'd go, then they sent me back to Washington. So I met the commandant in the headquarters and felt good about that.

And then they sent me to the jungle survival school down at Camp Pendleton, or at San Diego, I guess it was. And so if I got lost in the jungle or captured or something, I could know what to—you know, how to get rid of worms by eating chewing tobacco and then swallowing tobacco juice. And worms don't like that, and they'll leave your body, which might be as uncomfortable as leaving them inside. But they prepared me, basically, for it. But I was prepared to go out with the units and was fully prepared to fire the weapons that I had to take when I went. Even though my orders specified that I'd be unarmed, the only way I could go out with units is to be

armed, because they—no unit -

JO LAURIA: Because otherwise, you'd be a liability.

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah. You're just a dead weight. And they want—you have to contribute to the security of the unit if you're going to go.

[END OF TRACK AAA_vansan08_7447.]

JO LAURIA: Well, how do you feel looking back—I mean, hindsight is always great—that these adventures helped you develop as an artist, because we are talking, after all, about your artistic career? I mean, there are other people who might go on adventures, but they're not combining survival with their creative illustrations and their commentaries. So you did this at least three times. And in each time, there must have been some benefit or inspiration or stimulation. And when you got back to doing your other projects, which we'll get into later, how do you feel that experience bridged over?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I think it was what you mentioned earlier—it was a big part of it—which is, I didn't go there to make good drawings or to show off that I could draw or something else. I went there because I felt that I wanted to have the survival-oriented environment.

JO LAURIA: Right. But when you started coming back to do independent projects that were not necessarily commissioned by a government agency -

TOM VAN SANT: That's right.

JO LAURIA: I notice on your website the amount of projects you've done which are public art. Now, public art requires collaboration on many levels and, some would say also, compromise. And it's the ability to work with what you have and what is appropriate for a site. So I'm just trying to get to the development of getting from one place to the other place. There have been certain defining moments in your life. The evolution, if you look at it, certain ways that you learned to work with people - you learned to take the restrictions that you're given, the limitations that are in place—and those are all things that happen when you have commissions for public art.

TOM VAN SANT: They're present in the Vietnam jungle, as well.

JO LAURIA: Well, that's what I mean.

TOM VAN SANT: They're the same limitations, environmental limitations.

JO LAURIA: So, right. Because not every artist ventures into public works.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I did them a little differently, too. I didn't—compromise isn't something that I would do. If—I've had several proposals until I got to be known for the way I would work. I got several proposals from clients who would say, "We sort of want something like this, and we want it to look sort of like a—like—look at this picture here in Architectural Digest," or whatever. "And we want it to be sort of like this." And this is the basis upon which a lot of clients retain architects. And many of the architects that I've worked with would complain about that.

And so—but none of them ever did that to me. If they had decided up front what they wanted, I would offer to refer them. I wouldn't put them down for that. They should set their own goals, and I'm not going to set goals for anyone. But I would suggest to them some of the artists that I knew that would do them a good job, and that they'd be overpaying me, because what I think they should be paying me for is the solution that will come from me nursing that situation and that environment and those materials and the restrictions that are inherent into that situation.

JO LAURIA: Well, let's approach it a little bit differently.

TOM VAN SANT: And they'd be overpaying me, because that's what I offer.

JO LAURIA: Looking at some of the commissions that you've done in the past, I think a few comments are common to all of them. First, they're large scale. And second, they seem to have many components. It's not just one part of a building. A lot of them engage many aspects, architecturally, of a site. And third, you have a love, I think, for very permanent materials, which, of course, is necessary when you're doing public art, not so necessary when you're doing art for yourself or studio art. But permanence is a big factor.

TOM VAN SANT: Yes, ma'am.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs] And the last thing is that a lot of them embrace the idea of nature, the symbiosis between

man and—mankind and his/her environment. So if you could just comment on some of those aspects, you know, why so many birds in flight, the column—the ceramic column that was the celebration of life. Were these your ideas that you then found a home for? Or did others come to you with those ideas, and it sort of progressed into the fact that you do nature studies?

TOM VAN SANT: Boy, that's a super question. I believe we should—we shouldn't begin things or do things or take on things that aren't things that we can—we feel that we can fall in love with.

JO LAURIA: Okay. What does that mean?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, you mentioned birds. Well, when I was a kid, I built aviaries in the back yard. And starting at about age 10 or whatever I raised pigeons, pheasants, quail, all sorts of birds. I just love birds and their freedom to fly in the air and their beauty and how the delicacy of feathers, and this wonderful system for flight and keeping them warm and doing all the things that their evolved coats provide them. And also with—I spent every summer in nature in the Sierras [Sierra Nevada], fishing and hiking. And I love the natural environment—it wasn't a question of avoiding bears; I could hardly wait to see a bear or a cougar or deer or elk or whatever else in the natural world.

And I painted game birds on highball glasses. That's one thing I did when I was in high school. I didn't go in any art classes, but I painted all the upland and lowland game birds, and painted them in as permanent types of paints that I could find and sold them to Kerr's Sport Shop on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills.

Mr. Kerr was a famous hunter and trap shooter. And he held the world's record in shooting the little clay pigeons. In other words, it's sport shooting. And he—and the hunters - though I was a hunter when I was a young man, but when I was about 17, the last duck that I shot, I picked up and felt entirely different than I'd ever felt. I used to be proud of being successful, and I'd pick up the bird and hold out the feathers. And duck hunters love these birds. And they glory in how beautiful they are. And they know everyone—they know them by the way they fly, whereas a lot of folks who are critical of hunters don't understand how much the hunters love them.

Well, I didn't understand that it was a flawed moral position. And at 17, I picked that duck up and said, "Beautiful little sweet bird, you're the last bird I'll ever kill," and have not been a fan of hunters that are so proud of their skills in killing animals.

JO LAURIA: Then it would be fair to say that much of your art is a celebration of nature in its own right.

TOM VAN SANT: That's it.

JO LAURIA: Meaning it's not nature put into urban contexts per se.

TOM VAN SANT: That's right.

JO LAURIA: Do you want to talk about some of those commissions, especially the large dolphin wall, the side of the building in Newport [Authors of the Sea. Bank of Newport Beach, Newport Beach, CA, 1979], and how you used the concrete to give it dimension, which if you think about it, I mean, a dolphin is bound to the water. And now you're taking it from its natural habitat, and you're representing it on the side of a skyscraper building, which is very unnatural for the habitat. I mean, it's the lived environment, not the natural environment.

And you're executing this in a material that is so far from the properties of water. I mean, although concrete uses water—it's integral to the ingredients—but it's not the catalyst of concrete. It's whatever the catalyst of concrete is that makes it permanent is—very far from the idea of water. But yet you are trying to take the beauty of dolphins in movement in water and translate that to dolphins on the side, moving through this concrete up a building.

So do you want to tell us about how you came to that solution?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I hope I can give you an answer that is as insightful and as articulate as your question. That was—that, to me, was the fun of taking the ocean, which by definition is level—that's—water seeks its level, and that's how the concept of level began—and taking this horizontal surface and tilting it up to a vertical surface and representing that as the surface of the sea, just to me was—I had represented aquatic life, fishes and other aquatic life, as you would see it if you were underwater with them. But this was a 65-foot-high wall. And it was facing south, which is perfect for the light describing the forms in the intaglio, which is the term to express form cut into a surface, as opposed to coming out from a surface.

And then I was trying to figure out, well, I'll make the dorsal fins coming out in front of the wall. And I will attach them. And my friend Tony Sheets, who assisted me in carving these molds and so forth—he was the one that suggested, well, why not cut holes in the contractor's forms and attach in the sense of boxes to the outside and

pour it all at the same time? Which, in fact, we did.

And so here are these dorsal fins coming towards you, and as the sun moves across the sky each day, the fins cast their shadows off to the west in the morning and almost straight down at noon and then off to the east as the sun passes to the west. And all those conditions that you mentioned, which would be unusual, as they became possible in my mind, it became the limitations, which always make a successful work of art, in my view.

JO LAURIA: Because you have to rise above, and you have to come up with solutions?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, you can put it that way, rise above them. You can also put it another way, which is a painting without a frame that has nothing but space going out in all directions becomes an image isolated in a void. So it is the horizontal and vertical edges of the painting which are, in a sense, the first four lines that you make. And the same with the architecture—those vertical and horizontal lines are the first—is the frame that you're presented with.

JO LAURIA: But who decided on the concrete? Was the building made of concrete? Or is your wall affixed to another structure?

TOM VAN SANT: The building is a poured concrete structure.

JO LAURIA: So you did your wall at the same time?

TOM VAN SANT: And so I did my molds and so forth and placed them in the contractor's forms. And contractors are used to pouring concrete in a certain way because, unless it's an exposed aggregate concrete building, the concrete is nothing but the structure under which then -

JO LAURIA: Gets resurfaced.

TOM VAN SANT: —marble or granite or something would be placed on it. When I first started doing this, I think I was the first one—I never saw this done before. I figured out to do it, and it was the first time I used this process, was, again, within a limitation. William Pereira had designed these exposed aggregate concrete buildings with all these beautiful walls at the ground level, 15- by 20-foot panels that would be poured in place and so forth. And he was going to cover them with travertine. And so he had this budget. I think there were 40—39 or 40 walls. And his budget for the travertine would be \$39,000 or \$40,000.

And so he asked me if I had any ideas as an alternative. He thought it might just—as nice as travertine is, it might get a little -

JO LAURIA: Monotonous.

TOM VAN SANT: —tedious-looking as you walked through these nice environments, which would have gardens and so forth—tedious to see just the travertine walls.

JO LAURIA: And, Tom, just to interrupt you for a moment. You had a relationship with William Pereira, because in 1964 you did also a wall for one of his buildings in Salt Lake City?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes.

JO LAURIA: That was called The Gulls of Salt Lake City [Prudential Federal Savings and Loan Association, 1964], and it was in bronze.

TOM VAN SANT: And this was the year before, this Irvine Financial Plaza [Indigenous Inhabitants. Newport Beach, CA, 1968] and these concrete walls. As a matter of fact, before the job was completed, I went to Vietnam. And his clients, the Irvine Company, were very worried about whether or not I would return to—[laughs].

JO LAURIA: To finish the job.

TOM VAN SANT: —to finish the walls, so the Irvine Company took out insurance policies on me. I was very flattered by that. Anyway, I said, well, instead of pouring the walls in place, let me do waste molds. I'll carve the molds inside-out and backwards. And I'll place them on the floor slab and cast the walls face-down into the floor. And then we'll tilt them up, and the sculpture will be right in the wall itself.

Well, nobody was quite sure about that. And so they insisted that we cast a test wall. But Bill Pereira and his architects, his staff of architects, all were intrigued enough by the idea to let this young whippersnapper try it. And so we cast a successful first panel and then did all of the other 39 walls, I believe it was, again with all the natural forms of Southern California, the indigenous animals and aquatic creatures and all of the nature of Southern California in the walls.

JO LAURIA: And today we can go—we can still go see that building. It's still extant, correct?

TOM VAN SANT: It looks just like it did the day it was—the day they were cast, because it's exposed aggregate, and the aggregate is granite pebbles. So that after the sculpture is finished, it's sandblasted so that the matrix, or the cement, is blasted away, you know, just enough to expose all of this beautiful rock aggregate. And so the wall is as permanent as the granite aggregate.

JO LAURIA: But how did William Pereira get to you? Did you make a proposal to him as an architectural firm? Or did he know of your sculpture before? I mean, because this came before the Salt Lake City Commission. So at some point, again, you must have had your—you know, your profile out into the public sphere where somebody would have the faith to come to you and say, "Can you do this large public commission?"

TOM VAN SANT: That's a funny story that doesn't have as much to do with the art as it's a personal encounter with Mr. Pereira, who is one of the most—a Fellow of the American Association of Architects and one of the premiere architects of Los Angeles at the time and a very thoughtful and insightful man.

And I don't know if you're interested in the personal story. But it –

JO LAURIA: It's all personal.

TOM VAN SANT: Of course. What's more personal than art?

JO LAURIA: Right. But I mean, it's interesting that, in a way, your artistic development has been somewhat opportunistic, taking—in a good way - taking advantage of opportunities that have been presented to you. And somehow you're able, through this association, to execute this new technology, basically, of sculpting concrete in place onto the side of this building, that I know, looking at your website, that you used again and maybe in a different way.

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah, oh, many times.

JO LAURIA: Many times, right. So it is, I think, part of the development of how you established yourself as an artist, so that the architect had faith in doing this public project for the Irvine Foundation, who was obviously funding it.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I had done a few other projects before I met Mr. Pereira. And I met him through one of his employees, Ann Buck. She worked in the Pereira office and was a valued employee. And I had known Ron and Ann Buck from college. They came to my studio and saw some things I was doing. And they said, "Well, you should meet Mr. Pereira." And I said, "Well, I'd be honored to meet Mr. Pereira." And—but it didn't happen right away. And I was developing the process for colored aggregate casting and so forth.

And Mr. Pereira got the commission to do the Los Angeles County Museum. And it had all these shallow pools all around. And I was developing this aggregate system, maybe to be on walls, but could be used on the bottom of pools. And Ann Buck thought so, so she called me one night, and she said, "Just before I left the office, I asked Mr. Pereira to come to dinner. He's going to arrive here in about 15 minutes. Will you come over?" And I said, "Oh, I"—you know, I was all—I think I was working in clay or something, and I was—you know, I was all—I said, "I have to shower and shave." She said, "Well, he's not going to stay for dinner. He's just coming for a couple of drinks. And will you come?" She says, "Don't worry about it. You don't need to get dressed."

Well, I knew I shouldn't do that. I shouldn't look like this when I meet this great, distinguished man. But I said, all right, because I wanted to meet him. So I got in my little car and drove up to their house in the Hollywood Hills and arrived. And Mr. Pereira had just arrived. And I asked forgiveness for coming appearing like this. And they were all fixing martinis. And that's—back in the '60s, that's what people drank.

JO LAURIA: A la Bond.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I hadn't had lunch or anything. And, "Here, Tom. Here's a martini." Well, I didn't know how Ron Buck made martinis. But whatever it was, they were very cold, so you couldn't even tell it was liquor almost. They were frozen glass and frozen—so I drank a martini on an empty stomach. And then Mr. Pereira said, "Now, I understand you're interested in"—I said, "Yes. Thank you, sir. I brought some pictures, and here, I'll show you." He looked at them. And he looked. And then he said, "How much will it cost a square foot?"

Well, between the martinis and, with no technical question, no question about its permanency or its artistic—how suitable it is as an expression of art integrated with architecture. But he, of course, was thinking about these pools. And I didn't even know what he was thinking about. And I said, "Well, I haven't calculated that." And he said, "Well, you must know. Give me a guess as how much a foot." And I said, "I've been working on this process for about the last half-year. And these samples I brought and these pictures I brought, I thought you'd

be interested as an architectural material. And the only thing you have to ask me is how much it is a square foot?"

JO LAURIA: Was Mr. Pereira offended by your question?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I sure thought he was, because he—and then I—because that's when he said he was—had to get home to dinner, and he said goodbye to Ron and Ann Buck. And I was just mortified, you know, when he left. He's this beautiful, handsome man. He always—his hair was gray, and he dressed in gray, in a gray tie and gray suede shoes and so on. And I apologized to Ann. And I think I probably even shed a tear. And I said I'd probably embarrassed you, and all this. And she said, "Well, it was a bit out of line. But don't worry about it. It will all be okay."

About a week later, I got a call from Bill Pereira. And he says, "We have this project"—I don't know which project it was. But, "We have this project, and would you please come down to the office and tell us what you think might be done?" He never asked me how much a foot ever again. [They laugh.]

And he was the nicest and most courteous and friendly man. And so I blame my inexperience and my—and Ronny Buck's martinis for this terrible gaffe, which he forgave me for completely.

As a matter of fact, probably, in a way, he never—he probably thought that maybe he could have asked something besides how much a foot, and maybe thought that I would -

JO LAURIA: Maybe artistic integrity might have come around to his mind.

TOM VAN SANT: Whatever, whatever, whatever. But he was just wonderful. I did maybe, through the years, maybe 15 projects with him, and many other architects, too. But Bill Pereira was the—and his office was as much fun to work with as anyone. And he never told me what they wanted me to do. They'd always ask the same thing, you know: Would you take this—and my guys will show you the project and the parameters and materials and so forth—and then come back and tell us what has come to your mind to do.

JO LAURIA: So you would come up with the theme?

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah. They never—no one—Bill Pereira never asked me for a theme. As a matter of fact, he would always make a joke about, whatever he had in mind, I would never come up with the thing that he had in mind. So he got used to being—he felt some disappointment. He got used to it, you know, and then probably got to like the fact that the offerings wouldn't necessarily—or wouldn't ever - be what he had in mind, and he liked new surprises, apparently.

JO LAURIA: And would you say that your working relationship with him and his firm, as it evolved, that it become a collaboration?

TOM VAN SANT: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

JO LAURIA: And sometimes these commissions are not collaborations. I mean, obviously, there are different situations. But sometimes the artist doesn't have the opportunity to collaborate with the architects. They are given very strict instructions, basically given an assignment.

TOM VAN SANT: I've never executed an assignment for an architect. I've enjoyed, as I mentioned—if somebody had—if you want something like this and this and this, I—again, we're back to this old thing. I never felt like working on anything that I didn't really love. And I think that was known to the people I work with. And if they were asking for something that they already had in mind, then I was being overpaid, because I could get them somebody—I could recommend somebody to execute what they had in mind at a fee that would be less than mine.

JO LAURIA: So when you said that you had a studio, where was your studio at that point in time, Tom?

TOM VAN SANT: My first studio then was in an abandoned glue factory alongside the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks in Atwater, which is down below Glendale, south of Glendale. And it's that industrial area. And three other artists and I rented this place. And we built a bronze foundry and poured bronze for projects. And that's where I did these first concrete projects.

Then I built a house and studio in the Hollywood Hills, designed the house myself. And I really enjoyed architectural design. I've done a lot of that, and was hired by architects as a sort of a problem-solver, because they could have a problem that they'd worked on and present it to me. And I didn't have any answers. I'd just go home and go to bed. And either that night or the next night or the one after that, I would sit up in the middle of the night, and there would be the solution. I didn't work very hard. I just had confidence in something, whatever it might—whatever it is, that—and they appreciated that.

JO LAURIA: This is the end of tape one with Tom Van Sant at his home in Santa Monica. So we'll continue on.

[END OF TRACK AAA_vansan08_7748.]

Session two, interview with Tom Van Sant, September 10, 2008, at his home studio in Santa Monica.

So, Tom, where we left off last time, we were going to at this session start out speaking about your intersection throughout your career that you've had, at least in your mature career, of art and science.

And some of the projects that you showed me from your website certainly fit this intersecting of those two disciplines. Two particularly that I'd like you to address are the Ryan's Eye project [1981] and the GeoSphere Imaging Project [1989-90, initial phase]. And you know those are long and detailed, and for further information the readers of this interview can go to your website and get more information, as they can on Google. But if you could just give us the background and sort of walk us through what the conception to the execution were on these two projects that interfaced with science.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, of course, Ryan's Eye was nearly a decade earlier than the GeoSphere Project. And it was done as a companion piece to Eyes on Earth [From Space, 1986] or Reflections from Earth [1980]—I'm sorry—which was the large shape of an eye on the Mojave Desert. And so the eye theme continued to Ryan's Eye, named for that because he was four months old at the time. This was, what, April 1, 1982.

JO LAURIA: Ryan being the name of your first son?

TOM VAN SANT: My son, right. And he had these very strange, large eyes, which fascinated me. And I came across an article, I believe in the Scientific American, about the installation of the new National Center for Submicron Studies at Cornell University [Ithaca, NY], with a new large electron scanning microscope. And it occurred to me that, having sort of an interest and obsession with scale, how small an image one could make, as well as in contrast to the large image out on the desert.

And I spoke with the most interesting man, a Dr. Michael Isaacson, who operated the scanning electron microscope. And he invited me to come back to Cornell, which I did. And we talked over this project. And he felt that we could make—I could design an image, and he could create a stencil in a film of gold, gold atoms. And with a scanning electron microscope, he could cut to the stencil and create this shape.

JO LAURIA: The shape of the eye?

TOM VAN SANT: The shape of the eye. And then we could put that stencil on a crystal of sodium chloride, salt, which is a very common, but very finely structured crystal. And then the electrons would pass through this stencil and create this image in the salt crystal. And then as fast as possible, we would immediately scan it by going back and forth across the image before it dissolved, which was going to happen in about a 10th of a second.

And so we were operating down at the uncertainty principle: You destroy a thing by looking at it. In other words, you can't look at it and have it exist and get your cake and eat it, too. See, this is much smaller than the wavelength of light. A quarter of a micron across is something like an inch or something in relation to 10 feet of a wave of light. So you have to do it with electrons.

And the groove that it cuts into the salt is 600 times as deep as each line is wide. I mean, these are strange and bizarre facts, which create sort of bizarre images of the process of doing this. But that's what was fun about it.

JO LAURIA: So how did you see this as an art project? I mean, it sounds more like a scientific investigation. But ultimately, your goal was to have it seen as performance, in a way.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, of course, art performance is—if you want to use the term "art"; it's all dependent upon your definition. I guess "project" or "performance art," either one is okay.

I think the artistic dimension to it is the investigation into scale. And we found that if we made the small image at a quarter of a micron, which would be the smallest image ever made to that time, the pupil would be 100 atoms across. And you couldn't get any smaller than that at that time. And you couldn't get any smaller than constructing an image out of atoms. So that would make the image 100,000 times smaller than the human eye.

And the giant eye in the desert made by reflecting light back to a satellite, again, a giant image without damaging or affecting the environment—that was 100,000 times—at two and a half kilometers, it was 100,000 times larger than the human eye, which is two and a half centimeters across. And a quarter of a micron is 100,000 times smaller, which makes the large image 10 billion times as large as the small image.

In other words, directing imagery out to its infinite—to its limits of scale that we're able to create. And I don't

know how long ago was this, 30 years ago or so, 25 or 30 years ago. These are still the largest and smallest. That wasn't necessarily its intention. The intention was to show, to demonstrate the parameters of the realm in which we operate.

JO LAURIA: So scientifically, we operate on a very microscopic or sub-electron-scopic [sic] level, but out in space, we operate on orbiting satellite levels.

TOM VAN SANT: That's right.

JO LAURIA: But how did people experience the project?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, you experience it from the—from making it, number one. Our team out on the desert –

JO LAURIA: Could you talk a little bit about that, how you assembled—how many people holding the mirrors and—because it seems very collaborative.

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. Set up—did we talk about this last time?

JO LAURIA: No. We did not.

TOM VAN SANT: Okay. Well –

JO LAURIA: We did, but not on tape.

TOM VAN SANT: Oh, okay. Well, in investigating how we could do a project large-scale, you know, to be used, say, by a celebration which was coming up, which was the Los Angeles Bicentennial Celebration [1981], I was asked if I could come up with some technology project which a million or a couple of million people could participate in. Well, you can only get 100,000 people in the Los Angeles Coliseum, or less. So that something that happens in a coliseum isn't—didn't meet the requirements.

Oh, also, it couldn't cost much money, because they didn't have much money to –

JO LAURIA: And who was the –

TOM VAN SANT: There was a Los Angeles Bicentennial Commission.

JO LAURIA: Okay, the commission that was set up to celebrate 100 years of the City of Los Angeles.

TOM VAN SANT: Two hundred years.

JO LAURIA: Oh, 200 years, excuse me.

TOM VAN SANT: Right. That's fine. And so I investigated all the different kinds of celebration technologies, from fireworks to different sources of music or multiple events going on at the same time. But they all ended up being expensive.

And I gave up.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: I went back to the commission, and I said, "I'm very flattered that you thought that I would come up with something. But I've looked at everything, and if you have a few million dollars, then we could do some big things. But I don't know of any other solution to the problem." And I was embarrassed. But I was young and foolish at the time. I'm still—now I'm old and foolish. But then I was—[laughs].

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: And—but not long after that, I was sitting on my balcony of my home in the Hollywood Hills, with a view of downtown Los Angeles. And it was the first week in June, a couple of weeks before the summer solstice. And the sun is setting quite a distance to the north over the Pacific Ocean. And when the sun struck the glass on all the big glass buildings—they're all strictly aligned on the north-south axis in downtown Los Angeles—it reflected the light right back to where my house was on the hillside. And here was this great explosion of light. And I had marveled in this for several years. I had noticed it and watched for it each year and often thought of, well, what if somebody from another world came and saw this display of light? It would be quite impressive, not knowing its source.

And then it dawned upon me that I had just read an article in National Geographic, and I went inside quickly and opened the National Geographic to a picture of—it was the winter of 1976, I guess it was—of Chesapeake Bay.

And it was all frozen over on a very cold winter. And the sun was reflecting off of all of this ice. So the ocean, instead of being dark blue or black, as it appears from space in most satellite photographs, in this satellite photograph, it was a brilliant white. And here was another reflection that I was looking at, these two reflections.

And it inspired me to make a telephone call, because at the bottom of the photograph it said, "Courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey." So I looked them up in the book and called the number. And a lady answered the phone. I remember her name. It was Kim. I introduced myself and said, "May I speak to the person in charge of your office?" She said, "Well, there's only one person, so it must be me."

And I said, "Well, Kim, I'll present an idea to you that may be the most unusual one you'll get, today anyway. First of all, what does U.S. Geological Survey have to do with a satellite imagery?" And she said, "Oh, well, NASA runs the satellites. But that's the end of their mission. They turn over the product of their earth resource management satellites, or environmental satellites—they turn them over to the U.S. Geological Survey for printing, analyzing and printing."

And I said, "Well, I'm interested in using the satellite to reflect light from mirrors back to a satellite. What do you think of that?" And she said, "Well, that sounds a little bit crazy to me." She said, "But I used to work for a guy; Dr. Alvin Colvocoressas was his name, known as Colvo, in the USGS circles." And she said, "He's kind of crazy."

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: "So here, you might want to talk to him about it." He was at the headquarters back in Fairfax—Reston, Virginia, I guess it is. So I called Colvo. And I told him what I had in mind. And he said, "Well, she called me crazy, huh?" And I said, "Well, not really." He said, "That's okay. I admit to it." He said, "That sounds pretty interesting, Tom." He said, "Let me refer you to Dr. William Evans at Stanford Research. He's up in Palo Alto. And he calculates these kinds of things. And he's interested in the satellites."

And he gave me his number, and I called Bill Evans. And Bill Evans says, "Yes. I put a mirror out once, on a big drum to keep it stable." And he said, "But I was never successful in getting a flash of light on a satellite image because I didn't know how to make the mirror station." He said, "But, theoretically, in my calculations, a mirror just, you know, 24 inches on each side will reflect enough photons back to the satellite scanner to be seen on the image, and maybe even saturate several acres or several pixels, if they're an acre apiece, as they are on the Landsat."

JO LAURIA: Landsat being the—

TOM VAN SANT: The Landsat—he said on the Landsat satellite, which is an earth resource observation satellite.

JO LAURIA: And that's controlled by NASA?

TOM VAN SANT: Controlled by NASA. And he said, "Here, let me give you the number of Stan Freiden at NASA. And he's the truck driver of that satellite." And I said, "Terrific." So I said, "I'll call you back, Bill." And then I called Stan. And he's a very nice guy. And I told him my name, and I said, "I know this is a very sophisticated piece of equipment. And this may seem like maybe a trivial use of it to you, so you can tell me so if you wish. But here's what I have in mind." And I told him.

And he said, "Did you used to play football for Beverly Hills High School?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, I played at Inglewood High School, and we played against each other." Ah ha.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: [Laughs] So here's a comrade in arms. And he said, "Well, running this satellite isn't the most exciting thing in the world. It sounds pretty interesting." And so here I'd been on the phone about an hour. And in the hour, all of the parties and components were pretty much in place. All I had to do was learn something, which, I found out after I got into it, was challenging—how to orient and build and operate and properly calculate the settings of mirrors to accomplish such a thing, and—which I now was fired up and started in immediately.

And of course, the first thing to do is get a U.S. Geological map, or high-resolution map of the area. And I thought the place to do something like this would be out on the Mojave Desert. And I came across—on the satellite imagery, I came across a little group of mountains called the Shadow Mountains, which created a bowl in the middle and into which I could put this image, because I wanted to make a—I decided how large the image should be, and it needed to be level ground and not where there's people and so forth.

And so I laid it all out. And then I had to find out—I had to locate these things on the ground, each of these stations. There's going to be 30 of these stations to create the image. And then I had to design a mirror station, which means to get a protractor, make a protractor that's big enough for the station. And a portion of the

protractor also becomes the elevation protractor. And since, strangely enough, I learned about—this is a targeting project. And I learned about targeting when I—one of my commands when I was in the Marine Corps was an 81-millimeter mortar platoon. And we had to learn to calculate targeting. And so I used that experience to make these protractors.

And then the next project is, how do you get true north and south, or true east and west? You have to have a base point. And that involves a process called retro-reflection, where you determine what true noon is. True noon is your baseline. True noon at each station is going to be different, of these 30 stations. So you've got to calculate each one, one after the other.

JO LAURIA: How many miles does it transverse, these 30 stations in the Mojave Desert?

TOM VAN SANT: From one side of this almond shape, which is the eye, with the station in the middle, which is the pupil, it's a mile and a half from one side of the almond to the other.

JO LAURIA: So it's basically an ellipse that comes to two points on either side. And then you have the middle station, where it's going to be the pupil. So you need mirrors set up at equal distance along this parameter?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. And they were about 200 yards apart, 30 of them.

JO LAURIA: Okay. So did you have to draft this out on paper first?

TOM VAN SANT: I drafted it out on the USGS map. But that doesn't give me a north-south—accurate north-south - position for each station.

JO LAURIA: Which you needed because of the satellite?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, because of the accuracy. What Bill Evans calculated for me was that we'd have to have—all accumulated error had to be less than 1/10 of one degree. Woo.

JO LAURIA: Hmm. Because, speaking from a nonscientific background, what I'm imagining is that, as the satellite passes over to take these photographs, you have to be exactly positioned at the moment when it is going to be photographing your area in the Mojave Desert in between these mountains; correct?

TOM VAN SANT: That's right.

JO LAURIA: Okay. And you only have one opportunity, at least during that 24-hour period? Or how often does that satellite pass over?

TOM VAN SANT: The satellite passes over every nine days.

JO LAURIA: Oh. So you only have one opportunity within nine days to get this image recorded onto the photographic process that the satellite does?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, right. It's more like your television set. It's a scanner that very rapidly goes back and forth across all these lines to make the image of the earth, of the image of the earth that it's looking at at that moment. And at the moment that it passes over this particular piece of real estate, you have to have—each of the mirrors has to be reflecting its light into the path of the satellite so that they're all encountering the satellite in exactly the same moment in time.

And it's going 18,000 miles an hour in one direction. Then in another direction, the earth is turning, at about a little less than 1,000 miles an hour as it turns. And where those two intersect, with the beam of light that's being reflected from a mirror back up to the satellite, that has to be accurate within accumulated error, which means error in the program, error in the satellite movement, error in the construction of the mirror reflection station, error in how you made your protractors—all the error can't exceed 1/10 of one degree.

Well, that was challenging. But it just became more of a challenge, which sort of gets you more into it, rather than less. And to get true north, that's where you have to start. So you get a little radio. It's a little black box that only has one station. And the station goes tick, tick, tick, tick. That's the only sound it makes. And what it is, of course, is a clock being broadcast from Fort Collins, Colorado. And it's the exact time, based upon the—probably the Naval Observatory in Washington.

And if you use the mariner's almanac and you have the coordinates of your station, you can determine what is true noon at that exact moment. In other words, when the line between your mirror and the satellite, if that line were directed the other way, it would go right to the very center of the earth—in other words, in direct right angles to the surface at that point.

Well, Bill Evans said he could calculate this. And he fed that to Stan Freiden at NASA. And they wrote a program, because I accurately located each of the 30 stations. And then they said they could calculate the setting of the mirrors for each of those stations separately if I could get true north. So what you do is, you make a little metal box that goes over the mirror. And you have a little tiny hole in the box. And when the sun is passing overhead, you track it with your mirror by moving the elevation and azimuth settings on the protractor. You move it by hand. And the sunlight comes through that little hole and hits your mirror.

Well, of course, when it hits your mirror, it reflects back up to the back of the box. Now, when that reflection goes down, it goes right back into the hole through which it came, when the light goes down, goes back through the little hole through which it came, which means it's pointed right back at the satellite—or right back at the sun, I'm sorry. And it's noon. That's your point of reference.

So we set these up. The little box, the little radio, is going, "tick, tick, tick, tick, bzzpt." And a little recorded voice says, "Ten thirty-three." "Tick, tick, tick." Well, each one of those ticks is 10:33 and one second, two second, three second. And you just follow it until it's the exact noon for that particular place on earth, and which, we'll say, was calculated by Bill Evans to be 10:37 and 13 seconds. So you're there. And it's, "tick, tick, tick." You're counting 10, 11, 12. But you're keeping the light going back into the hole from whence it came.

And at 10:37:13, you stop right there, and that's true north. Your mirror is aligned. The sides of it are going east and west, and the bottom and the top are going north and south. So that's your base point on your protractor. Then all of your settings to encounter the satellite, which is going over at, presumably, some other time, at 11:30 or whatever, you will set the mirror from that base point at the encounter point.

Well, they can calculate the—so we set up all the mirror stations in their proper places, and had friends from wherever—got a wonderful bunch of young folks and middle-aged folks. And we rented a little house out there, not too far away from an old lady named Hattie, who lived out there by herself. And the place where we stayed, fixed our own meals, and we started these encounters in March, maybe.

And we found that the information we got back from NASA wasn't all that accurate if we got it a day or two in advance. You only get the real accuracy if you're—if the advance calculation comes from maybe 10 or 12 hours in advance. Then it's very accurate, because they can calculate the locations of the satellite, but it's not always exactly the same as the last time it went around.

See, it goes around the world every—it goes around on a north-south axis. All this business about getting true north, and somebody said, "Well, why not use a compass?" Well, a compass is several degrees off true north. And compasses are good for field use, but they're not good for accuracy. And this satellite goes around the world on a north-south axis, and it goes six degrees to the side of the pole. And the earth turns underneath its orbit, so that it makes these strips of images.

And it takes nine days to make all the strips all around the earth, until it comes back to the same strip that goes over this particular -

JO LAURIA: And so did you at some point have to convince or present this to the Los Angeles Bicentennial Commission? I mean, what kind of reaction did you get from them? You obviously started out in March doing the tests. But when was the deadline date that you were supposed to record the images?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I had kind of learned from [laughs] hard experience that you talk about it, sort of, after you do it. And so I didn't go back to the Bicentennial Commission. We went out and did this on my own because, if I'm successful, then I'll talk to them about it.

JO LAURIA: Okay.

TOM VAN SANT: And after I find out how hard it is to do or not do, whether or not schools all over the city of Los Angeles, or housewives, could go out on the corner and set up one of these things. We would make a little mirror and protractor kit that they could set up on the lawn—you know, four little stakes. And you put them in the ground, and set your mirror on it, and so forth. And I wanted to make sure that was possible before— [laughs]—

JO LAURIA: So the grand concept that you have is that you envision an image, let's say something detailed, like a portraiture of a face, that you've decided you wanted to do. And you would be able to, based on your previous adventures and calculations—be able to have these temporary stations all over that would reflect that light to make this portrait, whatever it was, silhouette.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, there's no reason why we shouldn't jump ahead in the story because I—it's really not ahead, because I was thinking about all these things as we did this. Though the project, to me, was worth doing, regardless of the Bicentennial Commission—we were all having such a good time, and it was so challenging.

Nobody had ever operated hands-on to a satellite before. So this was the first time, and probably still is the only time. I've never heard of anybody having an hands-on relationship to a satellite for any reason. So it stood alone as a challenge.

JO LAURIA: But it could be a great global art project.

TOM VAN SANT: But here was the idea. After we were successful with it, and it was published in Discover magazine and in the newspaper and so forth, NASA agreed to—well, first of all, I talked to the editor of the LA Times. And they liked the project, and they agreed to have a double page with a map of the city of Los Angeles, all in grids. And when you look up the number of your grid, wherever you are, and your school, or your home, then you can look on the tables on the next page and see what your mirror settings would be. There would be instructions how to set up a little mirror station.

And NASA agreed to issue a certificate of completion and scientific excellence, or whatever—again, you don't know whether it's art or science. But whatever it is, they'd put a certificate of accomplishment to that school. So they could set these up on the lawn in front of the school. Or it wouldn't have to be a school. It could be the front lawn of your house. And this would be a birthday cake, the final image—would be all these candles, thousands of them. And you could have your million or two million participants.

And these—the mirror package that I designed, the cost of the mirror, and the printing of the protractors on plastic, so they won't change their scale or anything if you get them wet or—and the little surveyor's level, and so forth, I think—well, this was 1970s dollars—would be about \$20. So this whole project could be done for a couple of hundred thousand dollars. So one corporation could sponsor the whole thing, or the LA Times could sponsor it, or whatever. And there were corporate investors that were already committed to support the Los Angeles Bicentennial. So that those dollars were already there.

And it would be, of course, very educational for kids to accomplish this. And the result would be really dramatic, because each mirror station would produce a flash of—a white light on that map. It would be several acres in size. So they wouldn't overlap the next school. It would be a giant celebration.

Anyway, back to, where were we? Oh, yes, trying to get the true north and then to get the late settings from the program that NASA put together for us from Bill Evans's calculations, and a fellow at NASA had calculated with him. So the closest thing to where we were was the back gate to George Air Force Base [Victorville, CA]. And there was a gas station there and a pay phone. And that's it.

So at about 11 o'clock or something, when everybody was going to sleep, I'd get in my van, and I'd drive, I think it was 17 miles, to the back gate of George Air Force Base to the phone booth. And I taped a flashlight onto my hat, and I stood in the phone booth with my pen and wrote down the settings for each mirror station, elevation and azimuth. By the way, we had to have three mirrors at each station instead of one, because the satellite we had shown in our earlier attempts back in May, we had shown, they told us, since the satellite had a pitch to it, because we got half the image on one of our trips to the desert in May.

And Stan Freiden and his guys said, "Well, we didn't know that the satellite had a pitch to it. We're glad to know that. Well, thank you." So we had to make an elongated light pattern for the satellite to pass through because it didn't have any wobble in its pitch or its yaw—I mean its roll or its yaw. Yaw is this way, roll is this way, and pitch is this way. But it had a variation in its pitch. So now we had 90 settings. The three mirrors on one station—each mirror had a different setting to make a longer patch of reflected light. And anyway -

[END OF TRACK AAA_vansan08_7449.]

JO LAURIA: Okay.

TOM VAN SANT: So I'd get back from the telephone booth at—after one o'clock in the morning or two and get the several hours sleep before we all got up and stormed out to the mirror stations to make the settings from what I had received. See, this was before -

JO LAURIA: Cell phones.

TOM VAN SANT: —long before Internet or cell phones or any of the technologies that we now enjoy and take for granted. This is the electronic Stone Age.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: And obviously, we didn't even know whether our satellites pitched or rolled. So—and probably half the launches worked, and half didn't in the first place. So it's the early part of the electronic age. And we'd storm out and make the settings on each of the mirrors and drive from one mirror station to the next. I think we

had two teams, each taking half. And then we'd gather at the center, which is the people. We'd gather there after we made our setups, and we had to finish, of course, by satellite time, which is—satellite encounter time was 12 minutes after 11, or something like that.

And we'd get back there. And then we'd all be—like, get our watches and looking up at the sky as though you'd be able to see it, which, of course, we wouldn't. But the imagination was, of course, working. But when we get back to the center, we find that the mirror is broken.

JO LAURIA: In the center? Oh.

TOM VAN SANT: At the pupil. With rabbit footprints all over it.

JO LAURIA: Oh.

TOM VAN SANT: The rabbit jumped on it early in the morning and broke the mirror. So that's the reason there's no pupil in the middle of the eye.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: And he hit the mirror that the—of the three mirrors, he broke the mirror that [laughs] was the encounter mirror, which is an amusing part of the story. So anyway, we got a successful eye. And we didn't know it; we thought we did at the time. And we all went back to Los Angeles, and then I got a flight up to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to the Earth Resource Satellite Data Processing Center, and watched the images coming off from the data transmitted by the satellite. And, da-dum. There it was.

JO LAURIA: Oh, so you got to see it. How immediately did you get to see it?

TOM VAN SANT: Oh, it was probably a week later, or whatever. And of course, they have these huge machines that look like cars in a car wash going through [laughs], to process and print all this data. It was like the size of—well, there were no—the size of—it was like the size of the computers then. You'd get a computer the size of a refrigerator or something, if you owned a computer at work.

JO LAURIA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM VAN SANT: The printers were that size, the size of automobiles. And off came this image. Well, the guys at the satellite processing center, they were kind of excited about it, too. So we came back and got these agreements for people to make sure that we had the cost right for the mirror station and the printing in the newspaper of the settings for each grid and all of this stuff. Then I went to the Bicentennial Commission with it. And so this probably would have been toward the end of June. I think it was June 10th of 1980 that we completed the image and were sure that we knew how to do it again.

And in July, the International Olympic Committee met to determine where the 1984 Olympics would take place, and they selected the city of Los Angeles. Well, that was really wonderful for the city. And all of the corporate support for the Los Angeles Bicentennial was withdrawn in favor of supporting the Olympics. And so the Los Angeles Bicentennial, which of course was a lesser, local event, as compared to, not only a national, but international event—their celebrations were discontinued. And of course, we went on to enjoy the great and successful Los Angeles Olympics under the direction of Peter Uberoff, who is a very creative designer of this great project.

JO LAURIA: But for this Ryan's Eye project, I believe you said you were awarded the Leonardo Da Vinci Space Art Award?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, that was for all of these, mostly, I guess, for the creation of the satellite map of earth, which—and the GeoSphere Project, which was the culmination of my romance with satellites.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: And had these projects brought forth for you, Tom, or for the community—the artistic community - any other projects that you know of that have taken place with artists trying to utilize satellite imagery?

TOM VAN SANT: Not that I know of.

JO LAURIA: So you were unique in your exploration of recording an artistic vision onto satellite data, which then results in a documentation that is artistic, in the sense that it is of what we see as a photographic image?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. It's a—we can now call it photographic image. What was interesting at the time, we were all excited about it, and who wants to publish it? So we sent it to the—some of the folks on my team sent it to the photography magazines. And they said, "Well, it's not photography. It's electronic scanning. And so we can't publish it as photography." And they sent it to art magazines, and they said, "No, it's photography." [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: So the world is –

JO LAURIA: Built by categories.

TOM VAN SANT: Right. And of course, after a decade of accommodation, and particularly with the—two decades later, the introduction of digital imagery, and then of cameras and everything else, they don't distinguish between the two. But back then, they didn't know what to do with digital imagery. Now digital cameras operate like that satellite scanner.

JO LAURIA: Right. Well, did you do another—so did the Ryan's Eye project—I mean, did ultimately it get publicized so that people knew about it and knew who you were and –

TOM VAN SANT: Not too much. The Reflections from Earth out on the desert was on the cover of some magazines. But they were mostly scientific and engineering type magazines that were interested in it.

JO LAURIA: And were they surprised that—you coming from, you know, this sort of environment of art wedded with science - that an artist would want to participate with these variables? I mean, in a way, you're setting yourself up to have to learn so much, before you can even begin your process. Every artist has technological, or technique, to overcome. I mean, paintbrush, oils, watercolors, acrylics onto canvas. It's still—but it's pretty immediate compared to having to learn or work with scientists who have to then calculate all these other variables of when the satellite goes around the earth.

Your components were really simple. It required human resources, i.e., individuals who were willing to go out with you during the whole testing process. And it required mirrors, which, you know, have been in existence for centuries. So on that level, it was very simplistic. But the conceptual level was very complex. So—and I know you do other kinds of art. I mean, I can see it in your studio. You do carvings and bronze castings, and you've worked with concrete. Was this something totally, let's say, tangential to your other art experiences or other kinds of involvement with materials? Because your material here was almost ethereal, in a way.

I mean, you were depending on the satellite passing over and digital scanning, which were all calculations. It wasn't really, in the conventional sense, considered artistic materials. So what made you have that leap, I guess is what I'm asking. A sculptor working with materials and conventional sculpting materials, and now you're coming to working with an entirely different set of variables and tools.

TOM VAN SANT: I either don't have an answer for your question, or I have a group of answers. [Laughs.] Probably starts with the brain. You're supposed to have a right and left brain, one of which is artistic, conceptual, and the other is technical and engineering, or whatever. And so I must apologize that the two halves of my brain seem to be connected in the middle. More in the—so I don't separate this stuff very much.

And the other answer would be that—what made you do it? Well, to me, it's sort of like falling in love. Somebody said, "Well, what made you fall in love with that lady?" Well, the only answer is, "Well, I'm surprised you're not in love with her, too. Isn't she wonderful?" You know. [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: So it becomes irresistible, once it seems possible.

JO LAURIA: So the seduction, for you, if you want to put it in those terms, is the possibility, the potentiality of being able to realize your vision at this level, no matter what that vision is. I mean, it could be something executed with a mallet and a piece of stone. Or it could be something executed with the scientific community and the satellite in orbit.

TOM VAN SANT: That's right. Yeah.

JO LAURIA: And this thinking brought you next to the GeoSphere Imaging Project; is that correct?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, there was a couple in between there. The Reflections from Earth attracted the attention of Dr. Otto Peine, who is the director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA]. And he invited me and another Californian, Paul McCready, the great creative aeronautical engineer of AeroVironments, who made the first man-powered flight across the English Channel and

won the Kremer prize and so forth for his very creative designs in the flying pterodactyl. Do you remember those?

JO LAURIA: Hmm.

TOM VAN SANT: And so Paul and I both flew on a plane together back to Boston to make presentations, at the request of the director for the fellows of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies.

JO LAURIA: So they saw this, obviously, as a perfect union of art and science?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, there are a bunch of connected-brainers, I guess.

JO LAURIA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM VAN SANT: [Laughs] And they are the ones that didn't need categories. So they call it Advanced Visual Studies, and they don't have to worry about art and science and who categorizes what where.

JO LAURIA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM VAN SANT: And there are people who really love these kinds of things and the things that other fellows at that center—were absolutely wonderful. So I got as much—I've had as much pleasure through this 25 years or something of association with them since that project—I've had as much pleasure from them as they have had from me. That's for sure.

JO LAURIA: So were you also teaching at this time anywhere, Tom, or working independently still in your studio?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. I had a drawing class every Monday night all during the '70s and '80s in my studio in the Hollywood Hills.

JO LAURIA: But they were not involved in this sort of advanced –

TOM VAN SANT: Well, one of the guys who came to my drawing class was Richard Feynman, a physicist from CalTech [California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA]. And we became friends. But Dick didn't like talking physics to non-physics enthusiasts, or nonscientists, because it was too laborious. Perhaps artists—maybe artists are more interested in physics than physicists are interested in art, or vice versa, or something.

Anyway, well, I could accept that. I liked Dick. Dick was a marvelous guy with a terrific sense of humor and wonderful insight into human nature. And he was a very enlightened man.

JO LAURIA: You're speaking of him in the past tense. Has he since passed away?

TOM VAN SANT: Oh, yes. He passed away about 10 years ago. And I still think of him, maybe every day, for all I know. And he'd come to the house for dinner before the art class. And one evening, I was fixing—cooking us some hamburgers or something in the kitchen. And my worktable, which was a drafting table, where I was doing all the work for this—for the Reflections from Earth project—so this would have been, probably, then, in 1979—he was looking at all that while I was fixing dinner. And after about 15 minutes, I said, "Dinner is ready," and started setting the table. And he called up from my drafting table, and he said, "You know, this might work," he said.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: And because I had agreed in my mind not to ask him to get involved—again, he just was interested in drawing. And I said, "Well, it better." And from that point on, we would talk physics as well as art, because I had somehow demonstrated to him that I was attentive enough or disciplined enough or whatever his criterion for a relationship was, that side of a relationship.

JO LAURIA: For me, as an interviewer, it's interesting to note that you never abandoned one pursuit for the other. I mean, they were of equal interest. Because a lot of people get involved in, let's say, virtual graphics. And they don't go back to drawing with their hand ever again. They prefer drawing through keyboard or through touchpad or something.

Because the tactile and the virtual are—they don't have to be diametrically opposed, but they can be. But it seems like you not only were interested in continuing your hand skills—drawing, painting, sculpting, which require, you know, time-honored mastery of materials and tools—but exploring things which had not been encountered before that, involved other types of investigations that had nothing to do with tactility or hand skills as conventional artists would do. And that's what I find particularly intriguing, because the world has become, as you say, very digital. And one of the great fears by a lot of art professors and great thinkers is that the younger

generation of artists are losing their hand skills.

TOM VAN SANT: [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: Well, I'm going to stop there because we may run out of tape on this one. So we'll change to another tape.

[END OF TRACK AAA_vansan08_7450.]

This is disc number three, continuing the interview with Tom Van Sant for the Archives of American Art, September 10 [2008], at his home studio in Santa Monica Canyon.

Disc number two, we left off with a question why—or do you actually continue both streams of your right-left brain adaptability and abilities by wanting to work in conventional artistic materials, as well as investigating art through channels which do not utilize conventional materials and techniques? And, Tom, I'll let you answer that.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, the partial answer was, I guess I'm not responsible for my Leonardo-esque brain that connects in the middle and finds no problem going back and forth. Also, I'm interested in concept and conceptual consequence, and the enlightenment, or the vision, that represents something more than my reaction to my immediate environment. I'm interested in things like scale and global resource management and these other issues, interested in military affairs because they're so—they play such a huge role in our management of resources.

And Ken Brower was the author of an article in the Discovery Channel magazine, and he came here and spent time a few years back. And they devoted the magazine to this project. And he asked the same question you asked. He says, "Why aren't you content to paint fish on platters like [Georges] Braque and do it over and over throughout your life?" Well, I don't know. But I do know that I like to paint fish on platters; I've painted fish on platters. But I certainly want to get on with something else pretty quickly. And that something else can be quite far removed.

But it always seems to be out on the edge of something, rebuilding my home in the Eastern Sierras in a flood zone, but putting up the kinds of berms and barriers to protect against it is living on the edge. And that's a good place to live.

JO LAURIA: Well, I think that one of the best examples of utilizing the ability to conceptualize creatively, but also incorporate engineering and physics skills, was this project you did called Birds of a Feather and the kites of 1970s that you made. Do you want to talk a little bit about that? Because you mentioned to me that they were sculptures in the sky. And I liked that concept, that you could see something that was moving, creating a visual experience. But yet, in order to achieve that, you have to build these skeletons of kites that can fly. And I thought that was a very unique way of animating the idea of these floating spheres in the atmosphere. So can you talk about how that project happened?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, it probably starts with, as a kid I loved birds, from the beautiful little innocence of the dove to the ferociousness of the raptors, the hawks and the eagles. This great society that exists in the airborne world. I raised pigeons, and I remember wanting to raise pheasants and writing to—as a kid, writing to the State of California to get pamphlets on how to raise pheasants. And my dad took me over to the valley to buy a bantam hen to sit on the pheasant eggs. We got pheasants in the back yard, then quail.

And so I'm always observing what's in the sky wherever I go. And the idea of sculpture that you can actually move against this glorious blue backdrop, it's always been interesting to me. And when I went to Taipei, Taiwan, to execute a sculptured mural for the Civil Aeronautics Administration in Taiwan, I asked about the Chinese kite makers that might have come out of China in 1949 when the Communists took over. And I finally found somebody that said, "Oh, well, you ought to go see Mr. Wong in this little town about an hour outside of Taipei and next to a river."

And I got a jeep and a driver, and we went out there and found Mr. Wong, this 80-year-old guy. See, I say that, an 80-year-old man. In a couple of years, I'm going to be 80. But they still seem like old men to me. [Laughs.] So Mr. Wong was wonderful, and he made these kites. And I got so excited about them. And I said, "Well, when I get back home, I'm going to make some kites." Well, you get back home, and you go on to another project of some sort.

But then I came across a girlfriend of mine, wonderful lady, whose sister married into the Browning Arms Company family. And John Browning's son, of the genius father inventor, decided he wanted to do less guns and more sporting goods things. So he opened a business here in Southern California to make aero shafts for Olympic competition, hollow fiberglass aero shafts, and fly rods for fly fishermen. But the business failed. And I was told about the materials that had to be disposed of. And I bought this whole room of fiberglass rods and

shafts.

When I found out that the interior dimension of the hollow fiberglass shaft for men's competition was the same size as the exterior dimension of the smaller fiberglass rod for women's competition—when they go together, you have a construction system. And I started making kites. And with these wonderful products, I could make kites that, instead of having, you know, a cross-sticks—all kites were made of wood up at that time. Instead of having cross-sticks with the fabric out on the outside edge, or paper, I made exoskeleton kites, with the structure around the outside, so that the fabric could stretch between them, like a trampoline. One of the most popular designs I called the Trampoline Kite.

And these you could put in any wind, no matter how strong it was. It would accommodate. It wouldn't tear apart, because the skeleton was on the outside, the outer edge. And I could string them all together and make big, long trains of beautiful, bright-colored things, particularly at the opposite side of the color wheel from blue—in other words, the oranges and blacks and whites - and great events happening in the sky. And so I did that for a couple of years, and had a chance to exhibit them at the Los Angeles Pacific Design Center, the Blue Whale, which had huge spaces inside. And so we could string these great kites through the air and fly them from out in the plaza in front.

And from that, Lynn Kienholz, Ed Kienholz's ex-wife, introduced these kites to the director of the Institute for Contemporary Art in London. And so they wanted to have the exhibit, so the exhibit went to London. And they decided to put it together to travel to other museums. It went to the Stedelijk [Amsterdam, The Netherlands] and to the Rothschild in Paris and different places. And I got to go to Europe. We flew the kites out in front of the museum. It was sort of a hands-on for visitors, instead of quietly walking around looking at things on the walls. So everybody enjoyed it, and I had a wonderful time. So that was my experience with the kites.

JO LAURIA: So what happened to the kites, ultimately? Are they in permanent collections? Are they owned by -

TOM VAN SANT: So. They're here, stored back in that storeroom there. Oh, some of them are. People—I gave some as gifts. But whether they're kites or whether they're architectural sculpture or whether they're satellite imaging, all of these things are—there's nothing to buy or to sell. So there's no galleries that are interested in them.

JO LAURIA: So they're not commodity driven.

TOM VAN SANT: They're not commodity driven, which brings us to why—why would I go do all of these things and invest the time, cost, and so forth for doing them? If, you know, when you dance, there's no commodity done. Well, the only thing I can say is, it's for the same reasons that we should be doing painting and sculpture of any type, which is, the result isn't dependent in our minds—isn't dependent on who approves or disapproves. It's internally driven. The act of doing it, the process itself, is its own reward.

This doesn't mean for a minute that we're not delighted if somebody wants to exhibit or to buy or anything else. And certainly, all of these projects have had -

JO LAURIA: Sponsors.

TOM VAN SANT: —responses in one way or another. And that's all gratifying. But if the projects are dependent upon that, if Reflections from Earth was dependent upon the Bicentennial Celebration to be a joy to me, or the kites, or something else, they've all had their rewards, but if I was dependent upon some anticipated consequence, I'd be miserable by now.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: [Laughs] I'd be a hermit, or I'd be something other than a happy man. So that's the only answer I can give.

JO LAURIA: What we also were just touching upon—well, we didn't even address the question that I posed in the last disc about, how do you see the way that art is going in the twenty-first century, where a lot of art is being done that has no connection to tactility. And you said, "Well, I want to talk about that." So do you want to make a few comments about what you see as the—is there any -

[A telephone rings.]

[END OF TRACK AAA_vansan08_7451.]

So do you want to talk a little bit about—

TOM VAN SANT: Twenty-first-century art?

JO LAURIA: Yes.

TOM VAN SANT: This may—your program is about artists, so this may sound a little strange. But I don't know much about it. I'm a parent of many things. They call me the father of modern kite-making or the father of space art, with the space project. And I invent all these processes. And so I'm a parent of—I seem to enjoy the things that haven't been done before. So I guess what they used to call this is avant-garde. But they don't seem to do that anymore.

There's no—there still has to be an object that can be marketed and a personality to be expressed or created for collectors or for curators. And I have no objection to that at all. Quite to the contrary, I'm doing now painting, sculpture. Maybe they'll all flock to the work when I'm ready to show it here. And maybe whatever gallery folks that—I don't know too many of them. But the ones I've been exposed to that I like, I will certainly invite to come look at it. And supposedly, they should be happy to see a bunch of work that hasn't been exhibited before.

JO LAURIA: Well, do you feel a kinship with someone like James Turrell, who has been working on the Roden Crater now for 30-odd years, and that has no real marketability in the sense of, you know, you can't exhibit it in a conventional way, and you certainly can't sell it. But he has been entranced and impassioned by this project of creating this viewing experience, which all is about perception, which your satellite projects are also about perception.

TOM VAN SANT: Sure. Last year, I went to hear his talk down at the museum and liked it very much.

JO LAURIA: But he was here at the Claremont Colleges?

TOM VAN SANT: No. It was at the—on Wilshire Boulevard there, Museum of Modern Art.

JO LAURIA: Well, I know James Turrell just unveiled his new sky room.

TOM VAN SANT: His what?

JO LAURIA: His sky room. That is at the Pomona Colleges. And he came to speak during the summer about that project. And to fund some of the Roden Crater project, he has sold or has had agents sell drawings of the project.

TOM VAN SANT: Yes.

JO LAURIA: And he experiences the same phenomenon, which is, how do you get funding for a larger vision that doesn't seem to fit easily, or be categorized easily, within an art environment?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, Christo raised all of his funds from the drawings he did to prepare. But I've never done that. I just did them and paid for them from the commissions from architectural work that I do.

JO LAURIA: But I mean, conceptually, I think you have the same sort of aspirations, let's say, as Jim Turrell.

TOM VAN SANT: Right. That's right. Yeah. He's going to go ahead and do that, whether he funds it or not. He'll figure out a way to do it, because he suffers from the same [laughs] –

JO LAURIA: Well, it's large scale.

It has great implications for future generations.

TOM VAN SANT: That's right.

JO LAURIA: And it involves the giving of an experience to people, that is, not a conventional experience of standing in a museum, looking at something on the wall or stalking it, as you would a sculpture. I mean, it requires people to really be still and experience time and the light effects that happen perceptually as time passes.

TOM VAN SANT: That's right. Mine seem to involve people going down to the beach or out onto the desert to fly the kites or do the projects. And the only ones that experience it are the ones that were there during the execution of the project. But the imagery, to have a satellite picture of Los Angeles from Point Dune to San Bernardino and from Orange County up to the Mojave Desert, and to be able to see an eye on the desert looking back at you at a scale that can be seen from 500 miles away, which is the height of the Landsat satellite, is interesting.

But when combined with Ryan's Eye as a demonstration of the extremes of scale in which we can actually make imagery and have them be the same mathematics, only by coincidence, and Ryan's Eye is so small that if you made letters at that size, you'd be able to put all the letters of all the pages of all of the books of all the volumes

of the Encyclopedia Britannica on the head of a pin.

JO LAURIA: Not very accessible, though.

TOM VAN SANT: But this is the reason Richard Feynman loved these projects, because—I have a wonderful tape of him making a presentation of these projects at CalTech—I'm sorry, at Jet Propulsion Laboratory. I'll give you one; you can take it home. Because he gave a talk about 40 years ago, 35 years ago. It was called, "There's Lots of Room at the Bottom." Here we were looking out into space and launching satellites, sending the Voyager mission to—out into the solar system. And he says, "There's just as much room in the other direction, going down toward the atom." And he even offered a prize for anybody who could make a little machine with working parts down at a very small size, certainly not as far down as the Ryan's Eye, but that's small scale. And of course, it's the control over that scale, is what the electronic revolution is all about.

JO LAURIA: Well, let's talk a little bit about the GeoSphere Imaging Project, because I know that is probably the one project that you are most identified with. And it's the most recent of the imaging projects, I believe, unless you have one that you're working on now that I don't know about.

Could you briefly explain what this mapping project is about and why you decided to undertake it? I know you keep mentioning that, as growing up, you saw that maps of the world were in various colors. And as children, we all had to do wheat paste on cardboard, make our maps of different continents. And we associated different colors with different continents. And you have said that that left you kind of cold. But that was so nonscientific in the way that we identified with our global environment that you wanted to have something in place where we could visualize really what the earth looked like in order to connect with who we were as people living on this earth. So do you want to talk a little bit about that?

TOM VAN SANT: Sure. There are fundamental ideas that change—we like to use the word "paradigm"—change the paradigm, the Bucky Fullers [Buckminster Fullers]: we're passengers on Spaceship Earth. Woo. That changed a lot of things, that little phrase.

During the '80s, I would wake up in the middle of the night with this vision that the most important things happening on earth - all the weather systems, all the great migration patterns of birds and whales, the great ocean currents that have to do with our hurricanes, and our, just, big weather-change issue, and all the dynamics in the atmospheres, and the chemicals that we release into the air - the nature of the big dynamics like earthquakes are all based on knowing and understanding the earth as it is.

And we're not even—we're not passengers, really, on Spaceship Earth. That's a great transition idea. But it's not the idea itself. The idea itself is that we're the upholstery. We emerged. And the idea of a Mother Earth isn't so—it isn't softheaded and mushy. It's—in that sense, it's the truth. It's a truth, or a view of truth. And to not know what our mother's face looks like seemed intolerable to me. How can we love and appreciate, because that's what's going to change things, not—well, two things will change. One is love and the other is fear. And now we're experiencing a consequence for not paying attention to earth resource management.

But one of the things necessary for attention is love, and truth. And the truth is not colored countries and political boundaries. None of these dynamics that we need to understand and teach can be furthered unless we see. Eighty percent of what we experience comes through our eyes. And we must see this planet.

And then the next thing would happen, when I'd wake up in the middle of the night, would be, well, where do we find—how do we find stuff to learn? Well, we go to a library and we have a Dewey Decimal system—archaic structure—for finding. And then we find in relationship to the first initial of the last name of the author. Huh? Or we find it in a category of things. Well, the most interesting things in the world are usually lodged between the categories, not in the middle of them. And they're very difficult to assign to one side or the other.

Then we get into the document, and we look at the table of contents. And then we have an index in the back, which is alphabetically organized. Well, no wonder folks don't go to libraries.

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: Students go to libraries, usually because they're required to. But then if they're in academics or in science or in literature, whatever, they'll use libraries. That's a very small percentage. And you were referring earlier to the lack of understanding of scientific processes—in most voters, for an example. So the map became, to me, the foundation of a library. And it's called the Global Visual Library. And so I started building the overlays and visualizing it, the overlays for the Global Visual Library. And I visualized them in action, in movement.

And if we look carefully at how we speed up weather patterns, we can see how they spin off from the Equator, which is—as the earth goes around, the surface at the Equator is going faster than any of the other surfaces. And all the weather moves away from that, toward the north and toward the south. If we live in the northern

hemisphere, we're northern in the summer and more southern in the winter. And all the ocean currents are based upon the wind, and the winds, because they're moving the surfaces, all the ocean currents - except the deep ones like the Atlantic conveyor - but the surface currents are based upon that.

And then the weather is based upon the coreolis effect of the turning earth. And all the migration patterns of birds and whales and turtles—can you imagine turtles migrating from Australia to an island 1,000 miles out to sea—they're a very old species. This doesn't mean turtles are smart. It means that there used to be an island right off the coast, and the turtles would go there to breed and put their eggs, because they didn't have land predators on the island. All they had to worry about was the birds.

And—but the islands and the continent drift apart, and here you are. What? My goodness. A few million years later, it's quite a distance away, and you're wondering why they still migrate to that island. Well, that island—only the distance from the shore to the island may have increased maybe a quarter of an inch a year. Given enough time, it's a lot of distance away.

All these things are understood by understanding how it works. And so I envisioned a library that was based upon where it is and what it does, as opposed to the first name of the author who wrote about it.

JO LAURIA: Well, how does it work then, Tom, if I wanted to look up an image of earth?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I can show you the Global Visual Library. If you—and there are icons. And if you want to learn about animals, you click that icon, and up comes the image of different animals. And I want the tiger, and I click the tiger. And then you see the five different species, the Indian tiger - or lions, and the historic range of the great African lion that went up all through the Middle East, and even lions out into India, where they were near their cousins, the tiger. But how these ranges have all been compressed and shrunk by the conquest of the land by our species.

And you take the great blue whale, not only the largest animal on the planet, the largest creature, but the largest creature that ever existed on the planet, larger than any of the dinosaur whales—100, 120 tons for the great blue whale. While their historic population is about 200,000, their present population is about 4,000, or maybe now, since they're protected, maybe 5,000. But imagine this difference.

You read the log of [Christopher] Columbus when he landed in the Caribbean. He dropped anchor off the islands in the Caribbean. And he writes that they felt like they could walk ashore on the backs of the turtles. The turtles were solid on the ocean surface. And underneath all the turtles were billions of beautiful sea snakes, protein from the sea that could feed the entire population of earth today.

We've had such great success as a nation because our nation was built recently on a continent where the resources were unexploited. It didn't have millions of beavers. It had billions of beavers. It had billions of passenger pigeons, so dense that when the flocks would fly over the plains, they'd block out the sun for two-three days. And their droppings would fertilize all these great natural grasses, which then supported the millions of—20 million or 40 million buffalo.

Our Antelope Valley here had hundreds of thousands of antelopes. There hasn't been an antelope around - [laughs]. So—and the last passenger pigeon died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1922. Well, these—each of these, if we're, sort of, a nature lover, seems like kind of a personal—we feel it as a—well, you know, that's kind of a tragedy, you know. But it's progressed. It has progressed way beyond that, which is the depletion of the protein resources.

JO LAURIA: How is this connected to an art concept, I wonder? I have to keep asking that, because it seems very rooted in ecology, in natural resource maintenance or -

TOM VAN SANT: Management.

JO LAURIA: —management. And I know that you started it with a component of artistic endeavor. So could you just explain what that was? What was the artistic vision that ignited the project, regardless of what its consequences have been?

TOM VAN SANT: I don't think it was an artistic vision that ignited it.

JO LAURIA: Then what -

TOM VAN SANT: It was the sense of the great absence of an element which is essential if we're going to establish survivable balance.

JO LAURIA: So it's more of a cartography project, a mapping project?

TOM VAN SANT: No. I don't know anything about cartography. It ended up being a cartography event of the decade. Some of them call it the cartography event of the century. Well, those are opinions that may or may not be flattering. Some people thought they were subversive, because there are no political boundaries, and that this was a communist plot.

See, this was done back in 1989 and the first part of 1990, before the end of the Cold War. So there's—it was a vision of something that became more and more important as the implications of it expanded. I mean, you start thinking of geography as the foundation of a library, and access to information geographically and through icons as opposed to—much less all the different languages of the world, none of which can use each other's library. Here's a universal library, easily accessible through icons, based on geography.

And it became impossible to ignore. It had—whether it was going to be called cartography or art or anything else. Actually, it ended up as something that none of the categories could accept for awhile. But during the group—during the several years that it took for it to be accepted by—eventually accepted by all the categories, in that period of time it became the most widely distributed single image in the world.

JO LAURIA: That of the globe and the way it actually looks from -

TOM VAN SANT: The satellite map of planet earth.

JO LAURIA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM VAN SANT: And I spent 1987 and '88, when I was waking up in the middle of the night all the time [laughs]—from my earlier projects, I knew all these guys from NASA, NOAA [National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration], and—you know, well, how did you get to know Al Watkins, head of the U.S. Geological Survey? Well, I don't know. It was through some of these earlier projects. And when I went to see him, I said—told him about how I felt the satellite map of the earth was the fundamental instrument for changing the way we see the world into—and a library—into assuming the responsibility of resource management. And U.S. Geological Survey should do it.

And—well, he's a terrific guy, and he said, "I completely understand." He said, "Absolutely. You're absolutely right." He said, "But look at my door, Tom. It says 'U.S. Geological Survey,' not 'Global Geological Survey.'" And he said, "That's outside—my mandate ends at the borders of the United States. And I can't devote any funds to anything beyond our border. But lots of luck."

And the guys at NASA, who I'd gotten to know, see them at NASA headquarters, which is right around the corner from National Geographic. And I present the idea, suggest how it can be done and which satellite we could use, and so forth. And said, "Oh, you're absolutely right. But we're not authorized." He said, "We're the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA—we come down to within an inch of the ground, and that's where our mission ends."

Well, I'd seen that from before, because USGS then handles the imagery on the ground. And also, they were very concerned about making a satellite map of the Soviet Union, as well as the West, the Arctic and Antarctic, and anything else. And they thought they'd never get authorization to do that and make it public. And the estimate for doing this went from—the lowest estimate was 6 million, and the highest estimate, I think, was 20 million to do the job, to do such a job, because it would take thousands of separate satellite imagery, and they'd all have to be put together like a giant mosaic.

Well, my thesis project from graduate school was a giant mosaic, an Italian glass mosaic. So I'd put a lot of little things together. And when I saw how the strips that the satellite imaged as it went around the world, every strip was six degrees off, north from the one below it, and how that's all understood for mapping purposes, and how accurate the corners of all of these images were and how they connect to each other.

And I was—and the NOAA, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, they held, they controlled the library of all of these images. So you had these three giant agencies, all of which were quasi-military in the Cold War.

JO LAURIA: I mean, the satellites are always scanning all of this information, but it's just not made accessible, or put together globally in a three-dimensional -

TOM VAN SANT: Oh, it's not put together in any way.

JO LAURIA: Okay. So it existed.

TOM VAN SANT: So I was turned down by every government agency that would play any role in it. And—but, like Al Gore, stomping around from city to city with his global warming presentation, I started stomping around

making presentations at universities and things. And the academics and the students all understood the idea completely.

And the result of one of these presentations was a call from a technical genius at Jet Propulsion Laboratory whose name is Lloyd Van Warren. And he called me on the phone, and he said he'd been thinking about this idea himself. But then as we got into it, and we got into the library and how it needs to be circulated around the world and so forth, he said, "Oh, no, it should only be done in the computer." Because he was interested in it as a technical challenge, and I was interested in it as a cultural revolution.

And then he began to—by the way, Van Warren is a born-again Christian. And as we began to understand each other, he started showing me how it could be done. But the tools didn't exist, like Photoshop. By the way, we invented all those tools to do this job. We just didn't—couldn't slow down enough to pay attention to them as a commercial product. We were absolutely intent on this. We kept our big computer working 24 hours a day for over a year.

And as we both began to understand this—

JO LAURIA: "Our big computer" meaning Jet Propulsion Lab's big computer?

TOM VAN SANT: No, no. First of all, Van Warren said, "Here's the computer. There's only one computer that we need." He has his degree in electrical engineering, and he's a leader—a young man, but really creative. We're great friends all through these years. Now we talk every month or so, at least. And he said, "The Stardent GS 1000" from—they no longer exist, but, "The Stardent GS 1000 is the only machine that can interactively handle this job. There's only one problem. It costs 200,000 dollars. And here are the steps that I think we might have to take."

Well, every satellite image may not have the same angle of light as the one next to it. And so for all of these to put together as a unit, I had to create—oh, and if you remember, back then, all the pictures of the earth that had foliage, mountains and jungles and whatever, they're all red, represented in the infrared band. The moisture content was imaged in infrared.

JO LAURIA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM VAN SANT: And I had to create a color conversion program to take the light yellowish reds to the light yellowish greens and the dark bluish reds, purples, into the dark brownish greens. And I got all of the guys down at the Goddard Space Flight Center down in Texas—they sent me all the images that I asked for from the first shuttle flight, where pictures were taken with a Hasselblad camera out of the window of the shuttle. So I had the actual colors. And you can look at these images. None of the forests looked like another forest on another continent or another side of the same—they're all—I converted the infrared bands to these colors so I could accurately represent the surface of the earth.

And after this was published, a nice fellow, Neil Armstrong, came by. A couple of the astronauts came here.

JO LAURIA: Published where? I'm sorry.

TOM VAN SANT: After this was published all around, in the early '90s, some of the astronauts visited here and signed things for me and had me sign maps for them. And Neil said, "Boy, I wish the earth really looked like this." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Well, there's all these airborne particulates and smog and clouds." And I said, "Why, of course there are. And these can be overlain onto this. What are these tropical islands—here, look here in the Caribbean. See these?" He says, "Oh, now, these on your map look like those look." Well, that's because there's no airborne particulates. I said, "That's a database. That's an overlay."

JO LAURIA: Right. So it's transparent almost, that you can continue to put overlays one on top of the other.

TOM VAN SANT: And he said, "Oh, I understand." He said, "This is what it really looks like without these ephemeral effects, whatever they are." I said, "Yes. And we can overlay in our computer version or on this globe from projections within the exhibit. We can overlay today's weather if we can get it fast enough, or last week's weather, or the weather on the day of Katrina—of course—the day of such-and-such hurricane. We can overlay that and see it. We can overlay the smog coming off of Southern California or off of the electric plants in the west and see all that airborne content floating out over the Grand Canyon. I visited the Grand Canyon. It was hard to see because of all the smog. Well, we're making that. So these are ephemeral events."

And he said, "Oh. Well, in that case, that is—this is exactly how it looks. Because when I pass over areas of the Earth that don't have airborne contaminants, it is this bright and this beautiful."

So anyway, Van Warren and I resolved the pathways we're going to take. I'd work from the afternoon all the way

through two or three in the morning. I'd take my son, little boy, Ryan, with me at eight years old or whatever he was. I took Van Warren's garage apartment, beat-up apartment, and put 220 power in it to fire up this Stardent. I bought the Stardent computer. I had 600,000 dollars in savings. And I said, "Can we create this 6-million-dollar or 20-million-dollar project on 600,000 dollars?" And we both swore to give everything to it, our fortune and sacred honor, as our Revolutionaries used to say.

And we'd be working, and Van Warren would come in. He'd say, "Tom, we're doing God's work." And I said, "Van, we sure are." God has a lot of different definitions, but I'm certainly not going to argue with the fact that we're doing God's work. Like Einstein, it may be—my version of God may be different than yours, but I'm sure not going to object to the use of the term.

So I put Ryan to bed there. And at two or three in the morning, I'd leave a note for the things that I needed Van to do technically for us to accomplish certain things. And I'd pick up Ryan. He'd never wake up. I'd put him in the back seat of the car and put the strap—strap him down, and we'd drive back to here in Santa Monica, put him in the bed here, get up in the morning, and take him to school. And Van would go into the apartment at 5:30 or 6:00, whenever he'd get up. And he'd work on it until he had to go to JPL to do his tasks there, which became a little later and a little later.

And finally, the guys from—some guys from NASA came out and looked at the project. And they made a grant, 50,000 dollars, to continue to pay Van's salary at JPL. And JPL farmed him out to the project.

JO LAURIA: Oh, that's great.

[END OF TRACK AAA_vansan08_7452.]

TOM VAN SANT: I can finish it off with a couple of sentences.

JO LAURIA: Okay. Go ahead.

TOM VAN SANT: Now?

JO LAURIA: Yeah.

TOM VAN SANT: So the—I would ask myself, Why me? And there's that wonderful movie that came out called Network [1976], where God spoke to the network anchorman. And he answered back to God, "Why me?" And God, what, answered him and said, "Because you're on television." [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: Well, when I asked the universe, "Why me? Why am I in this trap to become—to leave my paints and my sculpture tools, and at age—in my 60s and so forth - to put my life savings into—become broke at the end of this project—why me?" Well, God didn't answer me; but I guess he did, because the answer was, "Your brain is connected in the middle." [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: "And you're just the right guy." And so I was content with that and had to accept it. I didn't have any alternatives. And it even meant that, during the '90s, in this room we're sitting in, I had 15 desks and employees of the GeoSphere Project. We never made an outgoing call, never advertised, or never asked for donations from anybody; never did anything. I kept having to hire more and more mostly good communicating ladies, young ladies, as account executives, I guess you'd call them. And we just received calls from all over the world, from every kind of advertising agency and every kind of atlas and every kind of scientific agency or every kind of request to give talks and show the stuff at their conferences, which I did. I went to Rio [de Janeiro, Brazil] and to South Africa and to Europe and these different places.

As Alan Watts used to say, "traveling from city to city on matters of great urgency." [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: [Laughs] I'm sorry. I didn't hear who you said used to say that.

TOM VAN SANT: Alan Watts.

JO LAURIA: He was a philosopher.

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. He was a Zen philosopher, who represented Zen to the Western world. He's a former Episcopal minister, and charming man with lots of good humor. And he said, "Life does not consist of flying on a big silver bird from city to city on matters of great urgency." And so many people accept that as reality. Well, I had to accept it for a little while. And no incoming calls, just coming from everybody. And so it was in Arab

magazines and magazines in Pakistan and Bangladesh and China, and Russia, too.

JO LAURIA: And now don't you think we take it for granted that we see –

TOM VAN SANT: This image, yeah.

JO LAURIA: —this image? I mean, and it's also on the cover of Al Gore's book [An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergence of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 2006].

TOM VAN SANT: Of course. It's—that's not something to complain about. That's fulfilling its greatest promise.

JO LAURIA: Well, absolutely. But I mean, did you envision that it would have such a global impact?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes.

JO LAURIA: Good.

TOM VAN SANT: Not because I'm so good, but because it's so necessary. It went right out as though a vacuum sucked it out into the world. I didn't have to promote it anyplace. And that, to me, was—you know, you were talking about some of your pessimism now about the future. Well, that was a great explosion of optimism.

JO LAURIA: And I'm sure that we've covered or touched upon a lot of these requisite questions. But let's just revisit them, maybe in summary manner. What would you say are the most powerful influences in your career, either involving people, art movements, or technological developments? If you had to distill that down, what would you cite as the most important influences?

TOM VAN SANT: The large-scale conceptual influences. My dad was a great influence, of course. Our fathers are. But he was a wonderful man of great honesty and good humor. He never had much faith in his son becoming an artist. Shouldn't I do something else and have art on the side? Well, maybe that's what I did. [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: Ryan's mother got to pick his name. She picked Ryan. And I got to pick his middle name. And his middle name is Darwin. I love the idea of a conception which changed the way we see the world. And if—and Darwin didn't just reveal biological processes called evolution. He didn't even know that that's the way everything worked. Everything evolves. And I was sure that the only way the satellite map of the world was going to get done was by somebody sacrificing up whatever they had to do it. I was just thankful that I—that we could get it done for—I had some nice things around here, some pre-Columbian art, some paintings. And I had to sell them in the end. But we got it done. And I'm just—it all worked out okay in the end.

JO LAURIA: Well, how would you categorize the areas of where your sources of inspiration have come from in the past? And has it changed over the years? Are you still inspired by the same things?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. I'm—I read Nature and Scientific American, as much as I read—or more, probably, than I read—well, not more. I love looking at artwork, whether it's by contemporaries or throughout history or from people of tradition, which we call primitive art. That's probably the most inspirational to me, in art.

JO LAURIA: Do you see similarities or differences between your early work and your recent work? Can you make any distinctions about those, or do you see it more as an evolution, since you used the word "evolution"?

TOM VAN SANT: I see it as evolution. I see that, with age, I—and with experience, I have learned to accept risk and learned to accept myself, that I'm—every part of me is legitimate. And so all the attention given to, is it better or worse? Do you like it more this way than that way? I've learned to—they can rest on my shoulder if they wish. I've learned to just accept that as a friend, a friend of mine who—I can make those considerations in everything I do without it being a weight on my shoulders. And I can find the joy in the process, just as with the projects. If there isn't joy in the process, you'd better give it a second thought.

JO LAURIA: How would you describe the qualities of your working environment? For example, can you describe—like today, this week and next week, what your studio day-to-day working activities might be? Are you using computers? Are you working on any specific project at the moment? Are you working towards an exhibition?

TOM VAN SANT: I'm working toward fulfillment of all of those ideas and those sculpture and painting things that I've started and put off. I find myself picking up things that are pre-1990, or pre-1988, I should say. And even the kites, I find myself repairing some of the kites so that I can take them up to my place in the desert with me and let the kids up there fly them. And I'm picking up on all of those things. And I notice a difference between my attitude toward them then and now. My attitude toward them now is with more ease and acceptance of what I used to consider as limitations.

Well, limitations are—the first limitation is that rectangular shape of the canvas or the size of that piece of mahogany. And why should the limitations of my ability to project into the consequence of each decision, why should that be different than any of the other limitations? And why shouldn't I accept where I go? If I wanted to—if I felt being a famous artist or something was my primary goal, I certainly would have stuck to something. And it would have been something that could be put on [laughs]—that could be marketed.

So I'd better accept myself as where I don't choose to go; I sort of have to go to these different places. It's like I'm drawn toward them. And if I feel that I'm neglecting—one of my wonderful mentors early in my life was a watercolor painter, Millard Sheets. And what a wonderful and enthusiastic man he was, and what an inspiration. He was always telling me, you know, that "You're doing just great," and that's great encouragement.

JO LAURIA: So interesting, that the last two people that I've interviewed—you and Martha Longenecker that I interviewed previous to you -

TOM VAN SANT: - mentioned Millard, huh?

JO LAURIA: Both of you mentioned Millard Sheets as their great mentors. And you two have totally separate paths.

TOM VAN SANT: Different.

JO LAURIA: You've never crossed, as far as I know. But yet, you're connected through Millard Sheets.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, that speaks for Millard, not for us.

JO LAURIA: It certainly does.

TOM VAN SANT: It certainly does. And when I took the satellite map of the world image and completed it, I was visiting Millard up at his home in Northern California along the coast. And as a matter of fact, he was becoming ill and his life was going to end soon. And I took this new map of the world to show him. And he looked at it, and of course, being Millard, said, "Oh, Tom, that's wonderful. How interesting. Tell me about this and that." "Okay. Well, thanks for asking, Millard."

And then he said, "When are you going to get back to art?" And then I realized that I had to accept the parameters put onto that subject by our culture. And if Millard accepted and advanced those parameters in recommending a direction to me—but he always thought I was a good painter, because he taught me to paint; he taught me a lot about painting - I'd better not object to them when they come from anybody else. So I've never objected to having a lot of my work being—see, for myself it's avant-garde. And it's using the tools of the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, these great technologies. I don't make any art on a computer. That doesn't interest me. But my interest in the tools of my time have always—they've always been outside the definition of art by the art community. And then, after a generation or two, they call it, "Oh, they were avant-garde artists."

JO LAURIA: Or visionary.

TOM VAN SANT: Right. And each generation thinks that it's beyond those terrible restrictions of the last generations that kept those Impressionists out of the Academy or did this or that because they were avant-garde, and now we understand. Now the [Vincent] van Goghs and the [Paul] Cézannes and so forth are the highest-priced paintings in the world. Isn't that interesting that they were that way? They held these narrow parameters. Well, it's been the same every generation. It's probably the same this generation. Maybe these projects will be encompassed in it. I don't know. It doesn't matter. By the time they are or are not, I won't be worrying about it. And I'm not worried about it now.

JO LAURIA: Well, I think it's a fair question, since we are, as you mentioned, in a political year, 2008, and every president is trying to secure their legacy [Van Sant laughs], as if any of us can really, you know, predict what our legacy is going to be.

So I'm saying that I think it's fair. But let me ask you this question, how would you like you and your art to be viewed in the future? And what do you think your contributions have been to American art? If you were to be remembered for your contributions or for the individual that you are, the artist that you are, the scientist that you are, how would you like that to be seen in your visual library?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I'm not sure. The satellite map of the earth and the Global Visual Library and the earth situation room, which we called it and have installed in these different locations, they're still operating beautifully. I don't think an artist as we know them could have done those things. And I certainly know all the wonderful scientists that I know—my board of directors for—during the '90s, when we were disseminating these

products around the world to fulfill the original vision. And they were mostly scientists.

And—but the scientists couldn't have done it. No scientist wanted to do it, nor could they have done it, because of all the sensibilities that had to be incorporated. What Van Warren as a scientist called it, the human umpire, which scientists like to keep out of the mix as much as possible. You don't want—if it's been tampered with by someone, its legitimacy has been compromised.

JO LAURIA: So you're saying "umpire," as in a baseball umpire?

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah, where you have to make decisions about, should it go this way or that way? It's a strike or it's a ball. It's a touchdown or it isn't.

JO LAURIA: So that's the human—

TOM VAN SANT: Human umpire.

JO LAURIA: Okay.

TOM VAN SANT: So I documented this project in those early days with drawings and commentary about these decisions of human umpire and so forth. And we both—he gave that name to it. And we both agreed on the roles of science and artistic decision. Where there was no alternative, an umpire was there. And well, that's the artist. And the scientist was the process of building the—

JO LAURIA: The frame?

TOM VAN SANT: —the management, the frame, the tools, because they were all electronic. So no cartographer was interested in this project. So who's going to do it? And no federal agency, no private sponsors—I never had anybody ever say to me, "You know, we—what we really need is a satellite map of the world." I never read it in any of the—anywhere. So it's a -

JO LAURIA: So you best fit into the category that the M.I.T. school has for advanced visual studies. And that's probably where your greatest contributions will be cited; don't you agree? Since it's that intersection of art and science.

TOM VAN SANT: You haven't seen these paintings I've been making.

JO LAURIA: Well, that was my last question. [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: [Laughs.]

JO LAURIA: What are you working on currently?

TOM VAN SANT: Well, I told—this is a joke. I told my son Ryan that I planned to have a very successful posthumous career [laughs], from which he should be the beneficiary. And he said, "Ah, that sounds great, Dad. Thanks a lot."

No, I think if these ideas about painting that I have - that are quite different from anything I've seen anywhere else—just like this project is different from anything I've ever seen anywhere else—if they've—if the ideas have lasted from where they were and discontinued in the '80s, and they've lasted through a decade and a half of -

JO LAURIA: Being found?

TOM VAN SANT: —neglect in favor of the GeoSphere Project—I took a couple of big architectural projects during that period to help pay for it. So we ended up spending more than the 600,000. I had to make some more money. But basically, these projects that I'm working now on were neglected and set aside.

And if they've lasted in my mind, in a sense, in the same form, with the same intensity and the same—with the same sense of that feeling that I have brought into these projects. I see myself, you know, laying there on my deathbed saying, "Well"—cackling and saying, "Well, Tom, why didn't you do that? You said you were going to do it. And you certainly tend to believe the visions that you have. And they seem to get—enough other people seem to like them."

JO LAURIA: Invest in them.

TOM VAN SANT: "Nobody's telling you, 'Oh, don't do that. Why are you wasting your'—nobody's doing that." Nobody's telling me these ideas are not—so why don't you do them? And so that's where I am. I'm doing them. And -

JO LAURIA: So it's going to be in the painting category?

TOM VAN SANT: Yes. I've had a couple of dozen exhibits. But they include kites and everything else. But the painting and sculpture, I've had a dozen of them, and they've been at different places. But they've been—one at a gallery in Laguna and another one at someplace, but all in the earlier part of my life. So I'm basically out of the loop of the gallery/collector business. And I don't know whether whatever I do can take enough hold to be of interest to that—in that case, the marketplace.

And on the assumption that a gallery—they may really like the work, but what they like even better is an artist that's young enough to keep doing it for the next 25 or 30 years, so that they can get the benefit of the investment they make into the promotion of –

JO LAURIA: Developing someone's career.

TOM VAN SANT: Whatever. [Laughs.] And yeah, that's even better. So it's sort of like a promoter. Does he want to take on a 35-year-old fighter?

JO LAURIA: Well, I guess nobody can control the post-product marketing part. But for you, you have—it would be fair to say that you haven't lost interest in going back to the more conventional methods of producing art.

TOM VAN SANT: I don't give any thought to the methods or whether or not they're conventional. I just don't know how to make paintings without paint. And I know a lot of people make them on computers and everything. I can't find any love doing that.

JO LAURIA: Some people make them out of light.

TOM VAN SANT: That's right. That's right. Like Reflections from Earth, it's made out of light.

JO LAURIA: It's made out of light. Even [Pablo] Picasso did his—well, I guess it was the Minotaur out of sculpted light that was then photographed in the instant that he did it.

TOM VAN SANT: Yeah.

JO LAURIA: But it's still the idea of mark-making, I guess, is what you'd say.

TOM VAN SANT: There was another important satellite project in there that—a couple of them attempted. One of them was the Eyes on Earth, where I made a zoom in real time from the geostationary satellite, which is 22,000 miles away, down through the Landsat, through high-altitude aerial photography, all done in real time, down through a handheld camera, down to the corner of Melrose and San Vicente Boulevards in West Hollywood.

This was commissioned by the Los Angeles Pacific Design Center, as part of their West Week project. And it was a zoom, which came down and ended up in Ryan's Eye, the five-year-old guy standing there looking up. And I dedicated it to Charles and Ray Eames and to Phyllis and Phillip Morrison, who participated in the Powers of Ten. So here was the powers—a zoom Powers of Ten, in which it was real instead of animated.

And Phillip Morrison, of course, back at M.I.T., astrophysicists, we became—Phyllis and Phillip Morrison—became great friends through these last decades, along with other of the wonderful folks at M.I.T. And that was an absolutely glorious experience. We showed it at the closing ceremony of the West Week project at—I'll give you a tape of it.

JO LAURIA: What year was it? You know, I also have to add that I think you should contribute to the Archives of American Art some of the relevant materials, as you will give to me, the talks or the things on tape.

TOM VAN SANT: Sure.

JO LAURIA: So that, you know, if people read the interview, they might be able to—

TOM VAN SANT: Of course.

JO LAURIA: —and have access to other multimedia materials that further illustrate some of your ideas, because they are very conceptual and difficult to understand, sometimes, just by reading through the interview.

TOM VAN SANT: Well, they're impossible.

JO LAURIA: Right. [Laughs.]

TOM VAN SANT: Anymore than reading about a painting. So it's just this last year that we've been finding, going back into the storage rooms back there and finding the original beta cams and so forth, from which the VHS tapes were made, which we sent out thousands of them all over the world, along with the map and so forth. Wonderful things happened with the map of the earth. We donated the map to National Geographic for them to make three million copies to send to all the schools in the country. Just about every school received the satellite map of the earth from the National Geographic.

And one of the most moving ones was a friend of mine, Steve Enzer [ph], went on an adventure into the Amazon and went into a Yanomami village that had only been visited once or twice by anybody outside of their tribe. And in the counsel hut was our map of the earth that the first expedition that went in there took with them and made a gift to the Yanomami to show them the rest of the world that they thought the edge—their territory was pretty much the edge of the world.

And on the map, it was—the place in the Amazon where they were, which was pointed out to them, was rubbed through by all the people who had touched the map: "We are here."

JO LAURIA: Well, that's wonderful. Tom, I think we'll conclude our interview with that inspiring story.

End of disc three, interview with Tom Van Sant.

[END OF TRACK AAA_vansan08_7453.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]