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Oral history interview with Athena Tacha, 2009 December 4-6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Athena Tacha on December 4, 5, and 6, 2009. The interview took place in the studio of Athena Tacha in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Brown Foundation project.

Athena Tacha and Avis Berman reviewed the transcript in 2011. Athena Tacha again edited the transcript in 2018. This transcript has been heavily edited. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman recording Athena Tacha for the Archives of American Art, General Services Administration oral history project, on December 4, 2009, in her studio in Washington, D.C.

Now, I always start the same way with everyone. Would you please state your full name and date of birth?

ATHENA TACHA: Athena Tacha, married Spear, born in Greece, Larissa, on April 23, 1936.

AVIS BERMAN: And was April 23rd Shakespeare's birthday or is it the 24th? I'm not sure but very close. Well, let us begin a little bit about your early life. Is Larissa, is it in northern or central Greece?

ATHENA TACHA: Central Greece.

AVIS BERMAN: So it's not on the Peloponnesus. It's—

ATHENA TACHA: Oh no, no, no. It's halfway between Thessaloniki and Athens, north of Athens.

AVIS BERMAN: And what was that like? Was that country? Were you in a town or what was the—

ATHENA TACHA: Larissa, L-A-R-I-S-S-A.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh Yes, right.

ATHENA TACHA: It's a town which was in the—around 1940, was very—relatively small, like 50,000 people. Now it has become at least half a million because all the peasants from the Plain of Thessaly have moved there and it's becoming a metropolis.

But it has been the most ancient city of Greece in continuous habitation since something like 8,000 B.C. I mean, it never became famous in the Classical times of Ancient Greece but it was active throughout history.

AVIS BERMAN: And your parents' name are—am I correct that it's Constantine?

ATHENA TACHA: Constantine Tachas, the male, takes an S at the end, and Helen Malaki Tacha.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay and your father was a doctor?

ATHENA TACHA: Mm-hmm, neurologist, and initially general practitioner in the villages of that area, studied in Athens, of course, and then became a neurologist with staying three years in Paris at the Salpêtrière, the famous hospital.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that before you were born?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes it was in the '20s, mid '20s and then he came back I think in '28 and married my mother, who was born in 1910 and therefore she was very young when they married. My mother was only a high school degree person and not at all professionally oriented.

AVIS BERMAN: It would have been hard at that time if she was from the same area.

ATHENA TACHA: Of course, but also she just was—she loved dancing. She loved singing. She was a very extroverted person and not at all a bookish person, so all my interest in reading and becoming a professional is from my father.

AVIS BERMAN: Did he encourage you?

ATHENA TACHA: He did encourage me mainly because he had only one child, because my mother fell ill with typhoid when I was three or six months old and she was in bed. In those days, they kept you in bed for six months and as a result she got phlebitis when she recovered from the typhoid.

So it wasn't easy for her to have more children and then the war broke pretty soon after that. I mean, I was born in '36 and the war started in '40. So I was three-and-a-half years when the war started.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I'm going to ask you about that in a minute. But I wanted to ask you both of your parents' birth and death dates.

ATHENA TACHA: My father was born in 1903 and my mother 1910.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you remember what year they died?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, my father died in, I think '69. He was 66. Richard Spear, my husband, what year did mother die? Oh, he left.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: I think he died in '69 and my mother died in '85.

AVIS BERMAN: So they saw you really come to fruition professionally.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes. I actually left Greece for good, first with the Fulbright fellowship in 1960 after—well, after finishing school of fine arts in Greece—and I had won a government fellowship for three years in Paris, studies in Paris, but I had to wait a year for the fellowship to begin.

I knew English quite well and I applied for a Fulbright fellowship to just come to America for a year to see what it looks like. So because I didn't have money to come, they paid my travel expenses and a month at Bennington College to improve my English.

I had asked for an assistantship or fellowship and no other schools except Oberlin College accepted foreign students with fellowships or assistantships. So they gave me an assistantship in the department of art at Oberlin College, and I studied a year of art history there.

I felt I should take a master's, but they said, "No, you can't do it in a year. You'll need two years," and I said, "Well, then I will leave in a year because I have that fellowship in Paris and that's where I want to go."

But in the middle of the first semester, they thought I was bright and such a good student, I was getting A's in everything. In those days, and in Oberlin College there were C, D and E. E was failure but there were four grades, unlike California where they give all A's. A's and B-pluses were very hard to get at Oberlin.

So they proposed that I take more courses and a heavier load and they gave me some credits for the art history I had taken in the school of Athens because I had taken the theoretical degree, diploma; not just sculpture, but three years of art history, two years of architectural history and two years of architectural design. So the Athens school gave a superior diploma, plus four years of sculpture of course.

So Oberlin allowed me to try to take the master's in one year, if I stayed the summer and wrote my thesis in the summer. So I stayed through that summer and got my master's in the history of art at Oberlin, the first person to get it in one year.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, I am going to backtrack now, going back to Greece, and again your early life and childhood. I mean what kind of a kid were you, besides obviously very intelligent?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I was told that I started drawing before the war when I was 3-and-a-half or 4, first on my father's cigarette boxes because in Greece, they had those square cigarette boxes with white backs.

So when my father saw that I had some interest and capabilities, he gave me all of the notebooks from calendars that pharmaceutical companies sent him. So huge notebooks like this thick I was filling with childish drawings and then the war started. He went to the war—I mean, as a soldier.

AVIS BERMAN: Was he in the Greek army as a doctor or as a medic or something?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, a doctor supervising one of the hospitals on the border cities, Drama, and then my mother and myself and Marianthe [Karalaiou], who is an important person in my life because she was like my little nanny. She was a child from a village family of the plain of Thessaly and her father died.

Her mother had four kids and she couldn't keep them up. So she gave the older girl as a little maid to our family.

She had gone one year to primary school and she stayed with us because I was a year-and-a-half old at the time and my mother had phlebitis and so Marianthe was helping raise me and like being my babysitter and my nanny, and helping my mother with cooking and she stayed with us throughout my parents' lives.

She still lives in my parents' home and I go see her. But she was like a sister to me in a way, an older sister, and we taught her languages, including English and French. She was not a very bright person but a very sweet person.

AVIS BERMAN: So you helped her to learn to read and write, I guess?

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, yes, my father taught her Greek. She writes and reads but he also taught her languages. My father was a polyglot. He knew Italian, German, French, English, self-taught all of them, French the best because he lived in Paris and he even attempted Russian. So he was a very bookish person.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, so you had a very intellectual climate in your house.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, not artistic though because nobody in either side of my family knew anything about that. But when my father saw that I was interested, he bought me some color books—what they call, the books that have images?

AVIS BERMAN: Coloring books.

ATHENA TACHA: Coloring books, when I went to primary school and then at the age of 10 when I was in 4th grade in primary school, one of my teachers noticed that I was making free-hand copies of all the religious pictures in the room. We had about 10 of them from the story of the life of Christ, colored drawings four inches by five inches but very faithful.

She thought I was a child prodigy and everybody declared me that. So my aunt, my mother's sister, who was in America, sent me a case of oil paints and brushes and a palette.

So I thought that I was becoming an artist and they sent me to a professor who was teaching art in the high school, the men's high school, just to be around in the studio. But he started pinching me after a while—and I was a pretty little girl, I guess, at that age, Lolita type.

So I stopped going. That was my beginning at art. Then in high school we had of course a female teacher of art who everybody was making fun of. She was a painter actually. But at age 15 I started carving sculptures out of soap and of course I had never seen art. There was no museum in Larissa. I had never been in Athens because of the war.

Moreover, my father went to prison actually after the war ended because he comes from a Vlach family (and he was accused of collaboration with the Italians). In other words, Vlachs are a tribe that lived in the Balkans and they were Greeks but they were speaking a dialect which is close to Romanian, a Latin-speaking dialect, and they were shepherds.

So my paternal forefathers had huge herds of sheep. They were up in the—what is called Macedonia now, Monastiri is the town where my grandfather studied through junior high now Bitolia school, Greek language, it was a Greek high school.

But then in the summers, they were going up there with their herds. In the winter, they were coming down to Thessaly. So my grandfather was—

AVIS BERMAN: A farmer, or a sheep farmer?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, no, when his father died and lost all his sheep from a disease, he became—what do you call those people who have a horse or a mule or mules, a train of mules and they carry—

AVIS BERMAN: A driver of a pack?

ATHENA TACHA: There's a word, *agoyiates* carrier of merchandise from up, the north to the south because he knew the route.

AVIS BERMAN: A peddler?

ATHENA TACHA: No, because he was carrying other people's stuff and people on the mules. I mean, a transporter.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, or kind of a shipper.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. Like a truck driver now, that's what he was but with mules.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And then he bought himself a property in a village outside of Larissa in the Plain of Thessaly and settled there and that's where my father was born. So when the war started, my family, my mother, Marianthe and myself—I started saying about Marianthe and then got interrupted—were sent by my father to the village because the Germans were bombarding the cities.

And in fact he had built a little building as his office because our house was a Turkish, old house, small, four rooms and his office just finished and then a bomb destroyed it, —while he was out fighting.

AVIS BERMAN: You were at your grandfather's house?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, my grandfather had died, and grandmother, both from cancer when I was 2 or 3 years old. But his relatives, his sister and niece, etcetera, lived in the village. So we stayed with them for six months while my father was at war and I kind of feel that I'm a country girl because of that.

I was imbued by the atmosphere of the Greek village and the countryside and also my father was himself a village boy. Although he was a psychiatrist-neurologist, (in those days, it was the same thing) he had bought a farm outside of our town, Larissa, in order to build a clinic, a mad house, a neurology clinic, which he never did because the war intervened.

But in any case, I also went to the farmhouse often because he cultivated wheat there. He also had pigeons. He loved to play the farmer as a hobby. But I was telling you also that my father went to prison after the war because he was of the Vlach tribe. First the Italians occupied Greece, then the Germans came and sent them home.

But while the Italians were there, somebody decided to create a kind of organization of Latin-speaking Greeks. It was called the Legion of Latin-Speaking Greeks. So by force actually they went around and convinced people to join it. For what reason, I don't know.

If they didn't join, then they were sending them to prison camps in Germany, like the Jews and other people, and my father joined because, as I told you, my mother was semi-invalid. I was 4 years old and Marianthe was 10 years old or whatever. So we were a helpless trio.

He didn't want to leave us to be sent to a prison camp without knowing the future of the war. So he joined that legion. Then the Italians left and the legion disappeared.

But people who had been sent to the camps because they said, "No, we don't want to join that legion," when they returned after the liberation of Greece, they were very vindictive and they wanted to put on trial the people who had joined "as collaborators of the Italians."

And so my father was in a very difficult situation upon liberation of Greece; he became a victim of that passion of some people. He was sent to prison for 15 years but he stayed only five.

AVIS BERMAN: Five years?

ATHENA TACHA: Five years.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh my goodness.

ATHENA TACHA: That was during the civil war in Greece. After World War II ended, the people who had been guerillas as Communists supported by Russia ruled Greece for a year—see, Greece was a bone of contention between the Anglo-Americans and the Russians.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: There was Resistance in Greece and the guerillas who were helped by the Russians were Communists and the guerillas who had been helped by the British were non-Communists; and so at first the Communist Party emerged after the war and then the Americans wanted to wipe out Communism from Greece and push the Communist guerillas up north.

So that was a civil war. It was equally bad as the war with Germany, the occupation by Germany. So I grew up through two wars, four years of German occupation, Italo-German, and five years of the civil war, until finally

with the American Marshall Plan and help, they defeated the Communists.

AVIS BERMAN: So that would be about 1950 or so that your father got out?

ATHENA TACHA: That's right. Yes, my father was—no, wait a second. I was 10 years old when he went to prison and I was 15 when he got out.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, so he went in '46 and got out—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, '46 and he got out in '51 and after that, since his office had been destroyed, he operated as a doctor from the house, and our living room became his office and we lived in a bedroom and the dining room, and Marianthe had her own room with me.

So it was a very bad situation and very primitive—unheated house of course. We had no bathroom. We had only a shower, cold. So in the winter, we were going to my aunt's to take a bath once a month.

So you can imagine the conditions I grew in, with just a toilet, of course the Turkish type of toilet, and that's why I am very "Eastern"—Greece was very primitive in those days and I feel very at home in any Near Eastern country or even India.

When Richard and I went first to India, he experienced culture shock. But I felt very acclimatized and even though India is very crowded and very different from Greece, the music I feel is like Greek music. I feel totally at home. The dance and the art, I adore the art of India, the architecture and the sculpture.

So that is to say that by my going to the village in 1940 and by Greece being in a poor and undeveloped condition during my youth—until I became a student essentially, I have absorbed a country life that I wouldn't have if the war had never happened and my father was a rich psychiatrist in a booming town, as Larissa is now a booming town. He was the only neurologist-psychiatrist in the whole area at the time. Now there are 10 or 15.

AVIS BERMAN: It sounds like you would have been thrown back on your own resources because your father was gone and certainly your mother—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, and my relatives helped—my mothers' relatives; my grandmother had a pension because one of her sons—my mother's youngest brother—was killed in the war as a pilot and she had the pension and she supported us during the years my father was in prison. We were very poor. We never were famished but I had—there was a stigma also with my father being in prison.

But somehow because I was very bright and I always was first in my class, and my mother was "educated"—even though she was not a bookish person, as I said, she sent me when I became 12 to the conservatory of music to learn piano and I got a degree in theory of music in six years there. I never became a good pianist because we didn't own a piano.

And she also sent me to the Alliance Française to learn French. My father had started me both French and English with private teachers at age 6. But that was very amateurish and the Alliance Française was a professional school. So I learned excellent French. I never learned as good English because the English schools were not as good.

But still I could write and read perfectly English at the end of my high school and I got a proficiency diploma in English and so that's why I could apply for a Fulbright.

And actually I was such a good student in high school, not only the first in my class every year, but I won a competition, a Greece-wide or Europe-wide competition, for the best writing in French: six Greek kids in the entire Greece, most of them Athenians of course, were sent to Paris for a month with a little summer fellowship just to absorb French culture and that was the first time I saw museums.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, so you still had never been to Athens?

ATHENA TACHA: I had been to Athens once or twice when my father was in prison, actually, they sent him to the neurological hospital of prisons in Athens to be of use and that way he practiced his profession mostly throughout his prison years. And so we went to visit him.

But you see, all the bridges were bombed. There were guerrillas fighting all the time. So we couldn't travel very much. I had an uncle in Athens, an older brother of my mother, and we stayed with him the couple of times we went. But you couldn't travel very much. It was very limited because of the guerillas attacking trains and blowing the bridges up.

So I hadn't seen any art at all. Even when I went to Athens, I'm not sure I went to the archeological museum

because there was nobody to take me to it. I was 12 years old or 13, or something.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But you must have seen pictures in your schoolbooks.

ATHENA TACHA: You don't know what the education was in Greece at that time. There were no libraries. There were no labs. I mean, the schools had been bombed, and the whole high school of girls was housed in one of the primary schools, which had not been bombed.

So there was absolutely nothing. There were no labs. I mean, chemistry and physics we learned from books. And so when my father came out of prison, I was 16, I think, and he went to Athens a couple of times to find jobs or whatever. I forget, he brought me back from the foreign language bookstore that had opened in Athens a book on Leonardo da Vinci, which I still have—the small format series Grands Maîtres. Also he had the Larousse dictionary because he was a French educated person and the Larousse had illustrations, tiny black and white illustrations of a lot of great masters.

That's where I learned my art, from the Larousse illustrations, which were tiny black and whites, and after that, from the little Leonardo da Vinci book that my father brought me. Maybe he bought one on Rembrandt too. I can't remember.

AVIS BERMAN: But not on Greek sculpture?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, Greek sculpture, I must have seen in photographs of books because that's why when I started carving figural sculpture in white blocks of soap that we had for laundry, they looked like the *Nike of Samothrace*. The *Nike of Samothrace* probably is illustrated in the Larousse.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: *Aphrodite of Milos*, et cetera, I mean, that's the kind of thing I was carving, but very realistic and very well-done, and so everybody—a professor of chemistry actually in my high school at age 15 saw those things and he said, "Oh my god, you are really an artist." So everybody thought I was a child prodigy, but I could go nowhere for studies.

AVIS BERMAN: Because you were so intelligent and first in your class and you had interest, say, in science and history, was there ever any thought that you wanted to be something else besides an artist?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, my father wanted me to become an architect because he thought as an artist you won't make a living. I was pretty good in mathematics, better still in geometry, and so he said, "You should try the school of architecture." The exams were very difficult, the entrance exams, and I said, "Well, I want to be an artist." So when I finished the high school in Greece, we went together to Athens.

And that's when I saw the museum of ancient art, or the archaeological museum and the Acropolis, et cetera. And he sent me to a private—well, they were those private kind of training for preparation to get into the schools and he sent me to somebody who was teaching drawing so that I could pass the exams of the School of Fine Arts in Athens and to somebody who was teaching mathematics I think for the architecture, for the summer. The exams were in September.

So when I finished high school I went to Athens in the summer for a month or two. I stayed in a dormitory of Catholic sisters and washed dishes to pay for my bedding, which was bedding in like a military dorm—30 girls in a room, with mice running around underneath at night and so on, and I was washing dishes for 300 at night.

In any case, I stayed there actually for a year as a student in Athens—well, I did not get in the school of architecture. I was on the waiting list because my algebra or chemistry exam grade was very poor. But I had never done chemistry in lab, as I said. It was all formulas in books. So I hated chemistry. But I love it now because I can relate differently to it.

So in any case, I got the first prize of the Greek government entering in the school of fine arts and I got on the waiting list of architecture. So I told my father that decides it. Because the school of fine arts, the government [I.K.Y.]—Foundation of State Fellowships—whatever you call it—fellowship was a substantial fellowship. I could live with it.

I saved it all because I wanted to go on further studies abroad. So what happened is I finished the French school, Alliance Française, here—I mean, in Larissa.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: I also enrolled in the Alliance Française for French literature and language two years in Athens.

So I was going to the school of fine arts all day, all morning, to the French school al-afternoon, and then for the first two years my grandmother and my father helped me and I saved my fellowship money, put it aside, and then after two years I started teaching French. I taught four years of French for children at the Alliance Française, the lower class Alliance Française, and again I saved the money. So even though I was getting first prize every year in the School of Fine Arts, I was also working at the French school until I finished the school of fine arts. Then I passed the state exams for foreign studies abroad, and I won a fellowship for three years again from the government [I.K.Y.].

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And then I had to wait a year because those fellowships were given in advance, and that's why I applied and got a Fulbright.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Was your family religious?

ATHENA TACHA: My mother was very religious in a superficial way of course because she was kind of a superficial intellectual person anyway and so I went to church with her every Sunday. I hated it. I only liked the Easter Mass because we could sing and the week of Easter is a miracle in Greece because it's spring.

It's kind of full of lilacs. The fields are full of poppies, I should say. So it was a revival of nature and also we made a lamb on the spit. My father was not a cook but he could make a lamb on the spit; and so I learned it and I can make a lamb on the spit and we did it actually in Oberlin where we had a big yard several times, with Richard.

Easter is a festive time that I loved. But otherwise, I hated church and, after I became a student, of course I became agnostic.

AVIS BERMAN: And was your father religious?

ATHENA TACHA: My father was not religious at all.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean it just seem that you—

ATHENA TACHA: That religious indifference comes from there. But it isn't indifference really because I am a very —I was very interested in understanding religion. I read about Buddhism. I hate dogmas I should say and I don't believe in anthropomorphic gods. I just am a spiritual person but I don't believe in any dogmatic faith.

So I also was very good in writing throughout my high school. I was always the top in French, top grades in writing. So I considered becoming an author for a long time, during my studies in the school of fine arts and the French school. I always wondered should I become an author or an artist and ultimately the art won.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, but you did both.

ATHENA TACHA: It actually turns out that by being a conceptual artist, for which I write a lot, I have come back to it; and I read a lot about art and became an art historian for 10 years. I have written endlessly in my life. So the writing served me.

But I don't have a poet's talent at all. Also—the studies of architecture that I did in School of Fine Arts helped me, and my interest in architecture helped form my art into an outdoor sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Absolutely. I'm sure that would have been invaluable. On that first trip to Paris for a month, what did you see and what was it—

ATHENA TACHA: Well, they took us to all the art museums in Paris, the Louvre and of course the Musée Rodin also. I had never seen Rodin, never heard of Rodin. So I absorbed everything like a sponge.

AVIS BERMAN: When did you decide you were going to leave Greece?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, as soon as I could. I mean, I knew that the kind of art that I was studying in Greece was ancient Greek or Rodin's style, or my own traditional style at best. From the first year of art studies in Greece I knew I had to leave.

There was no future for me because I knew—well, having been in Paris, that summer first, and then I went twice with a little fellowship from the Alliance Française, two summer months again in Paris, spending to improve language but I went to museums endlessly.

So I knew I had to leave Greece and France was of course the place I was thinking of going and at those times I thought that contemporary art in France was the peak of it.

But I was curious about America nonetheless, and I thought that since I knew English enough, I'd apply for a Fulbright fellowship. I passed the exam and I thought the year that I had open before Paris I would come to America - and I won a fellowship from Oberlin College.

I traveled as much as I could here, to Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, all the major cities to see all the museums and I happened to have in Oberlin as a professor Ellen Johnson; and Ellen Johnson taught the first course on "Art Since 1945" in America.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, she was very—she was also very connected to New York artists.

ATHENA TACHA: Very, because she herself had wanted to be an artist and she had some talent but essentially she put her interest in art into studying contemporary art as an art historian; and so she was very interested in Pollock, all the Abstract Expressionists. She taught about art of the '60s when it was '60s.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: So '45 to '60 was her contemporary art course and we were talking about what was happening in New York. So I went with her to New York and I looked at galleries and I decided really this is happening here, not in Paris. But still, I had that fellowship.

So that's why I finished my master's in Oberlin (in one year) in art history, modern art history. I still wanted to be a sculptor. So I did my master's subject on the role of light in modern sculpture from Rodin, Brancusi, to the present and I then went to Paris and fortunately for me, by having the master's from Oberlin College in art history, they gave me an *equivalence de la License*—which meant I did not have to study four years in France before I got to start a doctorate.

They let me register immediately for a doctorate and that was a miracle of bureaucracy that happened. Yet I followed all the *License* courses nonetheless.

In Paris, I audited art history courses the whole time I was there and went to museums; the Louvre, I must have spent three weeks going to the Louvre, went to all the museums that existed in Paris, went to all the lectures that existed, at the Sorbonne, at the Collège de France, all art history lectures and even at the Musée du Louvre, I got the *certificat en muséologie* because I was passionate about studying art, and I wanted to understand art in order to become a good artist.

I became a good art historian in the process. But as soon as I got to Paris, I knew I had to come to America. I mean, from Athens I knew I wanted to go abroad to Paris. From Paris I didn't like at all that they weren't up to date, the art historians.

I mean, André Chastel, the famous art historian, who was the historian of modern art, was teaching up to abstract art and Cubism. But he started from 17th century to Cubism and I found that absurd when Ellen was teaching up to the art of the '60s.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: So I decided I had to go to America.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, just out of curiosity, you may or may not have found it, but in the early '60s, actually that's when Christo was in Paris and the *Nouveau Réalisme* and even Ileana Sonnabend had been—

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, I met Ileana. Of course, I went to her exhibitions all the time and I introduced Ellen to her, because I told her that Ellen was an authority in Pop art. Ellen came to Paris once or twice when I was there. I stayed three years in Paris because I had—oh no, two years because after the first year, I decided I have to leave Paris.

I finished my doctorate in two years instead of three and left as fast as I could because well, first of all, the professors, unlike American professors—it took me six months to get an appointment with Chastel to discuss my doctoral thesis.

Why should I stay there? I learned that even if I get the *doctorat ès lettres* for which I had registered, which is the top doctorate that requires two theses and I had registered for two doctoral thesis subjects, I would not be able to teach in a French university.

One thesis I pursued was the role of light in modern sculpture, which I had started in Oberlin. The other was *Brancusi's Birds* (monograph by Tacha, New York University Press for the College Art Association of America, 1969), that was suggested to me by Chastel.

I thought I had to study to two great sculptors of the near past. So I studied Rodin. In fact, I became a scholar of Rodin eventually, an expert in Rodin and I published a book [*Rodin Sculpture in the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 1967].

But Brancusi was the next best and so I also studied Brancusi and I decided that if I don't—if [Chastel] gives me an appointment every six months, I'll never get this done. So I finished the first thesis, the role of light, and I passed that exam, the *Doctorat de troisième* cycle.

They had initiated this new doctorate in Paris, which was for researchers mostly rather than for professors. I had discovered that even if I got the *doctorat ès lettres*, I could not teach ever in a French university—being non-French.

AVIS BERMAN: That's unbelievable.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, it was like the president of the United States. In French universities in those days, you had to be born French to be a professor.

AVIS BERMAN: That is so sterile. It's unbelievable.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right. But they were—they had a great education and they were very chauvinistic about their language and their culture.

AVIS BERMAN: They still are.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, they still are, but not as much.

AVIS BERMAN: No, but about the language.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, it's full of anglicisms now. In those days they would not allow you to use an English word. Now they are full of it, from "weekend" on—computer language of course has become so dominated by English. But in any case, after the first year in Paris, I decided I have to come to live in America to understand what contemporary art is, because you see that was my purpose.

In order to become an artist, I have to understand what are the artists doing today? That course of Ellen's opened my eyes but I wasn't going to jump from Rodin that I had studied as a sculptor, how to be a Rodin sculptor, to do contemporary art with a course about Pollock and Clyfford—

AVIS BERMAN: Clyfford Still?

ATHENA TACHA: Clyfford Still—I mean, sorry, the Abstract Expressionists. So I had still to understand for myself contemporary art. That's what brought me back to America.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me also ask you a couple of things. Up to this point, did you face any obstacles because you were a woman?

ATHENA TACHA: No, partly because I wouldn't accept them. I just tramped on them. I was a very strong person and I mean obviously I suffered being a woman versus a man but you see, in Europe also, really tough women are not trodden upon. I never felt that if I'm good, I will not go ahead. I know that the prejudice exists. But nonetheless, I think the prejudice is worse in this country because in this country there are very—when I came here—there were fewer professional woman, especially in the field of medicine, et cetera, I mean, the sciences.

AVIS BERMAN: And certainly architecture. There would be no one.

ATHENA TACHA: Right. Madame Curie became Madame Curie and so I felt the same urge at my level, that I will become what I want to become no matter what. The difficulty was, though, to find myself as an artist with that huge gap that I had from how I studied and was raised to what's happening in the present.

I was brought up with ancient Greece and Egyptian art and Rodin at the best—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: But you didn't even know about most of that when you were immediately brought up.

ATHENA TACHA: No, not in high school but I did in Athens, yes. In Athens, the School of Fine Arts was very geared to European sculpture of the earlier 20th century and to ancient sculpture. Egypt particularly was our love as students. So ancient cultures, like Sumerian and Assyrian and Egypt were our prototypes as students in Athens.

AVIS BERMAN: How did your father feel about you essentially permanently leaving?

ATHENA TACHA: My father gave me his blessings, even though it was very painful for him because they had no other children. My mother was noisily refusing. She wanted me to remain in Larissa and of course I said, "Well, even if I stay in Greece, it will be in Athens. So I'll be away from you anyway. So if I go to America, I promise you I'll come every summer for a month to see you," and I did.

All my life I've gone back for a month in Greece, every year.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you find that sustaining or did you find it a duty?

ATHENA TACHA: A duty it was but nonetheless, it is sustaining also because as I said, Greece is part of me, very deeply part of me, nature altogether, but Greece has a permeating kind of effect on me. So it was nurturing as well.

My husband of course hated Larissa. It was just a provincial town and I was talking with my relatives about things that he didn't care about. So we took my parents and Marianthe and went out to islands, to the Peloponnesus, et cetera. We traveled all over Greece the summers that we went back. So eventually after 15 years of traveling all over, we decided we should buy land and build a house.

So one of my professors in the school of fine arts, [Paul Mylonas], who had become a very dear friend because he was the youngest and the most advanced (he had studied in America and so on), he was a good architect and he designed the house, found us the land and designed a summer house for us.

So from the late '70s, yes, from '80 on, for 20 years we spent a month in Greece in our house and it was very lovely up in the hills between Athens and Cape Sounion, difficult though, very difficult. But we were young and we could do it. It actually was a very beautiful house built in red local stone.

You asked me before if I knew any artists in France, and Ileana, et cetera. Of course, I went to all the exhibitions. I wrote even little articles on Zoltán Kemény and [Étienne Hajdú] for Greek magazines, and Hajdú taught me how to carve wood and gave me a mallet because he shared my interest in sculpture. Christo I did not meet.

Ileana [Sonnabend], as I said, because I had been in America a year, we became very good friends as much as Ileana can become a friend because she's very—how should we say—not superior, but, well not an open person.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, removed.

ATHENA TACHA: Removed, Yes, so but what's his name, her husband—

AVIS BERMAN: Leo Castelli?

ATHENA TACHA: Not Leo, she had—

AVIS BERMAN: Michael Sonnabend.

ATHENA TACHA: Michael Sonnabend. I met Michael all the time and he was a bubbly person. So when Ellen came to Paris I introduced them and she wrote an introduction about a Rauschenberg show they had and about something or other, I forget. Several exhibitions, Saul, Peter Saul is the Californian?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: She wrote several articles for their catalogs or whatever. But they were so cheap that when they took Ellen and me out for dinner once, Michael pretended he didn't have any money with him. So we paid for our food. I mean, that's the kind of thing I mean, that you are very friendly, et cetera, but they are not really sincere.

So in any case, I knew everything there was possible to know as a foreigner, a non-French person in the art world of Paris at the time. Oh, the Galerie Denise [René, Paris—]

AVIS BERMAN: René.

ATHENA TACHA: René was very active and I saw a lot of the South American art at the time. [Julio le Parc] was one of the people I loved and he influenced me as a young artist when I became an artist, after I came to America, because he was working with light and you see, my thesis made me more interested in that movement of light art that emerged in the '60s and that's how I started, as a light artist actually.

You'll see it, if you click the bottom item in my website called "Earliest Works," which I did in the '60s. Well,

when I came back to America after two years in Paris and getting my doctorate there, I looked for jobs here and Queens College offered me a slide curator job. I didn't want to teach because I knew how time consuming teaching is, from having lived in Oberlin as an assistant to professors.

So I thought I should get either a museum curatorship since I had gotten a *museologie* diploma in Paris, or a slide curatorship because then I would have office hours. In the evening, I could work on my own art. At the time that I accepted the job at Queens, Oberlin offered me an assistant curatorship in their museum and I accepted because I had made friends in Oberlin and I knew how good it was. With $500 more in salary, I also refused the Queens College job because I had lived two years in Paris and I knew how hard city life is, and I knew New York well enough to know that with $5,500 a year in New York, I would be a pauper whereas in Oberlin I would be a queen and I could travel to New York every month or two and see all the shows; and with Ellen's advice about contemporary art, I would be well off—and that's what I did.

Of course, that decided my career because as I was developing my art while I was a museum curator and writing books and organizing exhibitions, because I was interested in art history too, so I never had the ins you have in New York as an artist.

In New York, museum curators come to your studio. You make connections. I was always isolated and when I started exhibiting in the '60s at the local artists' shows in Cleveland and Akron museums, et cetera, everybody loved my work but it was all local stuff.

Then in the late '60s, because of our students, I became very active in the war against Vietnam and protests, etcetera, and so the Vietnam War actually made me a public artist. When I started developing my art, I was doing art that was interactive and viewer oriented, I mean, interacting with the viewer through light and motion. In fact, I have some early works I can show you if you want.

But I thought that what good was I doing making art when the Vietnam War was raging, and aside from the soldiers, we were killing millions of citizens.

AVIS BERMAN: Civilians?

ATHENA TACHA: Civilians. So I thought what can I offer to humanity if I become an artist? Whereas if I go to Vietnam as a volunteer nurse, maybe I can offer some help to the pain of the people and I almost did it. Even though I was married, I never really discussed it with Richard, but it was a fight within me.

So in the summer of '70, I had finished a series of very successful exhibitions in the local Ohio art scene. I had even an exhibition at the [New Gallery]—Leo Castelli's daughter had opened a gallery in Cleveland.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Nina Sundell.

AVIS BERMAN: Sundell, right, and what was—

ATHENA TACHA: With Marjorie Talalay.

AVIS BERMAN: Talalay, yes.

ATHENA TACHA: And they had good shows. They offered me a one-artist show in benefit of E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology] because I had become a member of E.A.T. I was very interested in art and technology and art and science. I've always been. So I had all those successes locally but I still questioned the role of the artist in this society with wars that were raging.

So the summer of '70 when I was in Tsangarada—had come to Greece and went with my mother up on Mount Pelion in one of the beautiful villages through the mountains from which you saw the sea down below. I had a meditation period and I decided if I remain an artist, I have to put my art to the service of people, and therefore put it out in order to be seen and be part of life.

And I started designing staircases because I did not want that question of "what does it mean." I mean, that was a question that the public always asked about art and I said, "If I want to become a public artist, I want to make it look like non-art, look like architecture, look like street landscape," but to eliminate the question what does it mean. Just sit on it. Just play on it.

And so I designed this series of staircase sculptures, which decided my fate as a public artist—I think I knew already Will Insley—the two artists that I think were ahead of me in that direction, although they were not doing it as public art but architectural art, were [Insley] and Siah Armajani, his bridges. I had seen some images of his bridges. But he was conceiving them as intellectual projects rather than executed projects.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: I wanted mine to be executed and to be out of doors. So I designed 10 projects for staircases which were half-utilitarian but absurd and influenced by Minimalism and influenced even more by systemic art because they were developed in a kind of systemic way; but they were influenced also mainly by the villages—mountain villages of my area, on Mount Pelion, where we went often for excursions during my high school and primary school years.

Mount Pelion is a very beautiful mountain with a lot of wonderful villages and has a great history because the centaurs lived there. The centaurs are creatures of Mount Pelion and Achilles was from that area and his teacher was the leader of the centaurs. Because they were famous horse people, Thessaly was a horse raising region, famous horses like those of Siberia or the steppes in Asia.

So Mount Pelion is full of stepped paths and my art I think came partly from that and partly from the ideas that were being developed by at least two artists I knew, Will Insley and Armajani; but also there was architecture in my own past studies in architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: Who was the other artist besides [Armajani—]

ATHENA TACHA: Will Insley.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh right.

ATHENA TACHA: A New York artist, a very, very secretive person, a very shy person but a very important artist, a utopian. He never wanted to do public art.

Of course, I had the public strain in me not only because of the Greek precedent of art being out in the open but because of the Vietnam War. Essentially, my conscience made me a public artist, bad conscience about being an artist; so I wanted not just architectural art but I put it out in the public.

AVIS BERMAN: You wanted to do something that you felt was a contribution to society.

ATHENA TACHA: Exactly. I was a social worker. By that time I was sick of art that talks about itself and I was sick of the kind of self-feeding of contemporary art and that's one thing that led me to public art—and many things converged in 1970.

So after I self-published a book [*Ten Projects for Staircases*, 1971] and this series of sculptures was exhibited at the local artists' show in the Cleveland Museum as one work and I got the first prize. (I got it several times actually.) It was a group of nine sculptures and they are still in my studio, exactly like that, I mean my [Hyattsville studio], and they're made of homosote, the material that Maya Lin uses now.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And I made the first one of them, this one, with cement blocks, like Sol LeWitt started making lately, in 1971 for a summer festival outside of Cleveland. The Blossom Center, it's like a summer music festival. They had big grounds and they allowed artists to come and do outdoor work and I have slides of it actually. I was sending them to my retrospective people last night.

This is a double spiraling up and down staircase, which I made with cement blocks.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me just write—because I'm making this vocabulary list for the transcriber. So let me get this title right.

ATHENA TACHA: Nine projects for staircases—10 projects it was—but the tenth was not of that material and that's why it wasn't in the Cleveland May Show.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, great, Yes. So it just occurred to me that I haven't asked you—now, I've seen you can do watercolors—but why you think you were so strongly—

ATHENA TACHA: Three-dimensional?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, and gravitated towards sculpture, that you didn't think about, say, painting. I mean, you got your oil paints as a child but—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes, yes, yes, I did, and I actually was doing drawing a lot. But somehow I decided that painters, they are 10 to a dozen, whatever you call it, the saying. Sculpture, it's more difficult. Three-dimensional thinking is more difficult and that's what I was attracted to and good at, because I think three-

dimensionally.

Possibly my studies in architectural drawing and architectural history and my father's wish for me to become an architect, all of that contributed, but I really think I was born a three-dimensional person because I love materials. I love working with materials. I made everything in my early days, including Plexiglas fabrication and I work with shells. I work with all kinds of things.

I'll show you a couple of things when we finish the interview. I just felt actually when I started—well, I developed my art in the '60s, working evenings in my home (and at the museum all day long) and by '70 I had felt that I am a good artist and I can become a good artist. But in '70, I was still an art historian and publishing avidly in fact. I've published a lot and love it too.

It was very difficult, a very difficult thing to do. By '73 I had become an expert on Brancusi, Rodin and Elie Nadelman.

AVIS BERMAN: I have that article on Nadelman.

ATHENA TACHA: You do?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I cited it in an essay I wrote about him.

ATHENA TACHA: Really? Well, [Lincoln] Kirstein saw that article and he got in touch with me and he said, "Do you want to collaborate with me on the catalogue raisonné of [Elie] Nadelman," and I said—no. He didn't get in touch with me. I got in touch with him to ask about the first exhibition of Nadelman that I wanted to find out about, because he had 1909 photographs.

So we became very good friends—and he recommended me to the Whitney [Museum of American Art] to curate their retrospective of Nadelman. So the Whiney offered me $10,000 in 1973 to curate their exhibition, and my salary was $7,000 as a curator at Oberlin. You can imagine the temptation.

But by that time, I decided I can't do both. I have to be about one or the other and it was a huge plunge for me to tell the Whitney no. At that point I quit art history and fortunately there were two jobs open for sculptors at Oberlin College.

Because I wanted to make my living, my own living. I didn't want to depend on my husband's salary or anything. I always was a self-supporting person. So Richard said, "Why don't you apply for one of those art teaching jobs? Your work has developed so well, maybe you'll win it," and so I won one of the jobs, quit the museum, quit art history, told the Whitney, no, and changed careers totally.

By that time (that was in the fall of '73), I had taught a course in Oberlin on top of my museum work called "Form in Nature" and it was an interdisciplinary course with—I wanted the professors of six sciences to collaborate with me, geology, physics, chemistry, mathematics, astronomy and biology, and they couldn't but they offered me their best seniors to be my assistants.

So I had six students, assistants in the various sciences, and I taught the course, the interdisciplinary course, and I had like 15 students. It was miserable because there was nothing written about that subject at the time. I had no textbook. I had nothing but science articles in books from here and there to talk about form in nature; Thompson, D'Arcy Thompson, of course.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, I have it here, he was one of the early and important people who saw form in nature. But it was very difficult for the Oberlin students to read D'Arcy Thompson as a textbook. So it was a failure, although some students still write to me who took the course and say it opened their eyes, including one here in Washington who is a friend of our new neighbors.

But in any case, I had no teaching experience at all. I started teaching sculpture from zero and I offered seven courses a year, three one semester and four the other semester. I mean, it was a killing load. Then a January course because they started a January term at Oberlin.

So for January '74 I had proposed to take a bunch of students to New York galleries to teach them about how to look at art in New York. So, four weekends we did that and the rest of the time I assigned readings about contemporary art. Meanwhile, György Kepes, who was at the time directing the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, had seen this little booklet [*Ten Projects for Staircases*] and admired it so much.

I don't know how, if I sent it to him because I admired him too or what, but he invited me to be a fellow at MIT in 1974 at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. I don't think they were giving much money, but they were

giving free housing. I forget what the benefits were but I couldn't, because I had just accepted the professorship. So I said, "I can't come for the year but can I come just for January," and he said, "Okay, come just for January."

So he gave me a little studio (eight by sixteen feet?), for the month of January—weekends I had to meet my students in New York and four weeks I worked there, and I said, "What can I do in four weeks?," and he said, "Well, propose something for the Charles River, the banks of the Charles River since you are doing outdoor things."

So the first week I walked throughout seven miles of the Charles River on both sides.

AVIS BERMAN: In January.

ATHENA TACHA: Exactly. It was the worst winter in January in Boston for 14 years, I was told, terrible. I died from cold and that was the thing. I saw that there was not a coffee house to get a warm drink anyplace along the Charles River.

So I decided to design a proposal for the *Charles River* [*Step Sculpture*]—my first really original work, which was executed in three weeks, actually two, because one week I went to the town halls, to Cambridge and Boston, to get plans of the banks of both sides to decide what I could do.

Ultimately I chose a site across from Boston University between the Boston University Bridge—is it called Boston University Bridge?— and the boathouse of Boston University. And I designed in two weeks, designed and executed on the band-saw, the Charles River project, which was the first time I felt inspiration.

It was like somebody was flowing through me and drawing that thing and then whatever I drew at night, I cut throughout the day on the band saw. So I made the sculpture in two weeks, and when Kepes saw it—

I don't know if you have seen it—this is the model I did. It's 15 feet long. I have it in my studio, my [Hyattsville studio], and this is the plan of the site, because as I said, I got real plans from the city hall. But it is very visible. It is now cast in aluminum—and I asked Kepes, "Is it ever going to be possible that I can propose it for being built?"

He said, "No, it's just a utopian idea," but he said, "You must have been obsessed to do this," and he had their photographer make wonderful photographs of it. And the balcony was supposed to be a coffeehouse.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, this was the grounds.

ATHENA TACHA: So you could have some place to get a hot drink and it was supposed to give you access to the water. The other thing that killed me is how inhuman American riverfronts were. Just cars, cars, cars or dumps on the river sides.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, they never saw the beauty of it. It was just something to transport and throw things in.

ATHENA TACHA: Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: Same with Pittsburgh.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, and that's why I decided that I have to propose something that is beautiful and it's actually based on the nature of water, the fluidity of water because it is the only element that exists in all three states of matter, in all temperatures.

So the rectilinear half is the solid part of water, ice, because the river was freezing actually, and the curvilinear half is the fluid, clouds and water. I kind of broke new ground because it follows a musical composition rather than a gestalt—Minimalism at the time was dominating, and Bob Morris actually became a very good friend of mine because he had written his thesis on Brancusi (my specialty as an art historian).

AVIS BERMAN: Oh. I didn't know that.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, master's thesis at Hunter College and he sent it to me to ask my opinion of it because I was a Brancusi scholar and that's how we met. But you know, the kind of symmetrical rectilinear forms, like putting blinders to sculpture?

AVIS BERMAN: Right, serial repetition.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, and that I wanted absolutely to get out of, so fluidity was the catalyst for me that allowed me to move out of the minimal idiom.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, let me, again, backtrack, because there are still some gaps to fill in. That first year when you went to Oberlin, the one-year period, Ellen Johnson obviously was dominant in your life. Were there any other professors or other experiences that were helpful to you then?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, not really, because I was working so hard and in the vacations I was always going to other cities to see museums and I became dedicated to contemporary art because that's what I wanted to understand in order to become an artist. The other professors, they were all good professors, some famous professors actually, Wolfgang Stechow, who was a German who had fled Germany and made a career in Oberlin. Everybody liked me and gave me top grades.

But the thing is that I was so interested in contemporary art actually the first semester, I didn't take anything in modern because I had supposedly taken modern art history at the school in Athens; but I audited Ellen's courses since I was slide room assistant. They had appointed me as a slide helper in her lectures, to load her slides and take them out.

So I met her that way and I got so bound to her courses that the second semester, I took all of them. So she was the major experience, and also I made a great friend. Well, of course, there were two other graduate students of art history. We were good friends. I spent Christmas at the house of one of them. But the curator of the museum was a former Oberlin student, former student of Ellen's. They were very close friends. She became my second friend, Chloe Hamilton Young. I became her assistant when I went back to Oberlin.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, okay now meanwhile, what about the culture—I mean, when you say America, you obviously know how big the country is. So everywhere is so different. You had been in Paris and you'd been in Greece islands. Now you're in this landlocked, cold place—

ATHENA TACHA: No, I wasn't in any islands until after I came to America.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I had gone to Hydra, which is very close to Athens, when I was a student, but none of the Aegean islands, the major islands, I mean farther out.

AVIS BERMAN: I just wondered about adjusting to the Midwest or Oberlin.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I had gone a month to Bennington College upon arrival as a Fulbright student, which I loved, and it introduced me, again a comparable college, like Oberlin, it introduced me to American libraries.

I couldn't believe it, the amount of books and that I had the freedom to go and select them and stay all night there. I mean, it was unbelievable to me. That's what America meant, freedom to study anything you wanted and access to the material.

When I went to Paris, the libraries were so hard to get to, that you had to fill in cards, wait two hours to get the books from the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. It was not everywhere. I mean, the library at the *Institut d'art et d'archéologie* was more accessible because I was a student there. Actually I got a doctorate in aesthetics, yet that was a real gaffe—that I thought aesthetics would make me understand what art is about, to become faster an artist and understand contemporary art.

After a year of studying aesthetics in Athens, because I got also a *propédeutique*, which is the first year before French university, so that I could go immediately to the *Licence*. It's a year course. So I took those courses while I was in Athens as a student and I read a lot of aesthetics because I thought that's what I would study when I came to Paris.

And then by that time, when I came to Paris, I realized that aesthetics was for the birds—especially after studying art history in Oberlin, because you can't be a good aesthetician without being an art historian. And I feel you can't be a good art historian without being an artist, because it all starts there. I mean, they think they can, but they don't really know it.

So that's why I abandoned aesthetics, even though my doctorate was signed by an aesthetician, Souriau, a very famous aesthetician, Etienne Souriau. André Chastel and Etienne were my two directors for my two theses, Chastel for the *Brancusi birds* and Souriau for *the role of light in modern sculpture*.

So I had very good famous teachers in Paris but studies were backwards and especially the access to research material, so Bennington College opened my eyes to libraries and the friendliness of professors. I did very well there that month too.

But Oberlin was even better because I was an assistant to the professors and I had a key to the library. I could stay until 5:00a.m. in the library. I mean, it was a miracle, and nobody in Oberlin locked their doors because

everybody was so honest that they wouldn't—to me, coming from Greece and from France, it was unheard of. That's why I came back.

AVIS BERMAN: So, in other words, probably you would have gone almost anywhere in America.

ATHENA TACHA: Anywhere in America, except New York City. When I quit the Queens job for Oberlin, it was because after two years in a city I had gotten tired of the waste of time in transportation and the toughness of life. So I thought, well, I don't I want really to live in New York and why don't I go to a friendlier easier life and be able to go to New York anytime I want.

I know New York very well, or Manhattan anyway and Queens. I lived in Manhattan a year and I had a P.S. 1 studio for a year in '81, '80-'81 or '81-'82, after I had exhibited at Zabriskie [Gallery], in New York, the first show.

So I love New York. I just love New York and every time I go, I get charged—

AVIS BERMAN: No, no, I'm not tired. I still have some questions. Speaking of which, I think what we have to now address because he certainly is an important figure, is when and how did you meet your husband, Richard Spear?

ATHENA TACHA: He came to Oberlin the year after I returned. I accepted the job at the museum in the fall of '63 was it, yes, fall of '63, and he came the following, '64. And in a year living in Oberlin as a single woman, I realized that this was very tough because there were very few young professors who were unmarried.

The town being 10,000 people with the students, a fourth of which are the students, there was hardly anybody to date, even though all my friends introduced me to all the young people in sight and I dated somebody for a little while. When Wolf Stechow retired in '74, they were looking for a young professor to replace him, Richard was one of the candidates.

AVIS BERMAN: Not '74. It must have been '64.

ATHENA TACHA: '64, excuse me.

AVIS BERMAN: That's okay.

ATHENA TACHA: They interviewed him at College Art meetings and they had him for dinner because he was one of the top candidates and they sat me next to him because they were trying to get me married so that I would stay.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, wasn't that sweet.

ATHENA TACHA: They offered him the job and he came in the fall of '64. There were two young women in the art department that were comely, me and the slide curator, who was a very pretty girl. So he kind of looked at both of us, the poor sweetie, and opted for me, after a month or two, and so we dated for a year.

We got engaged at the end of the year and then married the next fall. So that's how we met.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you have children?

ATHENA TACHA: No, we actually decided early in our—well, I was 29 by the time we got married. He's almost four years younger and we discussed it. I said, "Do you want children?" He said, "I don't care particularly," and I said, "I don't care either," because I had spent 10 years of my life doing art history.

So I knew that I was behind, and I was a single child and I said I would never have a single child. If I have children, I would want to have two. So that meant—

AVIS BERMAN: No more career.

ATHENA TACHA: Minimum of three years per child to get them started, exactly, and so I said, "I don't want children either." So he said, "Fine with me," thank god.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, he also seems to be—

ATHENA TACHA: Actually, wait, I had one unwanted pregnancy, but at the time, I couldn't easily get an abortion. It was before abortions were legal.

AVIS BERMAN: Before '73.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right, before, yes, and so we decided to keep it and then two months later got very excited

about it. You know, the body, the chemistry changes. But I wasn't hardly two-and-a-half months pregnant and I lost it.

I mean, I started bleeding and I was heartbroken, but in four months it all passed away. Then I had an unwanted pregnancy much later, when I was in my 40s, 45 and so we decided we don't want it and I had a legal abortion.

Also it was actually that the doctor thought when they scraped me that my uterus looked as if it had fibrosis. It was enlarged. So they weren't sure—they weren't afraid that it was malignant really but they removed my uterus.

AVIS BERMAN: Fibroids also cause all that bleeding.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, so I had my uterus removed in '79, I guess, the year Richard's mother died. I couldn't go to her funeral. I was in hospital.

AVIS BERMAN: In those days, the way they did hysterectomies, they didn't have laparoscopes so they made an incision.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, I have a cut that big.

AVIS BERMAN: It was much more—it's still debilitating, but it was much more then.

ATHENA TACHA: But I never regretted it, nor Richard. Neither of us have regretted it. Everybody thought that we would regret it as we get older. It's possible that when I get really old, I'll regret it.

But I didn't want to bring children in this world. It's too difficult, too dangerous, becoming impossible, too many people. The population explosion is the fault of everything, all the degradation of the Earth.

So I didn't want to add people to the Earth, frankly, and also children are—I didn't want to be responsible for another person, to create them. I felt that I would make them a work of art and that wouldn't be fair to them. I would describe them like I do with all my booklets, I describe myself as an observation object. Well, I would use them too and that wouldn't be fair to them and god knows what psychological effect it would have on them.

So it's very—a problem, the responsibility is enormous. Do you have children?

AVIS BERMAN: No, but I know that just from occasionally taking care of my nephews and niece, all you do is worry. It's very difficult.

ATHENA TACHA: It's very difficult. Also, I was responsible for my parents when they were old, so that if Marianthe wasn't there, I wouldn't have been able to leave them and that's why I owe her my career.

I mean, there is a lot she has done for me by staying with my parents until their death and that way I could become an artist. I could be free to become an artist. When I was making my commission in Fort Worth, Florida, my mother was dying and because I knew Marianthe was there taking care of her, I could stay and supervise the work. So that's why I called it *Marianthe* because it is dedicated to her. So that's my life story.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, well it seems to me though that Richard, before his time, seemed to be a very evolved male because he didn't—

ATHENA TACHA: I made him that.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, so because I was going to ask you he had no issues about—

ATHENA TACHA: Oh yes, we did, because just before we went for our marriage license, I said, "Richard, we better sit down and discuss duties, household duties, because I can't get married and not know what we are getting into." So I proposed that three days of the week I'll cook and you'll do the dishes, the other three the opposite.

Either you want it every other day or however you divide. He said, "Oh, no, you cook, too." He wasn't very willing, but he agreed it was fair. He didn't especially like it. But he's a better cook. So ultimately he does most of the cooking and I do all the dishes and ultimately by year 1970 when the feminist movement came, he felt on top of the rest of the males because he was already advanced.

AVIS BERMAN: His consciousness was raised but also you were going to have a separate career as an artist, an art historian.

ATHENA TACHA: That was very difficult on him because I was working all the time and I was finishing two art

history books while I was trying to be an artist. So that really was very hard on him, that I gave him so little time of my life, and it still is so. But it made him also a good art historian because—

AVIS BERMAN: He had to work too.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, and he is tops.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, but somehow it got accommodated or he stayed—you stayed together.

ATHENA TACHA: We had difficulties, yes, and it was a struggle. It is still a struggle for both of us, but we managed.

AVIS BERMAN: Because it's so unusual. That's why I'm questioning you—most people fail.

ATHENA TACHA: It is. Well, we survived it and that is a wonderfully rewarding achievement.

AVIS BERMAN: And also as an artist you were using your own name.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that I had from the beginning because, you see, I used my married name as an art historian and therefore I did not want to exploit my connections as an art historian; I knew all the great dealers, Castelli and Sonnabend in New York. I knew a lot of artists, Dorothea Rockburne and Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner.

We were friends and aside from Morris who approached me first as an art historian. I mean, we got to be friends, too, and exchanged works afterwards. He gave me a work of his, I gave him a work of mine. So we were very good friends.

But I didn't want to use my connections as a curator to get galleries in New York myself. I never sent my works to Paula Cooper, Sonnabend, Castelli, none of the dealers whom I knew as friends, because I wanted to be totally independent, making it as an artist, not through connections and friendships.

So I approached dealers, let's say on the second level, like Zabriskie and OK Harris and people who were not as avant garde dealers, and I got galleries on the first try. I mean, when I showed works to them.

AVIS BERMAN: Speaking of Brancusi, did you become friendly with Sidney Geist?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, and that was a real problem. First of all, because he was a sculptor, we got along very well and whenever I went to New York, I saw him; and then whenever I went to measure *Brancusi*'s *Birds*, like to the Burden Collection [Mr. and Mrs. William A. M. Burden], etcetera, he begged me to come along and he came along. So I introduced him to scholarship of Brancusi, how to do the scholarship and that was the first year, before I had met Richard.

And then at Christmas of that year, he appeared in Oberlin, and he said, "I came to see you," and I said, "Well, good," and went to the hotel to get him a room and he brought me a little Chupicuaro figure as a Christmas present. I invited him to the Christmas party I was going to, etcetera.

But he took for granted that we were going to be mates and when I had made it clear that no, and the next year I had met Richard and we got engaged and announced that I got engaged, he really was furious, furious.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, he had a thing for you.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, yes, yes, indeed and so we stopped relationships and then he got so mad that he wrote a Brancusi book himself [*Brancusi: A Study in Sculpture*. New York: Grossman, 1967] without any reference to me or help from me and he decided to publish all the birds ahead of me. I had finished my book in '65 and I had submitted it to the College Art Association monograph series, because it was a very narrow type of subject and they accepted it.

But they took four years to publish it, because the editor changed. It was Lowzy, the guy who was involved in the Florence floods in 1966—I forget his name now—and therefore neglected all his editor duties.

Then the new editor came, was very conscientious, but had to change all the rules of editorship. So I had to not only update the goddamn material which I didn't want any more to work on, but to change all the editorial rules and retype the whole catalogue raisonné, which was a real tragedy. It finally got published in '69. Meanwhile, Sidney Geist had published his book in '67.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, or '68, even though he revised it a couple of times later on.

ATHENA TACHA: Right and he published all—most of the material that I had collected. Oh, I know what. He

wanted me to give him all of my material for his book.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

ATHENA TACHA: I said, "Of course not, Sidney. My book is taking four years to be published. I collected that material over several years and I can't give you all the material." I gave him the entire list of the birds, but I had sorted it out with a terrible amount of research.

A year in Paris, I went all over Europe doing research at all the libraries and then a year in America when I came back. So I had really done exhaustive research, went to Steichen and he climbed up and measured his Bird for me and he gave me several photos. I should show you them.

AVIS BERMAN: I saw them.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, he gave me several photographs of his birds and in those days they had no value and friends of Brancusi from Paris gave me two more, one of which turned out to be a Man Ray photograph. I didn't know it was Mme. Poiret, and I kept it; finally I told Mr. Steichen, "I can't keep all of your photographs," but he said, "Keep what you publish for the book." So I kept two photographs and returned the rest to him.

AVIS BERMAN: How generous.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, in those days, it was—I just felt that he was a famous photographer. He didn't need to give me more than what I would publish.

AVIS BERMAN: We were talking about Brancusi and your work.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, well that—and Steichen.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, and did you go to Romania too?

ATHENA TACHA: I went to Romania after my book was published in Romanian [*Brancusi's Birds—Păsările lui Brâncuşi*] because it was—it made such an impression on Romanian people that a woman who actually still is a friend of mine, a Romanian literary person [Ana Olos], wanted to translate it, she got in touch with a good publisher there, Meridiane, and translated it, and that took another four years; I had to revise and meanwhile Sidney's book had come out.

So I had to revise a lot of—I mean, update a lot of stuff and so I didn't get rid of art history that quickly, as I was saying. I mean, that was published in '76, I think, and so three years after I had quit art history they invited me that year to an international conference on Brancusi in Bucharest [Brancusi in the Art of the 20th Century] and having quit art history, I gave a paper on the importance of Brancusi for contemporary sculpture, sculptors. So it was really about contemporary work influenced by Brancusi. So that's the story of—

AVIS BERMAN: Of Sidney—but yes, so typical, of course just hand over all you material to me. So now, let's get into the art you were making in the early '70s, which was kind of conceptual and you were photographing yourself.

ATHENA TACHA: That's a second part of my work because, meanwhile, conceptual art had been born and it impressed me enormously.

AVIS BERMAN: Because?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, because the idea, I was always interested in dematerialization of art and because of the light that I was working with, light in sculpture and light sculpture and this was a step beyond. I mean, taking away everything and becoming language and I was always interested in language meanwhile.

So I decided that my last act as a curator with the museum was to do a conceptual art show, "Art in the Mind" [1970], which was all in the mind. It did not exist as a show. It was just the described works that the artists—I invited about 70-some artists and everybody sent me several pages and that became the catalogue. I mimeographed the whole thing. It was a labor of love because it wasn't supported by my museum. I did it on top of my museum work.

So that started me in doing conceptual art—using the body as a tool, and also because going out in public art and doing architectural work, I was missing the personal aspect of art. So I decided to use my body to do a different kind of art.

So I'm known as a conceptual artist to people who don't know at all that I'm a public artist and vice versa and that retrospective exhibition in Thessaloniki is going to be—I didn't devise the title—*From Public to Private* and it

will present all sides of my art.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me just pause this. We were talking about your personal work at the time and it seems to me that the conceptual art you were doing had at least a feminist tinge or was inflected—

ATHENA TACHA: That was the other influence, the feminist. I was very involved with feminism. I said the Vietnam War in the '60s and then the feminist movement immediately after made me a very body—

AVIS BERMAN: Body-centered maybe? I don't know.

ATHENA TACHA: Body-centered, but the thing is that my sculptures are also body-centered because they take the body as a measure.

I mean, the fact that I studied the body as a student ultimately, even though it delayed me so much in my career and the finding myself as a contemporary artist, it imbued my work with the measure of the body in the steps, my studies of steps and how the body reacts. It's totally kinesthetic art. I mean, the body responds to it. Otherwise, it isn't art. I mean, my sculpture isn't just visual. It's physical as well.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you have to move through it.

ATHENA TACHA: Exactly. Experience the form through the body and not just through the eye and so the body is always there. But conceptual art allowed me to enter the mind as well in terms of consciousness, the human consciousness although I always have been interested in philosophy and all of those things: psychology and understanding the mind and what we are and our place in the universe.

So most of the inspiration for the outdoors work comes from nature, but at the same time I want to place myself in the world and the conceptual art goes inwards to the mind and the self, as well as to the physical body which we are.

They are the two poles of my work and they look opposite, but they are not opposite really.

AVIS BERMAN: You need to get away sometimes from these projects in which there are so many other people impinging and sometimes go back to the studio.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, that's another thing, that I do need to work with my hands and in the outdoor pieces, I'm not my hands. The masons are my hands. At the same time I need to work privately with my mind and not in the public domain and that's why that curator of Thessaloniki who is a very perceptive and very good curator [Syrago Tsiara], thought of that, that she should bring together those opposite parts of my work as well as the in-betweens, which are the body sculptures that I do. I don't know if you know any of those sculptures that I work with—

AVIS BERMAN: Feathers and bones, right, and kind of chastity belts—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, they were shownat Franklin Furnace and I was going to do it as a performance actually, well, I'll give you a copy of that show catalog if you don't have one [*Vulnerability: New Fashions*] because actually I consider it a conceptual work of mine: it is a critique of fashion from a feminist point of view and it was generated, that group of works, from the death of my three best friends from cancer.

But two died the same year, Ellen Johnson, and Maro [Petychaki], my best Greek friend of my age. I dedicated actually this one to Ellen and this one to Maro, which is the first.

Unfortunately, they are very delicate and I couldn't ship them. I only am shipping one *Shield* and the *Rape Belts* to Greece. The *Rape Belts*, there are four of them now, move from the personal to the public again because I did one of a *Homeless Cape* and an *Armor for Battered Woman*, etcetera. From personal memorials, they went into social causes and feminist concerns.

But the texts are interspersed quotations from fashion history books and descriptions of what the works mean in terms of—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I saw that. I don't have it, but I saw it. The Whitney had it and I saw it in the library there.

ATHENA TACHA: Okay, you don't want it?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh I would take it. I just did see that before.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, you don't need to carry a box.

AVIS BERMAN: That's okay. It's light. But at the time, in the early '70s, what do you think most—what were the main elements that you took away from the women's movement as it hatched in the United States?

ATHENA TACHA: Actually, I can't say, that's why I'm not a feminist artist. I never am included in feminist shows, partly because I work in an abstract public way and partly—well, I was included in a *Conceptual Art* show of women artists at the Women's later Art Center in New York in'73, which were 10, all brilliant artists. I don't know if you ever saw that.

AVIS BERMAN: No, I was too young.

ATHENA TACHA: I think it's '73 but everybody who is a good artist was there, I mean, women, Alice Aycock, [Laurie Anderson, Jennifer Bartlett, Nancy Holt, et cetera]—I mean one after another and it's amazing because I looked at it the other day—the woman who is writing my biography for the retrospective started with that—that biography is in my website too.

But I found the—I have these clipping-books that are invaluable—I didn't know how invaluable they are because for instance they have only announcements of exhibitions, which are not saved by anybody now and I found that announcement of the women's conceptual art center in New York that listed the artists in the show and I was amazed. *Are we here?* It's '69, further on.

Well, this is also my E.A.T. announcement that I just saw here, which I did in the Cleveland New Gallery. Well, I'll find it for you for tomorrow. I can't find it now. But it's an interesting list of artists. I can't say that I was influenced by anybody because the women who became most famous in the movement like Mimi Schapiro and Judy—

AVIS BERMAN: Chicago.

ATHENA TACHA: Chicago, were doing totally different kind of art from me and Pat Lasch and some other people I felt closer to. But Agnes Denes is the only person that I became friends with because she has a scientific mind.

But she's not that kind of feminist artist either. She's an intellectual artist and an environmental artist. We are very much connected in how her mind works—a Leonardo-esque type of mind. She's interested in everything in the universe and in science, etcetera, and I have a great admiration for Agnes.

I'm grateful to her also because she emptied her studio or part of her New York studio for me to bring works to show to get galleries, and that's how I got Zabriskie Gallery. For a week, she did that and that was awfully nice of her. But I had invited her to give her first lecture outside of New York area in Oberlin a couple of years before and that's how we got to know each other actually. We liked each other.

We rarely see each other now because we are both so busy. But in any case—

AVIS BERMAN: I didn't mean just some of the artists, but I just wondered if some of the ideas of the Kate Millet or the Gloria Steinem or—

ATHENA TACHA: I loved all of the ideas. I was totally in favor of them and I invited Kate Millet to give a talk in Oberlin and I formed a little group of Oberlin women who met talking about each other's life, et cetera.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: But I never got extremely involved with the movement. Although I'm all in support of it. In fact, I was very—one of the founding members of the Womens' Caucus for CAA and I presented to Louise Nevelson, whatever they give every year, they give a—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, there's an award.

ATHENA TACHA: Award, right, and I wrote a compendium of women's courses, art courses on women artists that started emerging all over the country in the early '70s, which got—I self-published it and then got a second edition and there was demand for it at the time because there wasn't enough such information. But then it was superseded by so many other famous publications. So I was really active at the time but I can't say that my art got influenced by it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, except that it was made—

ATHENA TACHA: I certainly supported all of those ideas and still do all along.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, you lived it.

ATHENA TACHA: Mm-hmm.

AVIS BERMAN: So the one other thing I wanted to—

ATHENA TACHA: The tape is at the end of it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Just off tape, you had mentioned—you started to say that Richard Serra was a great artist, so why don't we discuss that since that was on your mind.

ATHENA TACHA: I mentioned him because of the GSA and I think that the disaster—

AVIS BERMAN: *Tilted Arc.*

ATHENA TACHA: That he caused with the *Tilted Arc*—the damage he did to public art altogether was incredible. But I think he's a great artist, a great sculptor, perhaps the greatest living sculptor, but not a public artist, because he doesn't care about the public. He doesn't have the spirit to reconcile his art with the public and if you put yourself, put your work out, you have got that duty, I think.

So he placed that unfriendly kind of work, magnificent work, in front of the building without ever explaining it, didn't bother to explain it to anybody and obviously it was rejected by the public, by the people who lived in the building and he blocked their way. I think much as it was a very intelligent work, I don't think it was a good work for that site because it did block the view. I mean, it was unfriendly. So that's all I wanted to say about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think though that maybe the GSA officials had an obligation to help explain it too because they selected it?

ATHENA TACHA: That's right and I think that communicating with the public is the most difficult thing about public art. Another is scale, the problem of scale, to make something that looks the right size for the space out there and sometimes the space doesn't yet exist, like the development here in Bethesda didn't exist Wisconsin Place, at Friendship Heights.

There was a totally different building on the site that they tore down and opened up holes and created a totally different space. I had to figure out what to do with it on paper only, and if I didn't have an experience of 40 years with studying public spaces … being in Rome with Richard [Spear] three years helped me a great deal because Rome is a great city for public spaces.

I gradually learned to deal with scale. The first commission I had, which was in Cleveland, a 10-foot high arcade, I was so scared to death how it would look in that size that I had one leg of the arcade made, a double arcade, in plywood, paid for plywood to make it the real size, and carried it with my students and placed it there to have a look and see if it would look good.

Well, it was frightening, really a frightening thing to do and since then, every time I do a big public piece, it's the same. I didn't know if the obelisk would look right at Friendship Heights and it's 25 feet. Well, 25 feet but such a big space and how will it look with the arcade next to it and the arcade of course I didn't imagine with those huge metal arms—they thickened the metal because of the winds.

Engineers ruined the looks of it in the daytime. It looks clunky with those thick pipes. It was simply light, strings of light on metal cable, and at night it looks like that. But the thing is that scale is scary every time, and that's the most difficult thing for a sculptor, a public sculptor to master.

The other is the public, as I said the relationship to the public, and one of the people who is wonderful in that, or was when he did public art, is Lucy's [Lippard] former lover, the one who made the very little clay landscapes, Simmons.

AVIS BERMAN: Charles Simmons.

ATHENA TACHA: Charles Simmons was a really wonderful person to work with communities and people. Some people, some artists go too far with it and they dilute the work and the work doesn't—once you leave it all up to the public, it just doesn't exist anymore; and Serra is the opposite, exactly. I mean, he is very centered on himself and disregards the public. I am kind of in between.

AVIS BERMAN: As a public artist, what was the fallout from *Tilted Arc*? How did it influence you and other artists working in the field?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, not me or the artists, the public's opinions about public art and it made people think that the public has the right to decide everything and that is not good for public art. Look at what happened to the memorial for the New York towers. I mean, it's diluted.

If you let everybody be a committee, it doesn't exist. Public art doesn't exist. The public artist has the duty to explain the work and take some advice from the people, but not let them make the work. That's my opinion.

AVIS BERMAN: So it shouldn't be done by referendum.

ATHENA TACHA: Exactly. I mean, that's not public art at all. It doesn't do justice to public art and [Richard] Serra's attitude that caused that, whatever, controversy, allowed them to do that. That's why I mean that he really ruined public art in a way. I had one controversy. I try to be totally non-controversial. Like I know every artist thrives on controversies because that's how they get famous and they get publicity and publicity is the thing. But I try to avoid controversy.

One work I did in Arizona, a series of curving arcades, caused a controversy. Tucson, Arizona, was the most backwards place you could work in and when they saw the model for it… I made actually two proposals. I have often made two proposals.

The first failed and the second was made. But models were exhibited in the university library for public view and opinions, and they rejected totally the first one so I proposed a totally different work and they didn't like that either. There were many vocal people in the newspapers and one, the most vocal, was making the greatest fun of me, I was an unknown artist that they had selected.

They were making caricatures of my work like Lipschitz, deformed Lipschitz, etcetera, and there was practically a student revolt, et cetera—what happened in the local press was incredible. I mean, as much controversy as the *Tilted Arc* on a smaller scale. Upon arrival with my crew we weren't sure if we would be allowed to install it because people were stopping and spitting and making a fuss.

So I said, "Well, why don't I try to explain to the public what it is," and so they offered me an hour interview on the public television and I gave a very friendly talk and tried to explain what it was about, and to say that the person who so vocally writes against it doesn't really know my work and he should come and talk with me. He's like being in Mars, an inhabitant of Mars trying to talk about something here.

So then while we were building it, a few people stopped very irate, and I talked to them and after I talked to them, they calmed down, and so the work got built and now they love it. In my opinion, explaining is the best thing to do. It doesn't always work, I must say, but most of the times it works.

AVIS BERMAN: I think this is a good time to quit for today.

ATHENA TACHA: Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: Thank you very much.

ATHENA TACHA: We talked about everything in the world.

[End disc one.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Athena Tacha for the Archives of American Art, GSA oral history project, on December 5, 2009, in her studio in Washington, D.C.

Before I start asking my questions, if you happened to review in your head what we said yesterday, was there anything else that came to mind or something that you had wanted to say or elaborate on from anything we discussed yesterday?

ATHENA TACHA: Not really.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ATHENA TACHA: I think we were so thorough, more thorough than I had expected, so…

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, I'm just checking. Well, we left off in the early 1970s and one thing we did not get into too much was this switching over of your beginning to teach sculpture, and what you were teaching and how that, if at all, pervaded your work. So why don't you just—your discussion as a teacher of studio sculpture, of what the courses were and the rationale.

ATHENA TACHA: I love teaching and the students and interacting with the students, of course, and I would say, though, that instead of helping me, it hampered me, because teaching is giving yourself a lot; and in teaching studio, you have to get to know individually every student every semester in order to help them develop their personality and their attitude towards making art.

So I had to memorize names and faces of about 50 students every semester for 20-some years, which was very tiring and also change my language with every generation of students, because young people change a lot and the language changes a lot, and I started to teach in a period when social changes were tremendous, later with computers and the Internet and everything.

The other tiring thing, aside from the giving so much to teaching, was that I was—I had a very heavy schedule, as I mentioned. I was teaching three or four courses per semester, which meant like nine to 12 contact hours a week. That left me very little time for my work and traveling, and living with somebody, as we mentioned.

The other thing that was hard is that I was also supervisor of the wood shop, the carpentry shop, the first years of my teaching, which was a lot of extra work and I am very meticulous, as you may notice. I am very anal. So I was cleaning the studios and the woodshop at the beginning of class, and at the end of class because the janitors of course weren't doing good enough work for me.

I was ordering materials for sculpture. I was salvaging materials for sculpture because I'm very great on recycling things and that took an awful lot of time and tiredness and I also moreover got an allergy from the woodshop's dust and mold because the woodshop initially was in our Buckminster Fuller Dome, which leaked and had gotten all moldy.

So for several years in my mid-40s I suffered from a respiratory allergy as a result. So I can't say that I got anything out of the students for my work at all except that, as I said, I gave constantly.

I created from the very beginning a course on environmental sculpture and taught the students how to work out of doors, how to understand materials and processes, techniques for outdoor sculpture and also how to deal with the environment, with the social environment, the physical environment.

I mean, everything about what I had learned as a beginner public sculptor, how to make public art and that was in the '70s. Nobody was teaching anything like that at the time.

So I continued that course all the way to the end of my career except I changed—I shifted the attitude. I called it sculpture and the environment. I called it sculpture and politics, because as I became more involved with social political events and the students too, I evolved the course and we did guerilla art and all kinds of things.

So that was very interesting and the students loved it too. So I think I—well, Mikyoung Kim came out of that.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: She is the only sculptor, I mean, student of mine who became an environmental public sculptor. Jack Risley, who became also a very good sculptor in New York, was my assistant in the '70s, but does very different work, not for out of doors.

Jeanne Dunning, who is a Chicago-based artist showing at Feigen's in New York [Richard L.] Feigen & Co. actually did clay work—her first work is in my garden. You will see it when we eat lunch. But she also became an important sculptor who turned into photography, a body sculptor.

So at least three good sculptors came out of my studio and some good architects also and some good computer animators. So I have had a progeny of students with whom I still am in touch, a lot of them that made my teaching worthwhile.

AVIS BERMAN: I'll ask you about Mikyoung because of course she started as a—

ATHENA TACHA: As a pianist.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: When she came, took my first course, introductory sculpture, she was still a conservatory major and thinking of becoming a solo pianist, because she was very talented in that and her brother actually in violin. I met their family because I did a work in Hartford, Connecticut, and her father helped me find a contractor there for both of my works.

So then she took my environmental sculpture and then she took my advanced projects. So she took several courses with me and the more she took, she decided to quit music and become an artist. But because her father, like mine, wanted her to be practical, she went into—and I advised her too—landscape architecture because that's very close to what I'm doing and she was planning to do.

She went to Harvard at the landscape architecture school and graduated from there, but at the same time because she wanted to pursue sculpture, she was taking at MIT classes for sculpture.

She became ultimately the kind of artist what I am and we actually competed once in a work in Ohio and she won it. So I have had a very loving relationship with her, except that the busier she became, the more we lost each other.

AVIS BERMAN: That happens to everybody and she's got children too.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes, she has a family as well as—which thank god, I didn't have to have. So that's my interaction about teaching, which—

AVIS BERMAN: Was her ability as an artist manifest in your class?

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, yes, definitely. She was one of my best students, but I had other students that were equally wonderful earlier or later and actually one of them became a successful filmmaker in San Francisco [Lidia Szajko].

So I have had a number of favorite students that also became architects [Jonathan Kirschenfeld, NY and Bob Weisbord, Philadelphia], computer animators [Donald Newlands, Portland, et cetera]. So I've had some very bright students.

AVIS BERMAN: And is it mostly undergraduate or graduate that you teach?

ATHENA TACHA: Undergraduate, all of it undergraduate.

AVIS BERMAN: And the courses that you taught, you taught an environmental sculpture course?

ATHENA TACHA: Not just environmental sculpture by any means! I taught three classes every semester:

Always an introductory sculpture class (which I modified some over the years); an advanced projects "seminar," in collaboration with one or more of the studio faculty; and always an intermediate sculpture, which changed every semester: I actually alternated four different courses, two per year. One year the intermediate would be, say "environmental sculpture" first semester, and clay sculpture from the model the second semester (you see, I had had that experience, and I thought my students should profit from it, if they wanted to—besides, it was a good 3-D counterpart to life drawing that we offered from time to time). The next year the intermediate sculpture would be one semester "new materials" from plastics to metals, to materials invented for outer space (where I was introducing students to what I had learned with my own sculpture in the '60s). The second semester I would offer "conceptual art," where I taught time media: from language, to performance, to video and film. So I was alternating every year those four intermediate sculpture classes. And every year I taught a seventh course, introductory or intermediate drawing, because all of the studio faculty, usually 4-5 professors, shared the drawing classes.

AVIS BERMAN: And so normally how many students were in each class?

ATHENA TACHA: About 25 in the introductory, about 15 in the intermediate, and about five to 10 in the advanced. That's why I said I had between 45 and 50 and with the drawings class, which was extra, sometimes over 50 students per semester.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And for the advanced courses, could anyone get in or were they—

ATHENA TACHA: They had to have had my introductory and intermediate, one introductory and one intermediate sculpture at minimum. Sometimes they had more.

AVIS BERMAN: Besides ideas, you really gave them a very good technical background too.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So I guess I would ask you to what extent can sculpture or can art be taught?

ATHENA TACHA: It can. If you have—if you are a good teacher, it can, and you have to really have good teachers—so I really think my teaching career was not wasted, not only because I produced some very good artists and architects but even people who didn't become professionals correspond with me and the experience that they gained—let me take my jacket off—from their exchange with me was important and oh, one of my students from the conceptual class is a very good gallerist in San Francisco [Brian Gross].

So he still remembers my conceptual class and of course I also was bringing visiting artists from New York or everywhere, every semester at least a couple of visiting artists. That's how Christo came and a lot of people, I mean, hundreds of people. Ellen Johnson was part of that program as well.

So I was raising funds from Agnes Gund or other friends to bring artists every semester and then I was also buying videotapes and films by artists from [Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* film] to anything you can imagine: Chris Burden's tape, a [John Baldessari film], [William Wegman's videos]. I brought Wegman to Oberlin College twice and he remembers me very well because I also had invited him to my "Art in the Mind" show [1970] as a curator.

So I put all my experience from the museum, as curator of contemporary art and as an artist into my teaching.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you ultimately prefer teaching sculpture to teaching art history?

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, I never would have liked to teach art history because—sorry, because I gave lectures while I was curator. I gave a lot of lectures on contemporary sculpture. I organized exhibitions, of course.

My last year as a curator I organized the Festival of Contemporary Art [April 29 to May 27, 1973] at AMAM, Oberlin College where I had four artists, young artists, and I chose all women and not just from New York but it was Ree Morton from Philadelphia, Ann McCoy from California, and Mary Miss and Jackie Winsor.

So you asked me in what way I taught art history—I was giving a lecture on art, women artists, regularly. I of course also gave lectures on Brancusi and Rodin as an art historian earlier when I was in the museum.

After I quit art history though, I only lectured on contemporary art, and that year that I had the four women artists' show, I also—we actually gave Mary Miss—

AVIS BERMAN: I love her.

ATHENA TACHA: —her first permanent outdoor sculpture, which she did in wood when in my show and then later we commissioned her to do it in metal.

I had a sculpture of Bob Morris installed outside the museum. The first [Claes Oldenburg] outdoor sculpture—I was curator when we commissioned it. Of course, Ellen was instrumental because she knew him so he offered us a price of only $4,000 for the plug [*Giant Three-Way Plug*, 1970]. He was already a good businessman. He asked if he could make an edition of three and therefore he sold the other three at much higher prices.

So in any case, I had the tremendous interaction between my teaching, my past museum career and all the other activities.

AVIS BERMAN: Oberlin was always considered to have a wonderful museum. It was really considered to be an island of art culture. So there was always a good reputation that the museum—and because of all the conservation lab and all of that. So it had a very high—

ATHENA TACHA: And the art history department was even better than the studio. Now the studio has become equally good.

AVIS BERMAN: I know several really good art historians who went to Oberlin and others—actually André Emmerich went there. He was a student.

ATHENA TACHA: That's right. That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: Which he said gave him his chance. He was a devotee of Oberlin and other—

ATHENA TACHA: Well, the person who is the gallerist that I said was my student was very influenced by my conceptual art course, is Brian Gross. You may know him, he's in San Francisco, and he always remembers something that I was telling my conceptual art students, that conceptual art doesn't have to be a masterpiece. You create just a little idea that you bring in the world, like bird shit. It's the bird shit of art. He always remembered that.

AVIS BERMAN: Now we had mentioned yesterday of course Brancusi, Rodin and it occurred to me that one artist that maybe we should bring up besides being a wonderful sculptor, understanding materials in the Brancusi tradition at first but also a pioneer in making environments is Noguchi. Did you know—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, [Isamu] Noguchi I admired very much although he is not one of my beloved artists because he had a conflicted personality, like many Japanese or Japanese-Americans. He was half Japanese and half Western.

He was trying to reconcile those two clashing cultures, but I admired him very much and we actually met at a congress—I mean not international sculpture conference and he knew me because I had corresponded with him for my Brancusi monograph.

He was the only student of Brancusi that became a famous sculptor and I asked him about the polish. Brancusi often sent him to polish the works that had been up in exhibitions because people were putting fingerprints on them and he said he often used Brasso to clean them up.

Therefore he knew me and we exchanged books—he sent me a new book that had been published on him and he gave me one of his works, the folding lamps that are made of paper.

AVIS BERMAN: The Akari [light] sculptures?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, and I sent him my Brancusi book. So that's our degree of exchange. But then I realized after I saw his book that he had designed some landscape sculptures that were never executed.

AVIS BERMAN: In the '30s.

ATHENA TACHA: In the '30s and they were almost like the step sculptures I was doing.

AVIS BERMAN: This is what occurred to me last night.

ATHENA TACHA: And I didn't know that. They had no influence on me because they were not known at the time. I mean, I met him I guess in the '70s, early '70s personally at the conference and that's when the first big book on him was published.

AVIS BERMAN: That's about 1968 or so was that big—I saw it before.

ATHENA TACHA: It's in my—yes, in my other room.

AVIS BERMAN: I have that too.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right, he gave it to me with a dedication. But, no, he wasn't an influence. The only—the person that influenced me most, I think, is Sol LeWitt with his thinking, not his work, because he was too minimal for me; and who else from among contemporary sculptors…

Serra did not influence me because he is younger than—well, he's the same age maybe. But he had not yet developed when I considered him in 1967 for one of our "Three Young Americans." We had this series of shows every two years called "Three Young Americans." So I interviewed him in his studio and his wife at the time, Nancy Graves.

AVIS BERMAN: Nancy Graves. Oh that's a long time ago because they were divorced—

ATHENA TACHA: In '67.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, and I think they were divorced by then.

ATHENA TACHA: Not yet. They were beating each other, but they hadn't quite divorced.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, right.

ATHENA TACHA: He was making at the time I met him those rubber things that were hanging on the wall. He hadn't started yet developing his lead sculptures. So I didn't choose him. I met Carl Andre also that year and he gave me a sculpture. You will see it in the dining room, which he was throwing out because he had moved in to something else. He gave Ellen [Johnson] one too. We went twice to his studio, with her and I went by myself.

AVIS BERMAN: How generous.

ATHENA TACHA: Eva Hesse of course I met in her studio and the Oberlin museum bought a sculpture of hers. I got wonderfully well along with her. I stayed the whole afternoon at her studio. But then soon after she got her brain cancer and after that I never saw her. In a way, Eva Hesse did not influence me but I admired her work a lot.

Well, she influenced me a bit. I had a series of sculptures that were fluid materials, in '69 (when did I meet her?) But in any case, I liked her work a lot. But I think Sol LeWitt was an important influence on me with his thinking.

AVIS BERMAN: Could you elaborate on that by what you mean?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, first of all, he freed sculpture from many things by making an idea more important. He's part of the conceptual art movement. His drawings existed as an idea and then anybody could execute them. Well, that was a very important idea! I actually made a series of sculptures too where I gave the pattern and people could fold paper and make the sculpture.

So somehow, the systemic thinking influenced me, especially in the very beginning of my sculpture, and then I kicked it out because after '74 when I first did the Charles River, I got rid of both systems and minimalism, minimalist forms.

But at the same time, my sculpture has always a systemic mind behind it, even though it rejects it and it changes it and you don't see the logic. There's always logic and there's always an idea. Conceptualism supports my public sculpture a great deal, not very obviously in all the work.

For instance in the *Light Obelisk*, even though Wisconsin Place is a commercial development so I made works that are for public attraction. It's my most attractive work in terms of the fact that it's made there to bring people to the shopping center. Yet its LED text on the "importance of water for life on Earth" is the conceptual part that went into it; and the *WWW Tower* is alluding to a radio sending messages to the outer universe, or referring to the Web, referring to information anyway [A 35-foot tall light tower installed at Wisconsin Place's north plaza in Chevy Chase, MD].

So always there is an element, even in that most commercial work, that includes language, refers to thinking, projects itself beyond the immediate environment, the immediate site. So does that answer what you were looking about?

AVIS BERMAN: Absolutely. I also had another thought when you were telling me that, when you were talking about you rejected minimalism. I think that most women sculptors rejected minimalism.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Mary Miss was another one that was doing it at the time and Eva Hesse of course. But Eva Hesse also was very good friends with Sol LeWitt. In fact, he introduced me to her. I forgot. [Mel] Bochner introduced me to Dorothea Rockburne. They were sharing—

AVIS BERMAN: They were living together then.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right, and they had studios in the same building. Oh, no, Sol introduced me to—what's the name of that conceptual artist who is very good but I don't remember her now. She was a student of his. It will come in a minute, who does performances and photographic work.

AVIS BERMAN: Carolee Schneeman?

ATHENA TACHA: No, no, no.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, I just don't know who his—I just don't know.

ATHENA TACHA: No, a black woman but not totally black. She's mixed.

AVIS BERMAN: Adrian Piper?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Adrian Piper was living in the same building as Sol and she had been a student of his and he admired her a lot. So he introduced me to her. Bob Morris introduced me to Alan Saret.

I mean, I knew a lot of artists when I was in my last years of the curatorship because I was going to New York all the time. I was looking for young artists and I had a lot of contacts. In any case, what were we talking about?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, how women—it's interesting—

ATHENA TACHA: Other women rejected minimalism, yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I just didn't know if you had a larger theoretical reason why that—or an abstraction of why that happened. But I just can't think of anyone—any women sculptors who may have tried it who stayed with it.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, Jackie Winsor is always—I would call her minimalist oriented.

AVIS BERMAN: Maybe and sometimes Jackie Ferrara a little bit, but she—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Jackie Ferrara more than me, for sure, but also she rejected it because she's working on the fringe of minimalism.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, I like Jackie Ferrara a lot. I considered her also for "Three Young Americans." [Alan] Saret, I met that year, too in '67, and selected him for the show with Bruce Nauman. I also had Chuck Close in the next "Three Young Americans," whom Serra recommended to me.

I chose Nauman over Serra that year because he was more advanced and Serra actually was influenced by Nauman at that stage of his career. Naturally, both Serra and Andre became great sculptors. But Saret I still admire very much. He is a very original—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: So my contacts with artists, of course, eased my entering contemporary art. But I had already found my way in the mid '60s, before I started meeting other artists, and in '74 when that crucial step happened, when I really found my own idiom totally, I had quit the museum career.

Oh I was telling you that in '70 was my last show, ["Art in the Mind,"] April '70 through the summer, but actually spring of '73 was my last museum show, the Festival of Contemporary Art with the four women artists show and a series of performances by Joan Jonas, Chris Burden, and Scott Burton. Earlier I had had other performance artists like the one who makes the mirror chambers, who has become very known now but at that time he was very little known. He was doing video performance primarily. You know him I'm sure. I can't remember him now.

AVIS BERMAN: Dan Graham.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. In 1973, I had also a series of films by artists, such as Alice Aycock, whom I had also interviewed for the "Three Young Americans." I could kick myself that I didn't select some of those artists.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you did very well. I mean, let's face it.

ATHENA TACHA: I was trying—seeing so many artists, visiting their studios and then I had to opt for various—

AVIS BERMAN: Were these reviewed ever other than locally?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I think I published in *ARTnews* an article about Chuck Close—

AVIS BERMAN: Because these were very advanced.

ATHENA TACHA: Chuck Close was just beginning in '69. It must have been Chuck Close, or '70—no, what am I saying.

AVIS BERMAN: They were earlier.

ATHENA TACHA: '69 was Chuck Close or '71 because I believe every two years an exhibition took place. I have all those catalogs but I don't know where they are because I kind of stuck away all of my art history stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: I didn't mean that you had written. I just wondered if you had ever gotten any critics from other cities.

ATHENA TACHA: No, I published the essay for the "Three Young Americans" in which Chuck Close was—and I can't remember who the other two were—in *ARTnews*, and I wrote the essay. So it wasn't a review. But you see, Oberlin is in the sticks.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's why I was asking you if you ever—with all of these very advanced and original shows—if you had ever gotten press from New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, anything.

ATHENA TACHA: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ATHENA TACHA: Lucy Lippard knew of my work independently of the shows—because we invited her twice as a visiting lecturer at Oberlin and we always have remained friends. We'd correspond occasionally.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, that was actually one of my questions: it seemed to me that Lucy Lippard became a supporter of your work and I wanted to ask you how that—

ATHENA TACHA: Because of women's art—two things, that she supported women always and then also she supported environmental art. In the early '70s, I was emerging as a young site-specific environmental artist. In fact, I was one of the creators of site-specific art.

I mean I know [Robert] Irwin is more known about it because Irwin was an itinerant lecturer (he came twice to Oberlin), picking up ideas from everywhere he picked ideas in the '60s from Turrell and the other young light artist in Los Angeles (in Venice) [Doug Wheeler].

They had the live artists' group and he became more famous because he's very verbal, very articulate and a

charmer, and he dedicated a whole year or two to circulating throughout the country giving lectures and therefore picking ideas up from everywhere.

But he's a great artist too. I admire him very much. But he didn't influence me either. I mean, there are a lot of artists that I admire that did not influence me nonetheless.

AVIS BERMAN: Because Lucy also wrote about you, a very sensitive story.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, yes, she wrote actually later—first she had invited me to be in that [Valencia, CA show circa '75] that traveled all around in 1973-'74 because she liked my series of conceptual art pieces, and she was very much into conceptual art as well at the time because she was dating [Seth] Siegelaub—and she introduced me to him actually.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: I visited him in 1969 when I was thinking about having a conceptual art show for the museum and his ideas influenced me. But of course the Europeans and the Latin Americans had already done exhibitions, museum exhibitions of conceptual art. It just hadn't come yet to America except through Seth Siegelaub.

So when I had my show at Max [Hutchinson's] Gallery, he wanted a text for the catalog and I said, "Why don't you ask Lucy Lippard to write an essay?" So he asked her and he paid her and she wrote an essay and that's how she got more acquainted with my series of memorials. That was a decade later…

AVIS BERMAN: About '81?

ATHENA TACHA: After Zabriskie, where I had a show in '81 and in—yes, '79 and '81. Hutchinson was later, it was in the mid '80s. Oh look, I have it right here.

AVIS BERMAN: Let's see. I think—

ATHENA TACHA: It was this catalog right here. What year is it? I keep forgetting things.

AVIS BERMAN: It doesn't say in here.

ATHENA TACHA: It says it someplace.

AVIS BERMAN: It's probably on the back somewhere.

ATHENA TACHA: Inside the cover.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you're right. It's in the mid-'80s.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes,'84. That's what it is.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, well why and how did you leave Zabriskie? What happened?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, Zabriskie I quit in the mid—in '83 because she did not renew my contract as we had it from earlier. In '83, I did that series [*Massacre Memorials*] here in Washington. Richard had a fellowship at CASVA.

So we came and lived '83-'84 in Washington, and that's when I executed all those memorials. I went to the National Archives and its Vietnam Archives and collected photographs and the horror of them made me sick—because the memorials are for massacres of people, not soldiers and I found so much material that I created this series.

Well, earlier she had written little bits about me including exhibitions. Somehow she felt supportive about me because I did both conceptual art and public art and she was interested in both.

AVIS BERMAN: Now she is?

ATHENA TACHA: Lucy.

AVIS BERMAN: Lucy, okay, because I had now—just asking you about Zabriskie.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, Zabriskie. Let's go to the start…

AVIS BERMAN: That's right.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, in the early '70s, I had done a series of works that I thought were interesting called *Cutouts*, which I'll show you maybe, but which I thought were worth trying to get a gallery to exhibit. I had quit the museum, you see. It was right after I quit the museum.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: That's when Agnes Denes generously offered me her studio. So I brought with a truck a bunch of that group of works and I wrote to several good galleries, like half a dozen, from [John Weber, Max Protetch and Zabriskie to OK Harris]. I can't remember who else, but that category, not the very top galleries that I knew as a curator.

And they came and looked at the work and three offered me a show and I forget who the other two were. But Zabriskie was the most enthusiastic and the most sympathetic, and at the time she had gotten interested in promoting public art.

It was just beginning, in the beginning of public art. So she offered me a three-artist show with Lloyd Hamrol, whom I like very much, myself, and the woman who does cloth sculptures, soft sculptures like banners.

AVIS BERMAN: Not Faith Ringgold?

ATHENA TACHA: No, no, no, Ann [Healey]—oh well, I can't remember right now. But we had a three artist show in '75 and we were debating what to call it, and I said, well, let's call it *Site Art* and that's what we called it; that's the first time the term site was entering the language of outdoor sculpture because that's what my interest had been from the Charles River on, looking at the site and doing a work for it.

My sculpture was architectural from '70, but for specific sites from January '74 on. So I actually exhibited at AIR the model for Charles River in '74 after I made it at MIT. We brought it with a truck and they invited me to a four guest artists show, Joyce Kozloff, me—we were four women, I forget who were the other two right now, but good artists. That's where I showed it in New York and then we brought it to Oberlin.

[Lawrence] Alloway saw it and liked it very much and became my supporter and also wrote about me in *Artforum*—the conceptual work of the *Heredity Studies* '70-'71. But then he died; most of my supporters died early, except for Agnes Gund and for Lucy.

Everybody else had died, the people who wrote about me, and being in the sticks, as I said, I wouldn't really have people visiting my studio. But so we finished that part of it?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, well I wanted to go back to something that you had said about Noguchi, which you had said, which was true, that he was conflicted. He was always trying to reconcile or deal with clashing cultures. So did you ever have that from—

ATHENA TACHA: No, I didn't because I'm Western, you see? He was Asian. That was a very different attitude about art from mine. Besides, I was—I mean, I rejected figural art totally even though I was trained in it and I knew it.

Therefore I went—to the Greek landscape, Greek island architecture and the terracing of the land and the paths, stone mountain paths, were food for my work; and that was very reconcilable with what I developed as an architectural landscape artist. So I never had the conflict that Noguchi had.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, of course it's true, just because there was so much culture, so much heritage in Europe and then you go to America, which just probably looks like readymade Pop art with Cadillacs and billboards and all of the rest.

ATHENA TACHA: That part of America did not influence me. I'm not into popular art of America at all. I hate comics. Cars is part of life that I don't enjoy—advertisements I hate, although they've become so good as images that I admire them.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I didn't mean influence you but maybe you had recoiled from it and of course—

ATHENA TACHA: It didn't bother me even though Pop art was also very popular at the time.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

ATHENA TACHA: But it wasn't part of me because having rejected figuration, I was really into abstract forms even for my landscape art because it was architectural. Therefore it never conflicted with Pop art. I mean, I admired it. I admired Oldenburg and other artists but I never adopted them.

AVIS BERMAN: Because certainly—well, the two Pop-related sculptors also made their representations abstract like Oldenburg through blowing up and George Segal too.

ATHENA TACHA: Segal never shed it. No, Segal to me is the least interesting of that group. [James] Rosenquist is one of the people I like best. Well, I'm not talking about [Robert] Rauschenberg or—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, [Jasper] Johns.

ATHENA TACHA: Johns, who were not really Pop artists. They were initiators. But Oldenburg and Rosenquist ultimately are the most abstract—open-ended.

AVIS BERMAN: I just read Rosenquist's memoir. It's wonderful.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, you told me yesterday.

AVIS BERMAN: I couldn't remember. It's wonderful. I recommend it.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, I like him very much. I think he's a very interesting artist; again, no influences there at all. It's kind of strange that a lot of people I admire have not influenced me.

AVIS BERMAN: That can happen.

ATHENA TACHA: Bob Morris I admire very much and I think people do not appreciate how great an artist's mind he is because he is a chameleon, like me actually. He changes constantly and adopts different idioms because he wants to change whereas [Donald] Judd is monolithic and people understand Judd; if they are imbued with the minimal, visual idiom, Judd is god. He is good, but Bob Morris is equally good but he's more varied.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's true, but I always have a sense about Morris, though he does change but somehow it's always in the period style.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, but he often initiates the period style. For instance, Serra and Saret would not exist without Bob Morris. Bob Morris taught Serra. He was a student of his at Hunter. He had done his felt pieces perhaps before Serra started doing soft materials.

I mean, he had done his felt pieces in the late '60s, '67-'68 maybe, and I visited his studio with Ellen and we were looking around, etcetera, and it was full of those felts and we said, "What are those?"

He said, "My new work," and he said, "Would you believe it, that Leo Castelli came to discuss my next exhibition?", and he never even saw them. He didn't register them because they were totally new stuff.

Of course, [Bruce] Nauman was also doing soft things at the time, and it was part of the idiom but it was very early on in the idiom and Bob always wrote those notes on sculpture in *Artforum* that were kind of about new ideas in sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, and he was certainly a pioneer in that. His outdoor piece in Washington state, from the mid-'70s—

ATHENA TACHA: Which was like the mine?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: That was later though.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, it was in the '70s I think.

ATHENA TACHA: Was it in the '70s? Well, are you sure?

AVIS BERMAN: I'll have to look it up.

ATHENA TACHA: The first piece I knew of that he did for out of doors, designed for out of doors, was in the Midwest, which was inspired by the Ohio Serpent Mound and he kept telling me, let's hire a helicopter from Oberlin and go over, or an airplane, and go over the Cincinnati mound. We never did it. But he must have seen photographs of it because that piece is a serpent mound more abstracted.

Actually, Maya Lin copied it closely in a work of hers but she lives in—she was born there in Athens, Ohio. She never acknowledges that it was a great influence but it is—it was. It's obvious when you know the serpent mound, which I visited later with Richard.

Actually one thing I should stress is how important our trips were. First of all, Richard, being in the Italian field, was Italy-oriented and Rome-oriented in particular. So whenever he got sabbaticals, three years, four different years we lived in Rome and that was a great influence in teaching urban space to me.

Also we lived a year, two different semesters, in London. I had lived in Paris, of course. But we traveled farther also. Starting in 1970 we decided since we didn't have children to spend our money going on far-away trips. So we went to Peru in '71.

Actually we had this student from Lima, who now became a famous architect at Arquitectonica in Miami, who planned our trip to Peru, told us where to go and helped us, and then we spent a week in the Galapagos. So that was our first out-of-the-way trip and it was very influential. I had read Charles Darwin's journal on the trip to the Galapagos and so I wanted to go there.

I saw Macchu Picchu in '71. I had already started in '70 doing those step sculptures I told you, but still it was a revelation and especially I would say it did help inspire Charles River even though Charles River is low and Macchu Picchu is up there, but in the blending of nature and human intervention upon nature.

So that was the earliest trip we did, and since then every couple of years we plan something far away. So India is another thing, and the Himalayan terracing, that if not influenced me, at least I get the feedback from those temples.

AVIS BERMAN: You respond.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right. I go see them because I'm interested. But then I get feedback from them too. So when I proposed my—is it here—I actually was one of the finalists for the biggest competitions of public art in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the commercial plaza—

AVIS BERMAN: At Battery Park?

ATHENA TACHA: At Battery Park '83-'84, and the finalists were Bob Irwin, Bob Morris, myself, [Siah] Armajani and Scott Burton, plus [Richard] Fleischner and a woman whom I liked very much but I can't remember [Harriet] Feigenbaum. I have some lapses of memory with names, because she's not as famous. But in any case, we each made a proposal, and Nancy, Nancy—

AVIS BERMAN: Nancy Holt?

ATHENA TACHA: No, no, no she was running the competition, [Nancy] Rosen a very professional woman was running competition.

So this is what I proposed and actually Victor Ganz, who was the chair of the committee, liked very much my work and he was a great supporter and he told me later that the committee (a 25-people committee—dealers, collectors, etcetera) debated two days about whom to select. Siah Armajani, Scott Burton, and I were the three finalists, and they selected the two men to collaborate.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: Feigenbaum and Fleischner had been added actually by [César] Pelli because he wanted to have a say in what the artists would compete.

So Victor Ganz told me that the two finalists really were me and Scott Burton with Armajani, who were working as a team, invited to work as a team because neither of them had done any public sculpture. I had already done Smithtown and Oberlin. Actually, I had executed several more public sculptures by that time. That was in '83

AVIS BERMAN: Were you invited to compete or was this an open—

ATHENA TACHA: Invited, invited. We did not submit anything and Victor Ganz unfortunately died early too. I'm telling you, a lot of my supporters, and he said they debated for over 20 hours about whom to select and Pelli pushed for Armajani and Scott Burton because he could manipulate them. You know?

When I went to visit, all of the candidates visited Pelli and his wife in his studio and had an interview and lunch with him. Also Victor Ganz took us each for lunch, to discuss our ideas. When I went to Pelli, I had already my model ready, I mean, my ideas ready, which he did not like.

Scott Burton and Armajani were totally open because they had no experience and therefore they told him, we'll discuss it, and they are both very—well, Scott died, but Siah is a very charming person to talk with. And Max Protetch was on the committee and he pushed for them because he was planning to have them—

AVIS BERMAN: In the gallery.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, in the gallery, so I lost that competition anyway. But supposedly there would be an exhibition of the models. I think Bob Irwin and Bob Morris, who were more famous and lost it, didn't agree to have the exhibition, so it never happened. They were going to have it at the Whitney and so on. So that's the story about this competition, which was an important—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I know you've entered a lot of competitions in which you were a finalist, a lot of open ones and then you lost them.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, most of them.

AVIS BERMAN: Or do you wait until let's say there are just four or five and you're invited?

ATHENA TACHA: No, no, no very rarely that happens. BPCCP had no competition. It was not a competition. It was an invitational.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: But very rarely that is the case. All of them I sent slides and bio and I was selected from, say, 300 artists, whatever submitted, to be one of three or one of five finalists. That's what I call a finalist whereas here I was a finalist at the invitational.

That has happened really rarely, very rarely because it was a very important competition and they didn't want huge numbers—and Smithtown also, which was my first national commission before the GSA was an invitational in the way that critics from New York and from the rest of the country submitted artists, in other words proposed a variety of artists.

And then the committee selected three finalists and the finalists for Smithtown were Scott Burton, George Trakas and myself; and I was joking that I was the token woman and the token outside of New York.

AVIS BERMAN: But you had two Greeks. That's unusual.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Trakas is Greek too. That's right. But he's a New York artist really and I like his work very much also. So the three of us went and made proposals and talked to the community. Oh, that was Doris Freedman, who was a pioneer in that. She was running that competition.

AVIS BERMAN: She was great.

ATHENA TACHA: She really, again—

AVIS BERMAN: She died too soon. I mean, not just—

ATHENA TACHA: Again, she liked my work a lot. Therefore we gave a lecture each of us at Smithtown and then we made the models and exhibited them. That was Doris's process, we exhibited them at the public library for the citizens to vote, and I got 51 percent of the votes and that's how I won.

But then soon after we finished Smithtown, Doris got hit in an accident and she had a brain aneurysm or whatever it is. She died and so I lost one more of the people who were supporting my work very early.

AVIS BERMAN: Now I want to go back to something else, which was E.A.T., and I want to know how you got into it or what was in it for you and tell me about Billy Klüver and Rauschenberg.

ATHENA TACHA: Nothing really because living in Oberlin and being so busy with teaching and with doing commissions at the same time—you don't know how busy. I said I was a finalist in over 150 competitions in 40 years, but I submitted to maybe 500.

Also I was my secretary, my photographer, my publicist, everything. So I didn't have time and so I never went. The meetings were either in New York or California and I was simply a member.

I joined the organization because I believed in its cause and I received announcements and I did that show at Nina Sundell's gallery Talalay as a benefit for E.A.T. and there was a little group in Cleveland that Nina and Marjorie oversaw of people who were interested—they brought us in contact with scientists in the area.

But I actually had in the '60s initiated my own contacts with scientists. I have a whole—one of those thick file boxes full of letters, correspondence with engineers about new materials. So my new materials research was in the '60s before—I don't know when E.A.T. was founded.

AVIS BERMAN: I think about '66 or '67, '67 I think.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, okay. I didn't really become a member until later in the '60s because that's when I had the exhibition with Nina's and Marjorie's gallery in '69. But I had been corresponding throughout the '60s and actually I wrote something in my journal, which I am kind of interested in, that "a sculptor is a person who understands materials."

That's why I am interested in all materials, not just the profession's materials, not just clay and marble or paints, but everything, everything from dirt to stone to rocks to silicone fluids and everything.

So I was doing already a lot of research—had a lot of contacts with scientists on my own. I never really profited anything from E.A.T. except the fact that it existed gave me courage about collaborating with scientists, and I was reading their newsletter and so on.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Now just also to get to this period with Zabriskie and Hutchinson and your pieces that you're making, the—private?—and public, did you have sales?

ATHENA TACHA: When I was operating within the Cleveland, Ohio, area, everything was sold that I made because I had very cheap prices, small works, very attractive works and like the one that is beyond the back of your chair. You can't see it from here. [*Pink Galaxy*, '68.]

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, that is attractive. I like that.

ATHENA TACHA: I was making things—

AVIS BERMAN: Pre-Jeff Koons.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, I was making things with light and transparent materials, with glass, Plexiglas, etcetera and everybody was buying them. Once I got into fluids and the impermanent work, they weren't saleable and the gallery—the show I had at Nina and Marjorie's new gallery was all processes, boiling, burning, etcetera, dripping. I called it *Phenomena* or *Forms of Nature* and so they weren't saleable.

Once I got into public art, like making the models, those step sculptures—Yes, actually Agnes Gund bought one of my *Dripping* sculptures. (I made an edition of 12 and the only one left is the one in my living room.) She bought one and she bought one of my early step sculptures, which her cat scratched and therefore it's gone, the ones that I showed you in the little booklet.

So she continued being a supporter of mine, even until now. She buys works occasionally and she recommended—well, her brother Graham Gund, who saw her *Dripping*, commissioned me to do a twice as big copy for his collection, which I had made, and then a few years later he called. He said, "It's leaking. Can you fix it?"

And I said, I don't think I can because that was fabricated that big, 2 feet by 2 feet, a huge size for sealed through Plexiglas. I had made the ones that are 1 foot, like the one in my living room; and Agnes' dripped too because silicone fluid is a very low surface-tension fluid, which leaks out of everything—where alcohol would not leak out of, it will leak out.

It's a very magnificent fluid that can be fabricated in all kinds of viscosity, from thin like alcohol to thick like Greek honey and I was looking for it in a liquid that would behave like Greek honey, drip very slowly and have elasticity and I found that liquid and the only problem—I love it—the only problem is that it has very low surface tension.

They use it for spaceships as lubricant because it does not change with temperature. It doesn't freeze. It doesn't become thick. It's an incredible fluid. It remains liquid. So I did sell some of my liquid works afterwards. By the time I got to Zabriskie, I was making also tape sculptures and I did an installation there. I will show you one of them. I have the catalog of the first ones [Wright State University, Dayton, OH, 1978].

Well, I shouldn't go away from the microphone because I'll forget. I'll show it to you later. But I did a tape sculpture installation in New York. We had a third group show again at Zabriskie with Lloyd and Anne Healy to which she added Mary Miss.

So in '76 we had the four-artist show, *Site Sculptors*, and then after that she gave me a one-artist show in '79 and I made this huge tape installation, which the curator of the MoMA liked very much. What's his name? He's still curator there, or maybe retired.

AVIS BERMAN: Kynaston McShine?

ATHENA TACHA: No, older than him. Elderfield?

AVIS BERMAN: John Elderfield.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right, and so Zabriskie, even though she didn't sell anything, she gave me another one-artist show in '72 where Katharine Kuh bought one large drawing and Agnes Gund bought another large drawing.

So she sold a few things but because most of my works were models or installations, they weren't selling and meanwhile, what happened with Virginia, she got involved with photography and with her gallery in Paris and she found out that she was making very little money with the public art business and very much money with photography.

So she was not interested in public art anymore. She lost her enthusiasm and she didn't want to renew my contract with the promise of a show every two years. So I quit and she was very hurt because I was the only artist that quit her.

I thought, I don't need a gallery, a New York gallery if it can't give me a one-artist show because the show that—the second show that she gave me in '72 had a wonderful review by Ted—the Christian Science—

AVIS BERMAN: Wolff, Ted Wolff.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, in the *Christian Science Monitor*, an enthusiastic, raving review and I became—we became very good friends at the time.

But she wasn't selling very much and if she didn't give me a one-artist show, I did not need her because I was operating through competitions and I had been—the contract stated that I would give her 20 percent or 25 percent of my earnings, but the earnings were not that big, because always there was little money for those competitions.

AVIS BERMAN: So you were supposed to give her 25 percent of the public pieces, even if she had nothing to do with them?

ATHENA TACHA: Mm-hmm. She did try to find me one with a private collector, a tape piece actually, in Long Island, but it fell through and she didn't get me any commission. All the others were through competitions.

But I had to pay her nonetheless her share for my public commissions. So we split, and then when I was ready again after I did the memorials, I was looking for a gallery. Max Hutchinson was very active in public art, even though more object-oriented public art.

He was also—or rather his wife or partner, Irene Siegel—no, not Irene Siegel—an artist, a very good artist, painter, very politically minded—and so he was very agreeable to this idea of memorials for victims—massacre memorials.

So he offered me a one artist show and a contract for two years also and paid Lucy for a catalog and all that and then he closed his gallery and went out to—

AVIS BERMAN: Upstate New York.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, so I didn't want him anymore because I don't make object sculptures and I could not have anything out there, nor did I have time to go install a piece in a sculpture park, something that might be sold, might not. I mean, a lot of people, including [André] Emmerich, wanted to sell my work but I didn't make object sculpture at all.

That was the difficulty. My work was not saleable because I was pursuing commissions. So I have sold very little since then. Now I have done enough public art and I got very discouraged by it because people don't maintain it. I mean, GSA's and the Cleveland are among the few. A few of my commissions have been maintained. The rest are not maintained and some were destroyed. Smithtown was destroyed a year after it was built.

So I want to quit public art and also I don't have space to store models anymore. I mean, my 1,500 square feet studio that I have in a building out in Hyattsville MD, is full and I can't very much make physical work anymore.

So I started doing drawings then I started doing photographic work because I have so many photographs of nature. So I'm doing photographic work—and conceptual pieces, of course, I continue. So that I'm trying to balance out my conceptual, my photographic work, and my sculpture.

But I'm giving up sculpture mostly. I had decided I would quit public art when I left Oberlin in 1998, and then Texas offered me. No, excuse me, I had sent slides and they selected me for a big plaza in Dallas in collaboration with an architectural company, SWA, landscape architects, Sasaki Warner Associates (now Sasaki

Associates), and it was so tempting.

They paid me $150,000 just to be designer, not to do any of the contracts with contractors, etcetera and the architects were doing all the computer drawings. So it was so tempting I couldn't refuse yet it was an awful amount of work. Actually this is it, the plaza, because I'm preparing the drawing for my retrospective.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, it's fantastic. Well, look, no one gives you $150,000 for nothing. Of course it's going to be work.

ATHENA TACHA: It was two years of very hard work, of working with a 35-people team and very commercial also because it was in front of the new sports arena, a huge sports arena and now it's called the American Airlines Center because they sponsored it and it's a development all around it.

So it has a very commercial look around. But they wanted no sculpture because they wanted to have the ground flat for overspill from the arena. So I made the pavement design with water jets that can be turned off and then they can put people and events in the plaza.

AVIS BERMAN: Has it been installed yet?

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, yes, 2002.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

ATHENA TACHA: It's finished eight years ago. But I meant this was something that tempted me back into public art and then I have a friend here in Washington who has been art consultant—we met in the '80s when we were here. She had invited me to be—to submit slides to a lot of competitions, Françoise Yohalem.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh she's very well-known as a—

ATHENA TACHA: Right, she's an excellent art—

AVIS BERMAN: —Consultant?

ATHENA TACHA: Consultant, exactly, for public art, dedicated to it and so in the '80s I won actually one of her competitions for the site where we were yesterday.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, this is at Friendship Heights.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, it was—at the time it was a Hecht's and then a Woody's [Woodward and Lothrop, another department store. I made a model—they accepted it. They made a mock-up in wood of the entire sculpture to make sure that the architects and clients liked it, and then the store closed and so that fell through [*Link*, 1989].

I mean, I am saying that I won many more competitions than I actually executed. So I hadn't won except that one with Françoise and when I came to Washington and we renewed friendship, she invited me and encouraged me to submit slides to a number of other competitions, where she was submitting slides as an art consultant.

I didn't have anything to do with the paperwork part, which tired me, and I had said I won't do it again. Therefore, I got that commission here, the Strathmore Hall commission [*Hearts Beat*, 2004], which is the Strathmore Music Hall, through her because they were both Montgomery County, for which she was art consultant; but I said I'm going to be just designer. The architects, engineers would do everything with contractors and etcetera.

So they paid me a fee for design and then a very nice young man who was running the Metro, WMATA art commission's program, Michael—oh god—so many years of names, you know. Every competition I had to learn so many people, faces and names and remember them.

AVIS BERMAN: It's okay.

ATHENA TACHA: Michael McBride, who is a lovely person and a friend now, invited me to do something for the Metro and again I did it. They built a plaza in the Metro station next to Largo, an extension out of the D.C. lines, and I did a beautiful plaza there [*Stop and Go*, 2005] but then it had problems technically and also Strathmore had technical problems and all the last commissions immediately have problems, even with the LEDs.

From the '60s I had quit light because of the technical problems. Now LEDs tempted me again because they supposedly last so long. They supposedly don't go out, but they do. So they have had problems—all of those three commissions in Washington which are of the recent years, finished in 2004, 2005, and the last one 2009—but I started them in the early, 2001, 2002 and 2003.

I was invited also to another (triple) commission for which I did not apply, for the Muhammad Ali plaza in Louisville and that's one of my masterpieces I think [*Star Fountain*, 2002-09]. But it has problems with its LEDs too.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you keep using the LEDs if there were such a problem—

ATHENA TACHA: I didn't know that there would be problems. All those were simultaneous commissions that I was selected for—as I told you, the tower at Wisconsin Place was going to be neon initially, but LEDs meanwhile were a lot more attractive as material because neon has its own problems. And all of those—I made the decisions with different companies, different teams, different architects almost at the same time. I now know that programmed LEDs can have huge problems.

AVIS BERMAN: So is it something that can be—whose responsibility is it to fix the problem?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, the clients, the people who commissioned it. I'm not responsible, because as I said, I'm only designer. Nonetheless, I spent so much time advising them and the companies, the LED companies.

Color Kinetics is sophisticated and established. Well, Color Kinetics did this one here that you saw at Friendship Heights and the Muhammad Ali. Strathmore was done by a California younger company, LED Effects. But all of them claim that supposedly it's the electricians that are not savvy enough with LEDs and they don't know how to install them, how to connect them—make the connections safe from humidity, etcetera.

So the companies claim that it's the electricians. The electricians claim that it's the companies. So whom do you believe and I can't do anything about it. But, in any case, I've decided to stop public art, even when I'm invited, unless they pay me a big fee again, but nobody does that.

AVIS BERMAN: This actually leads me, since we're talking about this, I was going to ask you this later because it was later chronologically, but I might as well ask you now because it fits, which is you move to Washington in—

ATHENA TACHA: End of '98.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So it seems to me that moving here gave you a whole host of opportunities that you might not have had had you stayed in Oberlin.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, to a degree, because Washington is not a hotbed of contemporary art, as you know. But I have more contacts with people and it's a metropolitan area.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, there were more opportunities.

ATHENA TACHA: But those opportunities actually might have existed before because Françoise Yohalem got me the commissions in Strathmore and at Friendship Heights (old and new)—I mean, recommended me and they selected me as the finalist. And she could have invited me even if I wasn't living here.

But I wouldn't have accepted because I had this urge not to travel anymore all over the country to do public commissions, whereas here, the two of them were at my doorsteps, my metro station and a little beyond.

Louisville, Kentucky, was different, because Muhammad Ali is such an important person whom actually I did not know until they invited me, but once I figured out who he is and what he did, I was enthralled by the idea of doing something for him, I mean, not for him but for his name. I met him actually the last time we were in Louisville and—

AVIS BERMAN: Was he able to speak to you?

ATHENA TACHA: No. He doesn't speak. He just smiles a little bit. He trembles and he tries to hold on to the armchair. But his mind is totally there.

AVIS BERMAN: How can you tell?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, first of all I told him that I know his mind is present because both of my parents had Parkinson's and I know that even though people say that the mind goes, it doesn't. It's totally there and I could see his eyes through his black glasses and then we showed him—Richard had taken a video of the fountain with the LED program.

So we showed him the video and not only he looked at it but he stopped trembling during the whole four minutes that he was looking at the video.

So he's absolutely responding and I know he has—he communicates with his wife of course, who was also there,

and they went to Ireland after we met them to look for his antecedents in Ireland. I don't know what that meant but he's still active mentally. There is no question about it. He has an important mind, not just a body.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course. In terms of going to Ireland, he certainly—he could have had 19th century ancestors who came over and went to the South.

ATHENA TACHA: That's what I was thinking, yes, right. That's what I was thinking. But in any case, Lonnie gave me her e-mail and also their address.

I sent to their address the videos and photographs of the plaza and also she e-mailed me from Ireland, said, I'll answer you when we are back, but she hasn't and god knows what their life is like with not only the difficulty with him but they probably receives millions of—

AVIS BERMAN: Of course, fending off people—not you, but all sorts of people.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes, I don't expect them to answer, but sometime they might.

AVIS BERMAN: And did she—in other words, in terms of people, was she on the selection committee or any of his family on the committee?

ATHENA TACHA: No, I don't think so because the Muhammad Ali Center had initiated the project. They built a center, which is actually not only a good building, but a very vital presentation of his work. I'm sure for the presentation of his work and his life, he offered the material because it's videos and millions of things.

AVIS BERMAN: Their archives.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, the archives, that's right and he goes there, visits, and people come and pay homage. That's how I met him. He sits in a room there, in a conference room in a chair, and people come and visit him. So I don't think he financed anything else other than giving the material probably.

But they wanted to do something in his honor because he was born there and raised there and they formed something called the Muhammad Ali committee or Muhammad Ali project and they selected EDAW landscape architect firm as the architect, EDAW—no, not architect, the landscape architect for the plaza. The architects for the building were from New York, and I can't remember them right now.

But EDAW is the biggest landscape firm in the world actually and they have an office here in Virginia. So the Alexandria office had done already one or two plazas in Louisville and they selected them to design this plaza, and Muhammad Ali gave a "program" and he said he wanted a Muslim garden.

The plaza has three levels: a Muslim garden with a waterfall [Chagar] at the top that trickles down to the middle level of the plaza to a grand fountain, showing his modest beginnings and his stardom, reaching stardom, and between the top level and the middle level is an amphitheater for possible performances.

So EDAW designed something and the committee didn't like it. They thought it was too traditional, following too much Moghul garden style and nothing inspirational. So they decided to have an artist and who suggested me I have no idea, either EDAW or somebody on the committee there.

But they contacted me and interviewed me on the phone and I thought they were interviewing a number of artists, which probably they were. But so we had a half-hour interview and they told me what it was about and I said, yes, I was interested, because it sounded fascinating and I didn't expect that they would select me. But they selected me.

So I went to Louisville with the main architect designer from EDAW, Dennis Carmichael, and we sat two days in a charrette type of thing and worked out—reworked the plaza totally and I did—well here is the amphitheater actually, right here, to the plaza, if you turn around.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: The upper level is out of the drawing there. The amphitheater is in the drawing and then the water from the waterfall, which is on the riverfront up there, cascades and trickles down through the amphitheater into a fountain that is a star-shaped fountain with glass—made of 48 glass columns and I'll show you a slide, I mean a JPG of it afterwards.

But it's a very beautiful piece and the amphitheater [*Dancing Steps*] is one of my masterpieces in terms of step sculptures because it's extremely complex. This is a simplified form because they had so many safety rules that we had to simply a lot of the forms.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

ATHENA TACHA: But in any case, even now it's very beautiful. So how'd I get there? Oh, that was the only commission I did outside of Washington in the last years.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. What were the special problems and challenges of that, the difficulties of that?

ATHENA TACHA: The main difficulty—actually I collaborated beautifully with EDAW.

But the main difficulty was the fact that they recommended that we do the fountain—the fountains—with glass because they have an excellent company of architectural glass in Louisville which is run by 10 artists and they called it architectural glass art, so I said, fine, because transparency has been always one of my loves and I would have used probably Plexiglas (but Plexiglas is not as durable as glass).

So Dennis and I visited the glass company and we showed them my drawings for the fountain and, in fact, here is the first model for the fountain, which I kept because if there are always problems, I have a Plexiglas model in the studio, in the other studio.

But these are the 48 columns spiraling inside the star wall of the outside and giving the impetus for the pavement design and then these are 12 feet high descending to 3 feet high, foot by foot.

So we took a drawing of that to the glass company and they said, yes we can do it, and then they made the model of one column. That was four or five years ago in 2003, 2004, something like that. And then it took two years of delays because we couldn't start building the plaza. We designed it all and it was wonderful. Everybody was happy. The model for the column worked out. Everybody was enthusiastic.

They decided to use LED animation under each column, 48 LED animation units—RGB they're called, red-green-blue—that create all kinds of colors. Sixteen million colors you can select. So everything was ready but the building was slow in execution, the Center. We couldn't start the plaza because the building's scaffolding was in the space of the plaza till they finished the building. So we waited two years for the building to be done.

By that time, they were ready to start the fountain. They had to rush and so the local contractor was not as careful; and the money, I thought it was $6 million. It turned out it was $2 million. Somehow they used it elsewhere. So the contractor was cutting corners and the masons were not very skilled masons for the amphitheater.

But they had a wonderful foreman. I always have been amazed by the great foremen I get for the jobs and we communicate so well because I'm a mason myself. So he was excellent and nobody else could have built that complex thing. But I had very little traveling money, so I could go only for very rare inspections.

That's why I don't want to work outside of town. Here I was all summer, every day, overseeing the masons in the Friendship Heights plaza. So in Louisville the craftsmanship was poor and then meanwhile it turned out that the fountain, when they built it, it was leaking. The columns would not hold water.

So the people, the fountain's glass experts had been mistaken about the pressure that the water inside the columns would have. Even though they put metal inside, supports in every column, it was still leaking. So it took another two years to fix the leaks and they still are not fully fixed.

They have added metal—they probably got bankrupt—stainless steel edges on all the columns to prevent the leaks, used different glues. I knew that glass is a bitch of a material to glue because Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings where he has those glass corners always leaked.

AVIS BERMAN: Leaked, right.

ATHENA TACHA: Ellen Johnson had a Frank Lloyd Wright house and I helped her restore it. So I knew all about that problem. But I thought they know better and there are better glues now.

Well, there aren't, and so during those years that they were fixing the columns, the installed LED units underneath got damaged; apparently water, humidity seeped through and therefore 12 out of 48 don't work, don't respond to the computer.

So I went with Richard actually, he came to see it for the first time last August with a programmer from Color Kinetics, to program the RGB display animation and 12 of the columns were not responding.

We had a hell of a time and they still are fighting over whose fault it is, the electricians or ColorKinetics and meanwhile, the woman who was overseeing for the city, the whole project, had an accident. A staircase in another building collapsed on her. So she had six operations, kidney, spine, everywhere, and it was all of those

disasters.

So you can imagine, even though I thought that I won't do public art anymore—everything was going beautifully, I mean, in the beginning, the first two years were ideal. The same with the development here, at the Friendship Heights Metro station, the collaboration I did. Once they get executed, they start having problems and thank god I wasn't involved with contractors at least.

But the worries are nonetheless there and the amount of time I spend in corresponding with all the people, the light engineer, Color Kinetics, the contractor, the Muhammad Ali committee is endless, just endless.

AVIS BERMAN: So I know what he had said he had wanted. In your design, what are the references to Ali?

ATHENA TACHA: We followed exactly—oh, the references?

AVIS BERMAN: In other words because you said what he had wanted originally, it was too traditional. So how did you incorporate—

ATHENA TACHA: But we did follow it because the upper level of the garden is a Moghul-type garden design and the waterfall, which is glass—it's a beautiful waterfall which I designed but they executed—is like the charbaghs that they have in Moghul gardens, the very shallow waterfalls. It's made of glass, not of marble, but it has also a rippling design and so the upper part is totally Moghul.

The idea of coming down with a trickle, which goes underground actually and then, with a runnel of water through the amphitheater, comes to the main fountain in the center of the plaza, which is in the shape of a star, a very grand fountain—all follows Ali's wishes.

So we followed his idea totally and moreover, aside from that the "stardom" of the fountain's shape, the amphitheater I call *Dancing Steps* because it is all—you have to dance on it. I mean, it's totally irregular and you know his technique—

AVIS BERMAN: His footwork.

ATHENA TACHA: Right, his footwork, so I call the amphitheater *Dancing Steps* and the fountain *Star Fountain* and the other is the charbagh waterfall. In that sense we followed totally his wishes.

AVIS BERMAN: And so how do you judge the success or the effectiveness of the piece?

ATHENA TACHA: I think it's a beautiful plaza and Richard has seen it too. We have seen and studied so many plazas all over the world. I think it's one of the most beautiful in the world.

If there were no technical problems, it would be embraced by everybody. But people can't see it really because they have to stop the water or they have to stop the lights to fix this and fix that, and for two years they've been struggling.

AVIS BERMAN: But they are trying to fix it?

ATHENA TACHA: They are trying to fix it, but there are still disputes about who will pay for the replacements of the LEDs, will they last, will it leak again and the city woman is still having another two operations on her shoulders and she's running the Muhammad Ali funding committee. So it's still—nobody has written about it.

They don't publicize it. I mean, it did get published in Berlin in a huge landscape architecture compendium. I have it in fact. It's such a heavy book that I can't lift it, 1,000 pages. They selected the 1,000 best projects of landscape art and architecture of the last decades and they asked me to submit a project for one page and I said maybe the Muhammad Ali which was barely finished but it was leaking.

The Louisville people were mad that I submitted it because they said, we haven't yet finished it. It's still leaking. But it's published anyway there and *Sculpture* magazine will publish in its next issue as one of the public art commissions they selected to publish.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, even though it still isn't finished.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, well, it is finished. It's just not working properly. I mean, it's totally finished. The program is finished. The LEDs exist and one-quarter of them don't work, 12 out of 48, Yes, that's right.

AVIS BERMAN: Twenty-five percent, right.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right.

AVIS BERMAN: I want to ask you something because in this studio for the tape, there are some very evocative and telling photographs, some of which you have taken or posters. I mean, there's the steps from the National Trust and there's also something that looks like pieces of ice or ripples and layers, and they certainly evoke natural step formations and I wondered if those were something that—

ATHENA TACHA: That inspired me, not those particular posters. I bought them because I loved those things. But these are actually—this is in Turkey, but I had seen formations from lava—I mean, a volcanic water fountain, Minerva fountains in Yellowstone. I had seen them on our honeymoon trip and that was in '65, when we married.

So I love those nature formations that I photographed all my life and when I see a poster like that, I buy it. That is the Giant's Causeway in Ireland and I went to see it because I'd seen photographs and it's a magnificent place, I mean, a really sacred place. It gives you the goose bumps. That is in China, Southern China.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: That's Bryce Canyon, where we went, and of course the Grand Canyon map, I mean, aerial view. Those are the underground—what are they called—the canyons made in the past by aquifers—Richard?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, it's okay. I just actually want to know what this one is, too?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that's from Pamukkale. It's in Turkey. It's like the Minerva fountain in Yellowstone that I was telling you. It's volcanic, water, sulpherous water emerging and forming those beautiful steps. It's in Denizli, a great site in Turkey. I don't know if they stress it Pamúkkale or Pamukkále.

AVIS BERMAN: How do you spell that?

ATHENA TACHA: P-A-M-U-K-A-L-E. [sic.]

AVIS BERMAN: Makes sense.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So let me see, so anyway, getting now back to D.C., besides these commissions or local opportunities, I would just wonder if there was anything else within the art community, the museums.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh yes, I have a gallery, Marsha Mateyka Gallery, which is the most established contemporary art gallery, operating since 1983.

AVIS BERMAN: Marsha?

ATHENA TACHA: Marsha Mateyka. Here, I'll give you her announcements of my—well, I had actually a first show with her in 2004. She is from Cleveland and she happened to have known and admired my public art in Cleveland. She opened a gallery here in '83 and it's still very much operating.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And then I had another show with her in 2008. I'll find the announcement in a minute; and then I had a show at the Katzen Arts Center at American University for which I did a series of sculptures that were small landscapes. Because of my lack of space now, I decided to make miniature sculptures and photographic works.

So these are photographs from a place in Arizona called the Wave—that's what Agnes Gund bought, that work. But I decided to make all of my color photographs from the past years and recent digital photographs, to make them into—well, environments in a way because these are not individual photographs, well, the time element comes in.

I used to make films. These are films from '69 and well I was not a filmmaker—that's part of my conceptual art too, the filmmaking, and these are very small sculptures of grand canyons. Well, Richard and I visited such canyons. See that red thing?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Slot canyons they're called —I remembered it!

AVIS BERMAN: What kind?

ATHENA TACHA: Slot canyons. They are underground because the water cut the land. The interaction of land

and water impacts me tremendously and so we went to New Zealand also and we photographed glaciers. But then I decided to make first the canyons. I made a series of tiny canyons.

AVIS BERMAN: Excuse me.

ATHENA TACHA: That was in 2003, from when we made a trip to Utah—Utah and Arizona; and then, after the canyons, I made *Volcano*, which is 9 inches high made of copper, hot glue and black sand—again my interest in unusual materials. (I collect and use sands.) This is a *Waterfall*, and a *Peak* each a foot high, lead and silicone; and this is a *Cave*, stalagmite cave. This a *Creek*, and a *Glacier*—both about a foot long. They are all natural sites that I love, and I made in tiny scale with unusual materials, both natural and artificial, but unrelated to real sites.

Instead of a maquette that is to be enlarged, I made a sculpture of a large phenomenon of nature reduced to this size but evoking the large. It's the opposite of my environmental landscape sculpture. So I had an exhibition at the Katzen Arts Center in 2006 [*Small Wonders*], September 6—October 29, small sculptures of majestic natural sites rendered in a tiny size, and large photographic works made from comparable natural phenomena or sites.

This group of photographic works, which I named photoworks for short, are not simple photographs, but each a continuum of space or time, made with a dozen of related photos. These are rock ripples that I shot at Zion Canyon in '80—I've got to put my glasses on—and a lava flow that I photographed in Hawaii also in '80; these are the slot canyons (that Richard mostly shot, because I couldn't climb in them); this is a chicken mushroom colony in D.C., and this is from New Zealand—trees and also bark interests me a great deal. So all those semi-abstract images of nature combined in photographic ensembles, together with the related small sculptures were in my *Small Wonders* show, repeated a bit reduced at the Kouros Gallery in New York [Spring 2007].

AVIS BERMAN: New York.

ATHENA TACHA: Kouros [Gallery], Angelos Camillos has always been interested in my work since the Zabriskie days and I did a piece in his land in Long Island—no, not Long Island, Connecticut, he has a big property—for a summer kind of show.

But again, he never managed to sell anything except this work to Agnes Gund, who bought it because she's a friend of mine. And so these have been my activities since Washington. Yes, you can have those if you want.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, I will, and anything else about also living on the East Coast or living in Washington, having that big change that's notable?

ATHENA TACHA: In Oberlin I had three studios because the college was giving me space for storage and for work. So that hasn't changed really except that it's my responsibility now to rent the building.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Any regrets about moving?

ATHENA TACHA: Hmm?

AVIS BERMAN: Any regrets about leaving Oberlin?

ATHENA TACHA: No, no we are delighted with Washington. We love Washington and we didn't want to move in New York because it's too expensive and too tough. I mean, we lived a year there in '81-'82 on the Lower East Side, Grand Street.

AVIS BERMAN: That would have been tough then anyway.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, but we loved it, the year, and I had a studio at P.S. 1, so I was crossing the river and being in my studio. But in fact, that's where I did most of the work for the Zabriskie second show in '81 or '82, whenever it was the show, the second show, '82, I think.

So we loved it, but to go permanently there you have to have a lot of money and I love nature. I want to have a garden. So you have to be Victor Ganz to have a Gramercy Park apartment.

AVIS BERMAN: You either have to have a lot of money, or you have to move into a very small space, which wouldn't have worked.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that's exactly it. I had all that work. I gave things away. I threw things away. But I still have 250 models in my studio.

AVIS BERMAN: I want to ask you one more thing about the Muhammad Ali plaza because you do consider it so pivotal in your work, if you could redo something, would you redo anything having to do with the glass or doing the fountains?

ATHENA TACHA: No, I think I wouldn't. It's just that probably I would have used Plexiglas for the same fountain. Plexiglas, or Lexan, is softer of course and the sun can damage it. Glass is immutable in that way. But I trusted that those people knew their job and could handle that. They created actually a very textured glass, which is very nice for the effect.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: So I have—they are beautiful photographs and videos that Richard mostly made because I was busy with the programmer when we were there and he did most of the photography and all of the videos.

AVIS BERMAN: Besides that, is there any—what other maintenance should be done on that to keep it—

ATHENA TACHA: The amphitheater is as problematic, as are all of my step sculptures. They need inspections twice a year, removal of weeds, sweeping, fixing joints and this more because of poor craftsmanship. So the maintenance is necessary, as necessary as in a house or more and people don't do it because they think it should last.

AVIS BERMAN: So I guess you always have to get local contractors as opposed—or the lowest bid. Is that what happened there?

ATHENA TACHA: Usually. Yes, right.

AVIS BERMAN: I think this is a good time to take a break.

ATHENA TACHA: Okay, yes, it is.

AVIS BERMAN: Though we will continue. Thank you.

[End disc two.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman recording Athena Tacha for the third interview of the Archives of American Art GSA Oral History Program on December 5th, 2009, in her studio in Washington. And in this interview and the one that follows, we're going to chronologically start—

ATHENA TACHA: Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: —looking at public art pieces. Now, so we are now moving back to the early '70s for you, and when you're beginning to think about public art. And I would like—then, what did you feel made a work of art public?

ATHENA TACHA: Being accessible to everybody, whether it is in the cityscape or in a park or—not in the wilderness. I mean, that is the difference between site-specific public art and land art. [Michael] Heizer worked out in the canyons. And of course he selected the canyon, but it might have made no difference if it is this canyon or another canyon—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —I suspect. And, again, Smithson selected the flat lake of Utah—I mean Salt Lake City—but I think any similar lake would have done because his specialty is abstract projects, really, much as he fitted it with the land in terms of selecting stone from the area, etcetera, etcetera. But it is—the shape of it is totally unrelated to the environment.

So, to the contrary, my work, although initially it started with those staircases that were abstract, they could have been placed in any park, flat land, let's say. As of '74, when I designed something for the banks of the Charles River, I realized that a form can emerge from the site itself, and I had no previous concept at all about what I might do in that site.

I selected the site because it was empty. It was the only part of the banks that was not a dump site or an industrial site. It was just the rubble and bushes, and also the utopian idea that it might someday be built and that's why I got the plans from the city and planned it meticulously.

And I did select the highest incline that I could find, not flat land, because it's cheaper to build steps on an incline than start from nothing. So aside from that, though, everything else came out of the site—the proximity

of the river, the fact that the river was freezing and the slabs of ice were wedging themselves against the banks, the fact that I wanted to create access from a highway to the water for people to admire and reach the water. Even polluted, it doesn't matter; water is still beautiful for me.

And I wanted people to be able to see the form of the sculpture from above as they descend, and I wanted it to be also a utilitarian thing, a park where children can play, people can sit for picnic, and even I created a small amphitheater on the turn of the bridge—from the road to the bridge for outdoor performances—informal performances.

So, after that I wanted then to apply those ideas that developed so spontaneously for the Charles River and out of my experience of the past four years when I had been creating art for the outdoors. I wanted to make them reality, so I got an NEA grant—

AVIS BERMAN: Wait. Before we do that, I just want to ask a little bit of a follow-up to the general question on the NEA grant, which is that was your original thinking. I would like to know how that, in terms of looking at public art, original thought may have evolved or been refined or changed over the years, I mean, from your original conception, how you look at public art.

ATHENA TACHA: It hasn't changed, actually. For me—I became a public artist, as I told you, because of the Vietnam War, because of the upheavals of the late '60s—social upheavals. I wanted to create something for public spaces that could also be used; in other words, a place where people could sit, where children can play.

I mean, I wanted to define the role of the artist as a socially valid entity and not just decorative or aesthetic. So that was very important for me and has been all along, and that's why whenever I accepted any commission I wanted no matter what site it was, how crass or horrible in terms of urban environment, I still wanted it to be useful, to make it better and to make people acquire aesthetic sensitivity without even realizing it.

My ideal prototypes were the Spanish Steps in Rome, which were used as—built as you can go down the steps to lead you from the upper level to the lower level of the street—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —but also are used by people tremendously.

AVIS BERMAN: Great gathering place.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, exactly. That was my ideal public art, and still is. I haven't succeeded always because of the budgets, the small budgets, and because American cities do not often lead to this kind of experience. People don't gather so much in a public space as they do in European cities.

The *Fontana di Trevi* also was a great example because, aside from the mythological figures, which didn't interest me, the environment—the people come to refresh themselves, to see other people, to see the water. That was what I was trying to emulate. And therefore I saw the role of the artist as a useful role, and it still stayed that way, maybe—

AVIS BERMAN: To make a place.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, created a place that is used for useful purposes or entertainment purposes, but also of aesthetic value, so that it permeates the unconscious—fills? unconsciously—the viewer with beauty. I absolutely insist that art has to be beautiful. Form is very important, but I don't want to impose it in a way that is unacceptable to the people. I want to have it naturally become part of their experience.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, in terms of being unacceptable, I mean, should sometimes people look at work a little harder or get a little bit more educated? Does the artist always—

ATHENA TACHA: Well, that—I thought that should be the role of the living artist, to explain the work to the people, and I think there should be educational programs through television or through tours or whatever to make people aware of what they have seen. It always helps. If I take people to a site of mine, they appreciate it a lot more because I can make them see things that they might not see otherwise.

Education is very important but I don't think that controversy is, to me, a good agent for introducing the public to art.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, now, I had interrupted you. You were going to mention the NEA grant. And I think—

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, Yes. How I entered the reality of public domain, I had gotten a small NEA grant, $4,000 that they were giving to individual artists, and I felt instead of using it to work in my studio, why don't I use it to

create some public sculpture?

So I went to the government of my town in Oberlin and I said, "Listen; I have this $4,000 and I'm willing to give it to create a work of art for the city. And since it's easier to build on an incline something for people to sit on or to play on, why don't you give me a site on the creek?" There is a little park there which now is called the Martin Luther King Park because Oberlin has an important black community, which was called Plum Creek. It's a tiny creek that floods in the winter and dries in the summer, kind of.

So we went around with the city people, officials, and selected a spot, and out of my own lack of experience I selected a spot that is oriented north, which was a total mistake because it doesn't get enough sunshine and therefore a lot of humidity has disfigured the stone.

In any case, at that point the 4,000 dollars weren't going to get me very far and so I suggested to the city to apply for an Ohio Arts Council Grant to get some extra money because they didn't give it to individuals at the time, only to institutions. So they applied and got a thousand dollars with a requirement to match the funds.

So they offered services and they built the foundation. I made, by that time, a model [*Streams*]. They approved it. I have the model still in my studio. And they created three platforms of concrete for the foundation. So all of that was designed to be built with my students on the platforms—I mean, I paid them the minimum wage or no fee, to build it as an experience, a learning experience. So it's very small. It's 30 feet by 20 feet by 10 feet high.

And then we built it with concrete blocks because I had already built two temporary sculptures—no, one temporary—the Blossom Center, I was telling you yesterday, at the musical festival, the spiraling staircase.

So we built it with cement block, solid cement block, mostly—the surface anyway. So when people saw it they said, oh, it's so beautiful, and they offered—a citizen offered me $500. "And you cover it with stone," he said. And then another citizen, an industrialist, offered me another $500, and some others gave smaller amounts and we had $1,500 to cover it with stone.

So I ordered stone from the quarries, local quarries of sandstone because Ohio has a lot of sandstone. So all the steps are covered with sandstone, and the risers as well. And the rough edges distinguish the fronts of the steps.

At the intervals I was going to make concrete forms, "soft" concrete—like cloud sculptural forms, but once I used stones, then we bought some pink pumice rocks, and so the steps are yellow sandstone, which became now gray with humidity, and the rock clusters pink pumice. And then river pebbles, lake pebbles all around.

So, actually it works as an erosion prevention because the creek floods up to here sometimes and has worn out the banks on both sides of the river but not my sculpture. I mean, it keeps the banks intact.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, which was unintended, I guess, at the time.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I didn't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: I mean, I had no knowledge—this was the first work and that's why I considered it as one of my most pivotal works because it not only encompasses my aesthetic in miniature. The irregularities of the Charles River are here, but this is a vernacular that is industrial because I based all the irregularities on the cement block units in terms of width, height and depth of the steps. But I wanted to create the effects of rippling and downward motion of water, cascading—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —with the river. The whole thing must be really a creek, you know? It's on a creek and it's a creek experience itself.

AVIS BERMAN: It's called *Streams*.

ATHENA TACHA: *Streams*, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: There is no literal water coming down.

ATHENA TACHA: No, the stream is around here. The water is down here but the sculpture looks like streams of water.

So that is the first, and I made it, as I said, with student help. And then it happened when I got to stone—there was a—what do you call that when people don't have work? A strike—a strike of masons in my area. So Richard

said, "Why don't you ask the masons to contribute some free labor since they are getting compensation money?" So they did.

I went to the mason union of the area and I said, "Is there anybody who would like to come and work free for a sculpture? Your children will play in the park." So two or three men came and helped me finish the concrete understructure. Then they went back to work because the strike ended, but when I got the stone, I had enough money to pay the same masons to come and build the stone because the students could not build stone. I mean, that's professional work.

So, that's how this was made. I didn't make a penny on it. I didn't lose any money. I gave my grant. So, the—

AVIS BERMAN: But you learned from it.

ATHENA TACHA: Hmm?

AVIS BERMAN: You learned.

ATHENA TACHA: I learned a tremendous amount. It was conceived in '75 at Christmas time in Guatemala, actually. We were traveling. And I made a little model with scissors and cardboard, and the drawing there, and then I made a bigger model, brick to brick, the entire thing now in my studio.

We finished the actual work in the summer of '76, and that was the anniversary year, the bicentennial anniversary. So competitions started appearing all over the country. Meanwhile, the NEA program had started and GSA—that's all there was in public art in those days: NEA, GSA, and then Dade County was an initial county program—

AVIS BERMAN: A pioneer.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. And Seattle started then—except Philadelphia had a program of public art since '48.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, well, that's the Fairmount Park.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that was antiquated, kind of.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, those are free-standing traditional sculptures.

ATHENA TACHA: Exactly. And the state of Hawaii also was the first state to have a public art program—1 percent type of thing. So that was all there was. But then from the bicentennial spurted a great wave of commissions so I applied for one in Cleveland, which is this one here, the first arcade.

This *Tension Archer* is for a little mall—pedestrian mall or other little triangular plaza. And it was only $10,000, the amount. They wanted a vertical sculpture, but I wanted something that is open, that people can interact with, can pass through and doesn't block traffic visually. So I made that out of stainless steel and then painted green and red the two sides so that you see—from different traffic directions you see two different sculptures.

AVIS BERMAN: Is that still there?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, they changed the mall and they moved it to the performance arts center grounds, music center, and we painted it this ochre and this red, or blue and ochre. I forget. But it exists, yes, and they did it with my advice, so it still exists.

And that's what I call *Tension Arches*, which are my first vertical sculptures, because I realized I had to develop a style not only for horizontal but for vertical interaction sculptures.

AVIS BERMAN: Is there any conservation that goes on with S*treams*?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, they repair things as things are needed. I told them to weed it or sweep it. How much they do I don't know, but they are trying to be supportive and they—it still exists. I photographed it last time I was there.

So this series actually was continued in Toledo, then in Miami with *Leaning Arches*, through the '80s. And then I developed another type of vertical sculpture in the Columbus Airport, which was destroyed—and then another one with columnar parts.

But this [*Curving Arcades*] was the sculpture that I told you I created that's in Arizona. That is the biggest of them. But I carried with my students two arches of that in plywood in real size—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, to—

ATHENA TACHA: —to try out the scale.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —this thing, two of them, we carried.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. And now let us move chronologically—now, you've had just the one GSA commission. Is that correct, *Ripples*?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ATHENA TACHA: I didn't know that you can have more than one, actually.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, most artists don't get more. I mean, the most anyone usually gets is two. I think that—

ATHENA TACHA: How did Larry [Kirkland] get three? He's a go-getter.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Very go-getter.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess so, but most people have—yes, I think he had three. Somebody's got three. I know that. Well, if you can do courthouses, there are always tons of courthouses. So that's the—

ATHENA TACHA: Where you can get more, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I think we should now go to *Ripples*, which is the GSA piece. And you were, I guess, in Rome at a certain point?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, we were—Richard had the fellowship, a sabbatical in '78, that year in Rome.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ATHENA TACHA: And I don't know how many works I had done before that. I have a list I can show you, but maybe three or four—certainly the Smithtown with Doris Freedman. That was in '76. And that was the first park designed by an artist not a landscape architect—a mini-park but still a park, and people liked it a lot but they didn't maintain it.

So this was my first national commission, and Lawrence Alloway recommended me as a possible candidate for that, having seen the *Charles River* at the AIR [Gallery, New York]. Then the G.S.A. *Ripples* was my second national commission, but now the earliest because Smithtown was destroyed.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, did you send slides in?

ATHENA TACHA: To GSA?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. How did—

ATHENA TACHA: I don't know. I can't remember about GSA because I was in Europe, first of all, and it was such a surprise that they—I may have sent—like some people send slides generally of their work for the files of GSA. I don't know.

But they called me—Don [Thalacker] I think called me and said, "Well, you were selected for a commission in Norfolk, Virginia, with $50,000," and that was a huge amount in those days. And I said, "Well, I'm in Europe; what can I do?" And he said, "Well, you'll have to risk paying your own way because we can't afford to pay you to come."

So I decided I would, and I went—flew to Norfolk for couple of days from Rome and looked at the site and discussed with the architects and with Don. And the architects wanted—well, here is the pavement. It has a grid. These are the columns towards the building. And—oh, you have that, actually. We don't need that except for the color.

The brick was very red—red brick with the biggest arch in front of the building—square arch of red-enamel here. And the brick of the pavement was brown. So it was a very difficult site because, aside from the grid that was

down there and the redness of the building, there were a lot of craft pavilions all over the mall. I mean, it was just a very mixed—aesthetically mixed site.

But they wanted water, either a fountain or a pool, so I proposed this first *Interlock* because with 50,000 dollars I thought—I found a technique, a new technique that I wanted to try out, of soft-cast concrete. That is cast in molds of cloth, like burlap sacks, that type of thing, but continuous molds so you can make any shape you want.

And the reason, actually, was because flying over Norfolk to come to see the site, I experienced the land around it, which is this, the Baywater area, which is full of fingers and interlocking land and water. So I thought I should evoke the landscape of the area in the work. So that's how this came up—a lake that is like a hand and the fingers of land crossing it.

So, that would have been—the concrete would have been tinted earth color. So I made that model, actually, in Greece. My cousin sewed it. And I filled it with sand in the Sahara, because we had gone to Egypt from Rome and Greece, and tried it out. And then when we returned in the fall of '78 I proposed it to the people. And they liked it but they said, "We can't have water unless we have a recycling system—reservoir of water and recycled water. Well, that would have cost another $25,000.

So I had to scrap the project. And I said, "Well, we can't do it," so they said you have to propose something else. And I was really not knowing what to propose but then I decided to go in the opposite direction—instead of organic, to do something rectilinear, which is cheap to cast in concrete—in regular concrete.

And I had done some sculptures of this sort in the earlier '70s where I was using—wait a second. I have a better drawing someplace here. But, in any case, I was using straight lines and diagonals, opening and closing like fans but with the ups and downs alternating.

So I created two units, really—this unit and this unit—that by changing their position and the arrangement, you create a variety of ups and downs and patterns. You see how irregular it looks—because I was still absolutely firm about non-minimal regularity, against regularity.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And so I managed to create irregularity, with two very regular-looking units—the advantage of the regularity is that you can cast these in the same molds—I thought of using pre-cast concrete and have a company cast—make molds and cast all the units—in two molds. But then the units were so big that—20 by 10 feet and three feet high—that it would have cost an awful lot for transportation. So, it turned out, after all the research with pre-cast factories, that I couldn't do it.

And then Virginia had a contractor friend in Norfolk.

AVIS BERMAN: Virginia Zabriskie?

ATHENA TACHA: Zabriskie. I was with Virginia already at that time. And she said, "I'll call"—I forget his name now; I have it here; Goodrich, I think—"Larry Goodrich and see if he can help you." So, he said, "Well, I'll find you a small company that will cast that." All that information actually is in the text I gave you yesterday—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —from the video because I had a video done, which is in very bad condition and therefore it can't be shown, but I wrote the script for it.

So, a small company with five workmen built that. And I started—I proposed the second model in the spring of '79 and they started building it in August. So I went there for two weeks and oversaw the building of two units.

It turned out that the weather was so hot in Norfolk in August that the concrete started drying before they could cast it. So it was faulty and full of holes when it was hardened, and they had to destroy the first unit they cast.

So they cast two more and they had to work until 10:30 at night to be able to avoid the effect of the heat. Then they sprinkled it and covered it with plastic to be able to cure with normal—not so much heat—the normal humidity.

So, after they cast the first three units, I had to leave and a young artist graduate student of sculpture who befriended me—her father was a contractor—offered to supervise and photograph for me. Of course, she didn't have any experience and not much time, so it was hardly a supervision.

Finally, when they finished it, it was pretty faulty surface-wise because what they do is they cast it and then instead of having perfect surfaces, after it's cast they do what they call rubbing. They rub a fresh layer of

concrete onto it.

But, oh, they had also a hurricane during the construction, so that delayed them two weeks because they just couldn't do anything with it. And so we finished it in the fall of '79 finally, and it was too set and too dry when they did the final rubbing so it wasn't a very perfect job and it didn't weather very well, and that's why GSA had to restore it. And it's white concrete. It gets dirty, you know, and moldy. It has drains at every lower level.

But it is quite used by people in terms of sitting and playing, and I have early photographs—these are pristine photographs. But I have photos with people—so you can go climbing on it—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. What kind of—who was the audience for this? What kind of offices were in the building?

ATHENA TACHA: The building is a state office building but the mall is a shopping mall—I mean stores. And so it's a mixed audience, you know, but being a city, an American city, pedestrian malls are not very populated.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And at night there's nobody there. It's unlike European cities, where people move all the time at all times of the day. So, it was used quite a bit, but I couldn't follow, being so far away. I mean, Norfolk from Oberlin is not that close.

AVIS BERMAN: So you feel you needed more of a travel budget to go back. Would things have been better if you had been able to go back and forth?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I don't know. I think that it was a matter of the total budget for the job—it was five workmen and uneven weather. And I don't know that they could have done much better if they had 20 workmen on the job and they could work faster, and only when the conditions were good for the concrete, the craftsmanship would have been better.

But it's always a matter of budget, you know? All of those works of art are made with minimal budgets. And so, for a large work like a landscape piece, you need a lot of money.

AVIS BERMAN: Was there some way—I mean, once you were selected, where was GSA in the process with you? You're talking about the workmen.

ATHENA TACHA: GSA didn't have anything to do once they approved the project. The model was given to the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art, whatever it's called; it keeps changing. And I guess they came and approved it at the end, and so did the architect, but it was totally in my hands.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, how about your relationship with the architect? How did he or she feel about that?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, they approved again but they had finished the building so they had—they washed their hands. I mean, that was after the building was finished. So I don't think that either of the architects—I can't remember that but I don't think any of the architects or Don were involved with the process of building. But it was a tremendously complex process and a tremendously instructive process for me again.

AVIS BERMAN: Instructive because?

ATHENA TACHA: Because I learned so much about building. From every one of my commissions I learn and learn and learn, and I now have a 40-year experience about all of those techniques and how things are done. I learned about gunite—with Smithtown. I learned about cast concrete with *Ripples*. I learned about building with stones and concrete blocks with *Streams*. I learned about steel with my arcades. All of those are techniques that are not used in the studio or taught in schools.

AVIS BERMAN: So, what did the restoration consist of in—

ATHENA TACHA: Well, the restoration consisted—here is the portfolio of the restoration. They power-washed the sculpture. They started—[inaudible]—upside down. Here. This is how it had got kind of dirty-looking, I mean, dark. And so they power-washed it, as they show in photos—and they removed any loose joints and loose particles. And the surfaces—see, they had developed some cracks because the sculpture was in 20—no, how many pieces it is? 12 huge pieces.

And so they filled the cracks where needed. See, they opened up the loose stuff and filled it. And then they sent me—the conservator is showing it before and after the power-washing here, how much the color changed with the washing. They got back to the initial concrete as much as possible, removed dirt and molds and whatever had built up.

And then they finished it. These are photographs from before, I think. Well, maybe during—after they washed it. And then they covered it—they gave it a coating of a compound that is out in the market, and I had used it, actually, in *Streams* on the sides where there was no stone, and it became white again. So, now, it obviously will get dirty again and will get, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: Did they come to you about what—your suggestions to—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, the conservator [Robert] Lodge actually is from Oberlin, Ohio, if you can believe it—happened to be—called and said, "They hired me to do—GSA hired me to restore your work." And so he told me what he was doing and then he asked my opinion about that coating, which I had very good experience with, and I told him, "It's fine, from my experience."

And, as a matter of fact, white concrete came out of my love of the Greek island architecture, and I had initially hoped to paint the risers of the steps with that material. I forget its name now but maybe it's mentioned here someplace. Thoroseal, that's what it's called.

AVIS BERMAN: T-H-O-R—

ATHENA TACHA: It's a commercial—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Thoroseal. Or Thorocoat.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: And it sticks very well to concrete and it coats completely. Here is the difference.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I had intended to use that compound on the risers with very pastel colors—blues, pinks—like the Greek island houses, and I couldn't afford it so we just—and here they're caulking the joints between units.

AVIS BERMAN: Now that this has been done, what kind of conservation—I mean, it looks like they kind of made it in better shape than it was because they protected it more. So, what would be needed in the future?

ATHENA TACHA: Probably the same thing. You know, they'll have—when it gets dirty again they'll have to wash it and make sure the drains work, because there are drains at every bottom step here; fill cracks if needed, and give it another coating of Thorocoat.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And this fits in—I mean, now, have they rebuilt—or is the space still—

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, they did another thing. They changed the mall's pavement and the planting. So they consulted me again on that, and I can't remember exactly what they changed but I have correspondence here and they wanted—here is the—plan?—and they wanted to put a kind of raised pavement around it—and I said no to that.

And magnolias they wanted to put around it. I remember now—black circles, trees? That was my question to the person.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, yes, they wanted to put a bed of flowers next to it, and I felt that was contrary to my concept because here is the initial pavement. I mean, I designed it for that. And I can't remember if they followed my suggestions—I haven't gone back.

But somehow, you know, I have been usually so disappointed with the lack of preservation maintenance or the changes that people want to make always around something—you design something for a particular space and they change the space around it. I mean, they don't have the concept that they have to preserve it since you designed it for it. So, always modernizing and updating etcetera.

My first destroyed sculpture [*Crossings*] was because they wanted to expand the airport of Columbus and so they had given me a courtyard to build a sculpture and six years later they needed the courtyard for expansion. You see, that's why I don't want any more to do public sculpture, and to be clear about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Is there anything you would have done different on this other than, if you'd had the

money, added some pastel hues to it?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, with a smaller sculpture, if I had another 5,000 dollars I could have done that. But to build that huge imperfect form, I should have had twice the budget. You know, to have a company that had more workmen, better workmen and full supervision and so on.

It's always—I would build within the limits of the budget and I refuse to not make any money because I want to make at least 10 percent or 5 percent, depending on how big the margin is—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —because otherwise I think I shouldn't be in the business. I think it is a profession—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —being an artist. I want to be professional about it and not just for fame.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. No, there's no reason why you should be subsidizing the U.S. government—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes—

AVIS BERMAN: —or any—

ATHENA TACHA: —or anybody—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —because if they want public art and I am willing to do art that is of social service, they should pay normal wages for it and not always skimpy.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, right. Actually, that leads me to another question because you have worked for corporations and states and all sorts of organizations—

ATHENA TACHA: Very few corporations, only this one here and one in Ashland, Ohio, outside of Columbus. That was my only private commission in my whole career. It's mostly states and city and federal organizations.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, that's—what I want to ask you is—

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, universities—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: I mean schools—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: Entities. So mostly nonprofit entities.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Then I guess what I want to ask you is that, are there any special considerations that an artist should take into account when the federal government is the client?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I think they should probably be more generous, which they now probably are. I mean, probably they paid Serra plenty of money to do that [*Arc*]. I don't know. It depends also—I suppose if the artist has the power to negotiate, but I think the commission preexists for a particular space, a particular building because they base them on the building budget.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, the percent, yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. I think it's great that the federal government does that, but I do think that it's better to build less—fewer projects and better financed because artists are always working on the margin of the budget, you know, barely fitting it.

It's inevitable because they want to do the best but how much can you do unless you or your gallery can pay? Your dealer may pay, or if you have a rich family and your own income, then you pay yourself. But that's not professional and I don't think the government should encourage or profit from that.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, absolutely. No, I'm just also exploring if there were in terms of a public art process in general, just improvements from the artist's point of view that might improve things.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, money. [They laugh.] Well, let me show you a few slides of the construction so that you understand how complex this construction was and—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I would actually rather—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: I would rather move on and get some of this done.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, okay. Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, I take your word for it.

ATHENA TACHA: You want to do first the—

[Cross talk.]

ATHENA TACHA: —works. Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and I also wanted to ask you some more—you know, a few more questions that now also—which I think is related—is that you have seen, since the '70s, a real proliferation of public art, and I'm just wondering—I mean, it sounds like you think that the majority of it isn't so great, or—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, I think there are two things—several things, actually, comments I have about it. One is that because everybody became aware that public sculpture or landscape needs maintenance more than traditional bronze, although it does, too, and they never had thought about it. They never had budgeted for it.

So they started their movement toward temporary art and they do only temporary projects, some organizations, which is a good idea but I don't think that it is the perfect solution either because although it exposes the public to a lot more ideas, it is also a waste of money in a way because nothing remains of it. I mean, look at Christo's things. Only photos remain, and films.

AVIS BERMAN: But he raises all this—[inaudible]—money.

ATHENA TACHA: I know, but it's his business.

AVIS BERMAN: Exactly.

ATHENA TACHA: Exactly. So it's his business how to use his money. But if all public sculpture was temporary—I mean, to me, being a Greek and being raised with Egypt at proximity, I think if all of those countries used temporary art, nothing would have remained of their culture. No Parthenon, the pyramids, nothing.

And when the government here started—and the institutions started to want permanent art and they were telling me permanent materials, least maintenance, and I tried to use granite and stainless steel, et cetera. And then they don't maintain it. Why the hell do they ask for permanent materials? There is nothing more permanent than granite, but granite also—the joints of granite go bad. I mean, it needs maintenance.

I think, though, that going to temporary is not the solution. I think they should do fewer works. But now, of course, are all the states have a percent for art programs, all the cities, and it has become an industry, and I think the personnel has become more professional, and that's the problem—both the problem and the benefit.

The benefit because they have more experience, but a problem because they have personalities and they want to promote their own personality by doing such and such a project and so many projects. And that's not a good solution, because it seems to me that they should do fewer projects and better projects.

The other problem is our society. Aside from the lack of aesthetic education, the change—the constant change. Americans need this constant change. There is nothing to keep permanent things. And even nature of course destroys things, like Smithson's *Jetty*, nature will take it over, but meanwhile a developer wants to build around it.

So, I mean, Smithson has become an icon in outdoors work, and even so, it's hard to preserve his piece. So, when the lifetime of a skyscraper is average 25 to 75 years, what do you expect for permanence here? So it's a conflicted concept, public art.

And Doris—I mean, what's the last name again?

AVIS BERMAN: Doris Freedman?

ATHENA TACHA: Freedman, who was a pioneer in this field and really wanted the best and the most permanent and tried to facilitate it in the best way, her successors in the public—what is the organization, New York Public Art Fund?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes—have decided—opted totally for nonpermanent art and they finance only temporary projects. Well, like how much they spent on the waterfalls of what's his name—

AVIS BERMAN: Eliasson.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Olafur Eliasson.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right. I didn't see them so I can't judge if they were successful, you know, aesthetically, but it seemed to me from films and photographs I saw that they were not worth the money they spent on them.

And I think that with that money they could have done one good permanent project by somebody good, either him or other people. There are plenty of good artists who have experience in permanent work.

So, it's all of those factors that make the field controversial, to say the least, right now, but in my opinion I think it's good to have some temporary works and some permanent works, but fewer and better financed and certainly with a maintenance budget.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So that's what you mostly feel bitter about is the lack of maintenance, as opposed—not the opportunities or lack thereof?

ATHENA TACHA: No, to the contrary. There are more opportunities and there are many more of us because there are more opportunities.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And all the younger artists who are very ambitious and don't have any idea what happened in the past because nobody studies history of recent art in America—as we know, even the art of the '60s was taught only by Ellen Johnson at that time. Nobody teaches now art of the last quarter of the twentieth century. They start since 1945 to maybe the '70s at best.

AVIS BERMAN: Maybe one of the byproducts—I mean, we're talking about the lack of maintenance—is that art is not perceived as essential to society.

ATHENA TACHA: That's what goes first.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, or it's a frill and that's why you're not getting the maintenance because—

ATHENA TACHA: So, what you need is education first, and the consciousness that art enriches life and therefore it's essential, not peripheral—as essential as technology. But now we have another problem, that the advertising industry, which was trained in good schools and has excellent imagery, has become so well-financed because importance for capitalism—

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, right.

ATHENA TACHA: —that a lot of the talented people go there, first of all. Second, it has also become part of entertainment with the MTV wave of thinking. And so, advertisement, entertainment and performance have become more essential in the visual arts, or the visual arts are merging with them. So there is, again, no interest in permanence. It's only about temporary and temporal—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Also here, I guess would you consider—would you consider *Ripples* a step sculpture or not?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes, absolutely because people can walk on it, up and down. And the up and downs create a field of perception—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —both visual and kinesthetic, with the body, that is like dance in a way, that create awareness about our body's existence in space and how we function through gravity and through our limbs adapting to gravity. I mean, we became vertical beings out of monkeys. That is a feat in body against gravity. And if we have a tilted plane, either the vertical or the horizontal, immediately we perceive it and immediately we get disoriented and immediately we have a different concept about stability.

And so, all of those things I want people to become aware as they walk on my sculpture, and the complexity of space and the complexity of—

AVIS BERMAN: I actually like—

ATHENA TACHA: —of relationships.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I like the metaphor of the opened and closed fans. I like the fan shape there; not that that's not a step because I—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, they are, actually, both, they also go up and down. They open and close, and while they do that, they go up and down. You see, I displace the lowest and the highest step at every row so that this—wait a second.

This is high, high, high in between the diagonal. Here the diagonal is the highest. Here again the parallel to the edge is the highest, and on the other the diagonal, but in a different form from the first; and the second group is in a different form from the fourth. In other words, the alternation of ups and downs and of openings creates that activity of space.

AVIS BERMAN: I was wondering if you—you know, at a certain point in your work you were interested in the idea of the fragment and I didn't know if—

ATHENA TACHA: Very much so.

AVIS BERMAN: And I don't know if those figure into these early sculptures, but it's—

ATHENA TACHA: Very much so. In fact, my second showing at Zabriskie was called *Fragmentation*, and I made a whole series of works, which started from a continuum and then I fragmented the continuum in different ways.

And actually, I took sometimes principles from nature like mud cracking and what formations it forms as it breaks, or ice cracking on a lake surface and how it fragments in different ways. And I made a whole series of sculptures with that principle.

AVIS BERMAN: This seemed to me—obviously it's ordered, but somehow the idea of the—

ATHENA TACHA: Ordered but yet—it's very orderly but it looks very disorderly, and that's what fascinates me about this piece. Actually, if you saw it in great condition, it's a very interesting piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think your interest in fragmentation came out of your love for and studies of Rodin?

ATHENA TACHA: I don't think so. That's interesting, though, to think about it because Rodin did fragment his sculpture and combined fragments of his sculpture, but it was more—I think what motivated me more was the wish for chaos and order combined. I mean, this is actually a prime example of that because from—

[Cross talk.]

ATHENA TACHA: —it looks so orderly.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I just want to say we're still talking about *Ripples*, the GSA piece, for the tape.

ATHENA TACHA: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: So, if you're seeing it from above, it looks, Yes, very—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, when I say "it" I should say *Ripples*. It's a kind of stylization of waves on the surface of water, and actually it's not unrelated to that either because that's exactly what this inspiration came from—sand ripples and water ripples.

And I called it *Rippling* at first, but this is an absolutely geometrical rendering of that idea, and yet because of the irregularity of succession of its units—each set is different—it creates a totally chaotic and disorderly perception as you walk on it, which fascinates me and which I want people—I have actually some images that

are even better than this one here because I have four juxtaposed—if I can find it fast; here—four juxtaposed views from different points of view.

And you can see how you constantly perceive breaks in the form, which you don't from above if you look—

AVIS BERMAN: No.

ATHENA TACHA: The progress of changing units is visible from the window of a restaurant, which interests me also, that view.

AVIS BERMAN: Let us go on to this piece, which is *Blair Fountain*, which I think is absolutely spectacular, from about '81 to '83, and let's discuss how—I mean, in terms of water and—this looks extremely successful. And I don't know how you feel—

ATHENA TACHA: It is and they love it. And, actually, it continues all the way to the bottom of the river. You see here a partial sculpture, but when the river is low, you see more of it. So it emerges and gets submerged. Sometimes the river floods. The water goes all the way to here. So it changes shape as the water level moves.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: So how did—was this a competition? How did this come across? This is in Tulsa.

ATHENA TACHA: Tulsa, Oklahoma. Let me think about it, if I applied for the competition or not, or if—again, I had submitted some slides through the Arts Council. I think I applied for the competition and I was selected—I was to collaborate with the architects for the dam. They created the dam and the pool. That pool is to control the flow of water through the river.

And they wanted a fountain in the midst of that pool, so I got inspired by both lava formations and by water dripping—I mean rain puddles, you know, like that dripping that I did, which is on my cupboard someplace. There was a strip of it, wasn't it? Oh, it's in the other catalogue. The bubbles—a raindrop drops there and then it forms concentric circles—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: It's like a Harold Edgerton photograph almost.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right, which I love. But this is a whole surface of them—not one but many contingent—I mean contiguous. The level of the tops differs, and at each top there is a pool, and when there is no wind there is a jet.

And also I put some jets around the fountain, in the river itself, and then there are some rocks in the interstices and some rocks in the river. So the sculpture continues in the pool beyond the actual central structure—

And I collaborated—actually, the initial model is more complex, bigger; there is more to it but, again, the budget constrained me. Usually I create the model and then it gets cut to half because of the expense.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, this does look as if—I mean, it looks—

ATHENA TACHA: It's still sufficient, but it went that far more down. It was much more complex.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And how was working with the architects here?

ATHENA TACHA: Very good. Actually there was a young architect, Jim Manzelmann, who was part of the engineering firm that did the dam, and I think he's mentioned actually in—if you have this book—I saw you copied some pages from it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: He is mentioned in my introduction.

So, we collaborated very well and they were very happy with it. And a lady—a rich lady paid for the expense, Mrs. Blair, and that's why it became *Blair Fountain*.

AVIS BERMAN: And so, did you—how long—did you have to, shall we say, live in Tulsa or what?

ATHENA TACHA: I went many times, selected the rocks and the positioning of them. I can't remember how many

times but it took us three years to build, I think—what is it, '81 to '83. And I must have gone a dozen times throughout the—

AVIS BERMAN: And how do you measure the—you know, the success or effectiveness of this as a public piece?

ATHENA TACHA: I think it's very successful. Again, they don't maintain it. They don't clean the jets and some of them do not go to the proper height. This is at the proper height when it was first built—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —because it's when I photographed it. This is probably later or possibly with higher wind when the jets go down. But, yes, I noticed that—a number of times Jim sent me photographs and some of the jets weren't working. The river had flooded it and muck and wood was in pools, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, you know.

They now maintain it and they seem to love it, and it is in their television—local television, the starting piece, but god knows what I'll find when I go there, and that's why I don't want to go.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So they've never been in touch with you about maintaining it?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, they have, and they claim that they maintain it, and they—you don't know how many instruction letters I've sent to all of the people that—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Now, is this a place, though, that people can come?

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, Yes, they come here, the balcony. In front you see a person there. Maybe they cut it out in the book, but this is a walking promenade and they have festivals and activities.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And he's super-human size, that man.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, what is this over here that looks like a similar circle?

ATHENA TACHA: Another promenade area—

AVIS BERMAN: So there was the—

ATHENA TACHA: —but it doesn't have a lake.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: This has a lake and fish—it is high enough for the fish to travel. I forget what fish they have; I think bass. And also turtles are in the water here. And I have photographs where the turtles sit on my rocks to sun themselves. So the river is alive; very much so.

This is where the boats can come and—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So this promenade was built before the fountain?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. Yes. Everything—this was built and the bottom of the lake was built when they asked me to go see the site, but the water was not there when we built it. The work goes all the way to the bottom.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And what kind of research did you have to do for this piece?

ATHENA TACHA: Aside from studying plans and dimensions, etcetera, etcetera, and getting the concept, then from there on the water part was in their hands because they were engineers and they had a water engineer.

I went to a local quarry and selected rocks, and with a crane—I was there when they placed the rocks. They are local limestone, kind of bluish and yellow at the same time. I don't think I did any research about the water circulation because I left it in their hands. In other fountains, like this one here, I had to do a lot of research about the water.

AVIS BERMAN: Which one is this? Is this in Cleveland?

ATHENA TACHA: Cleveland, yes, *Merging*, which they also have restored and they maintain it very well, as well

as is possible for a fountain because fountains are very difficult to maintain, notoriously so, and especially the water that we use nowadays with chemicals, chlorine, and if it's recycled has other matter in it and makes stains. So fountains are not an idea thing to build unfortunately.

This one that you saw in the Friendship Heights mall—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: —fountain, right.

ATHENA TACHA: —the *Obelisk*, it's a beautiful granite underneath but, again, the craftsmanship of the granite is rushed even though they had a Bolivian workman, who was marvelous, rushed, and then under tremendous heat conditions. And they insisted not to use the caulking I wanted. And it's creating florescence, which is these stains here.

Now, this is a kind of inevitability of modern architecture. I first saw it in Norfolk, in fact. The building—the red brick building, while I was building my *Ripples* sculpture, got oozing with stains—white stains through all the cracks. And I asked the architects, "What is that?" They said, "It's florescence." It's a phenomenon that happens often in brick because the mortars that they use have chemicals—well, nobody knows really. They think it's the lime in the mortar but people have been using lime mortar forever. I mean, our house is built with lime mortar and there's no efflorescence.

But at present they put preservatives, they put new chemicals that haven't been tried enough and they create all those horrible things. In Japan, when we were—all the new granite buildings were full of it. The memorial of the Navy here on Pennsylvania Avenue was disfigured by florescence. They had it cleaned then restored and I don't know if it has stopped.

At some point it apparently gets exhausted, but if you change the type of mortar and caulk you use—like the conservator who restored *Ripples* restored my *Merging* as well, and he claims they used mortar and caulk that won't form efflorescence but it still does, as a matter of fact.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, well, let me go on to another one that I thought was very interesting, which I picked because it's a little bit different so far from what we have discussed—

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, I love that.

AVIS BERMAN: —which is called *Ice Walls* from 1984, and that was a Percent for Art. And this is actually in a museum in Anchorage, Alaska. And so that might be also a different context about what it means to work for a museum, where you would think there would maybe be some art sensitivity.

ATHENA TACHA: No, because the museum is a museum of history, primarily, and art, and it was not commissioned by the museum but by the city of Alaska because the building—

AVIS BERMAN: Anchorage.

ATHENA TACHA: —I mean Anchorage; excuse me. The building was, I guess, commissioned by the city, built by Mitchell/Giurgola [Architects, and Mitchell/Giurgola] had created a pool in the middle of the atrium, with the staircase that leads to the second floor, which has a balcony all around that goes around the pool. And this round balcony of the staircase is under a dome in the atrium.

So, the woman who was running the public art program asked me to design a fountain or a water sculpture in the middle of the pool, and I had designed something round first to fit the shapes of the dome and this—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —made out of glass because of ice. I mean, Alaska is full of ice. But they didn't approve it for earthquake purposes because they have a lot of earthquakes. So we canceled that and I designed something lower. Also, the architect did not want anything higher than four feet high because it would obscure his staircase.

So I designed a totally different thing that is made of glass block again, which looks like ice and does not have active water but simply sits in the water and the water circulates through the walls of the sculpture.

It's a very beautiful piece and I'm very fond of it. And a couple of years ago, because they had a leak in the pool, they claimed, they wanted to cover the pool—obliterate the pool and remove my work and make it a coffee shop for people to sit there. And I kind of fought and said, "Well, if you are a museum to boot, the VARA [Visual Artists Rights Act] is going to allow me to sue you even though it's built before because"—

AVIS BERMAN: What was that acronym?

ATHENA TACHA: VARA—V-A-R-A. It's the legislation protecting public art but it was enacted in '90 so it applies really to contracts post-'90. But, as a matter of fact, if you want to sue somebody, you can sue them even—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: Actually all of my contracts say that they have to preserve the piece because they wanted permanent pieces. So, in any case, my mazes came out of this actually in terms of the concept because it's a water maze.

AVIS BERMAN: So *Marianthe* came out of this one. Right.

ATHENA TACHA: *Marianthe*. Well, this was my first real maze because—

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ATHENA TACHA: —you see, I had to develop a series of different ideas because of different circumstances, and the concept of maze became an open maze in *Marianthe* because they wanted a garden pavilion out in their "green"—a beautiful place at a university.

So, I had to create something airy for Florida—and I love those open brick structures anyway. I admired them in Mexico and in other countries where we travel. So this is also a maze, but it's a see-through maze because it's transparent. And I want my mazes to be not just horizontal but up and down also; in other words, to have the different heights in *Ice Walls* here, based on the unit of the glass block.

And here you can't walk. I would have loved to make this some place big enough to walk through but here it is just for the water to move through and you can perceive the whole thing from around or from above. They made a very beautiful little video of that which I have and will be showing in my Greece retrospective.

AVIS BERMAN: So is this still there or did they remove it?

ATHENA TACHA: No, they were convinced not to remove it and to live with moving the coffee house out in the atrium, but still there is a leak in the pool, and although they are renovating the building, the guy who now runs the Arts Council, the City Arts Council, doesn't know if they will claim that they can't fix the leak. And I said, "For heaven's sakes, leaks can be fixed." There is still the fear that they may want to remove the pool and therefore my piece will go. So that's where we stand at this point.

AVIS BERMAN: And so—

ATHENA TACHA: But that was built—that's my first indoors piece, I think, and one of the very few—three or so I have. But in Alaska, to build out of doors, it's unrealistic.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Right. I think it's great that in terms of maintenance you don't have to worry about weather and nature.

ATHENA TACHA: No, exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: So, there is something to be said for that.

Now, it sounds like this architect was a little uncooperative?

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, well, he simply said he didn't want any sculpture in his pool that was higher than four feet at any point because it would block the view of his staircase, which is a beautiful staircase. But mine is transparent, to a degree, so it doesn't block, very much, the view.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So that wasn't a particular challenge to make at four feet.

ATHENA TACHA: No, no.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you feel it suffered for that?

ATHENA TACHA: No, once I abandoned the concept of the towering fountain—that was a kind of oval fountain that twisted all around. The oval rotated and the water would spill from the top oval glass to the bigger—to the bigger one below. It was a totally different concept from that.

AVIS BERMAN: I like the quietness of this concept, actually.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, I do too. I didn't mind abandoning the other. I mean, many of the times when I came up with a second idea, the second idea was better. So I never regretted—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, was there any commission that it just didn't work out because you came up with this proposal; they didn't like that; you went back? I mean, is there anything that you've ever had that you've just said, enough already, given you—

ATHENA TACHA: No—well, any commission that was abandoned was not because of my doing. It was either because they dragged and dragged and dragged—a commission in Manhattan, Kansas—the city called Manhattan in Kansas—they had commissioned me a plaza with water, and I suggested various possibilities and we settled on one that they liked and approved, but then they couldn't raise money for the development, for the whole—it was a shopping development. They were looking for Sears or some major clients. It took six years to get done with that.

Meanwhile, they changed their administrations or changed their minds about liking my work and they found a local architect who offered them a much cheaper plaza design. And so they cancelled my commission. They had paid me $14,000 already of the work's contract, but we hadn't executed anything. So that's usually what happens—something happens that changes their mind.

In Sacramento I had, in a shopping mall again—the architect had a wonderful public art consultant, Tamara Thomas—

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, yes.

ATHENA TACHA: —who was, again, one of my supporters who died early.

AVIS BERMAN: She's dead? Oh, she was Danny Thomas' daughter.

ATHENA TACHA: Who's Thomas?

AVIS BERMAN: Danny Thomas, the entertainer. I think she was an art dealer too, Tamara Thomas.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, really?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, she was a great lady and she liked very much my work so she got me a commission. That was a private commission that I didn't apply for. She convinced the architects that I was the right person for it.

So they wanted a lot of water, steps going from one level of the shopping to the lower, and waterfalls galore. So I designed, again, a glass staircase with waterfalls on either side and water falling on the side of the steps, and they loved it. I went and presented the project. I have the model. They loved it.

And then they didn't have funds for the development in place so they waited two years. And then at the end—they paid me again, like—I can't remember. It was well—in fact, 10,000 dollars or something.

And then—because I always make the contract with stepped payments, and I have contracts from both of those. And then the architects decided, well, it wasn't as exciting as they thought after all and we can do better, and so they cancelled it. And Tamara was mortified, but she said, "What can I do," you know? So there is nothing to do.

But that's what happens. I mean, people delay and lose their enthusiasm and then—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —and they don't have funds or funds fall through. I had a wonderful project in Ohio for a government building there that the local dealer, who admired very much my work, pushed for a step sculpture with waterfalls again. That was—right after the Charles River, in fact. He had seen the *Charles River Step Sculpture* model. He loved it. He said, "Let's make it reality." So the whole side of the state building in Columbus was going to have a staircase with waterfalls.

And then they didn't raise the money. We were hoping—we were planning to do it. I had models of different stages—they made me reduce the heights. I have a second model. And finally they dropped it.

AVIS BERMAN: Most of the time I think what we're talking about here is real estate in that there is always boom and bust with real estate too in terms of development. So, unfortunately, some of that is inherent. I'm not

excusing it, but—

ATHENA TACHA: I'm amazed that this development here in Friendship Heights went through, I guess partly because it's a very rich development, partly because they had committed themselves—they had paid already probably the fabricators and the contractors sums for these works—and partly because they were—they loved the light and it's a very great attraction for the mall because I designed exactly what they wanted.

And the plaza shape, which you see there in the pavement—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —created a footprint for the entire—I mean, remove that central shape and you have nothing—very little. So, I created the footprint of the development's public spaces, and they liked it a lot and they pursued it. But they cut here and there a little bit, but not major things.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, let us—I may not be in exact chronological order here, but—

ATHENA TACHA: No, we are not.

AVIS BERMAN: —but, you know, it's okay. In other words, I just want to get a few of these here, which is—and we should talk about this one. Okay, this was—I guess—well, maybe we'll talk about—

ATHENA TACHA: Which is first, my—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I've got these three because I thought these two were rather—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, these two are—

AVIS BERMAN: Let me see. This was—

ATHENA TACHA: —related in terms of concept—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, okay.

ATHENA TACHA: —because they are vertical sculptures—

AVIS BERMAN: No, I guess you did—*Merging* certainly started in—the idea was '84.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that was earlier and, I mean, it took several years.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: But it's a very complex and very beautiful work. It's made all of granite—gray granite here and pink granite here. And what—this came out of—it's a quad in Case Western University.

There is a road here and the path that comes here cutting across the quad—Mather Quad. I think it's M-A-T-H—it's here—Mather Quad. And the two paths were at an odd angle. I had gone to India and the Himalayas the year before that, in '83, and the Indian temples and the Himalayan terraces influenced me, and I perceived that as a collision of two bodies, you know, the two continents, the dry and the wet.

And this side (dark granite-water) followed parallel to this path and these steps (red granite, dry) were parallel to that path, and they hit each other at angles that are very odd and create very intriguing spaces. And the water levels are higher—all the same but higher, and the sitting steps are uneven. They are different heights.

The pools are very, very shallow, just filling with a little ridge all around, then the water drips over the ridge and covers everything. In other words, the water emerges at all levels but drips from level to level to level to level and collects in the lower pool and then gets recycled.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did you get this commission?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, that is sponsored by a fund established by a rich woman in Cleveland, Mildred Andrews, and by her son, Peter Putnam, left to the university under the supervision of Harvey Buchanan, who was a professor of art history—retired now—at Case Western Reserve. They endowed a fund to build public art pieces in the university. So he watched and commissioned various artists.

AVIS BERMAN: So he was—

ATHENA TACHA: He commissioned—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: So, in other words, it wasn't a committee; it was only him.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, only [Harvey] because he had jurisdiction over the fund. I mean, here is another case where it's not a competition. He first commissioned from me a small sculpture, which is over here, called *Twist*, one of the slab sculptures, which are at the end here, this kind of sculpture, the first one.

And so he liked that very much and then he got convinced to sacrifice a quarter of a million to build something big. He said, "I want it to be your best work and biggest work," and at the time, it was. "And I want it permanent, all granite," so it is. But water and granite and the present mortars and present waters create the efflorescence.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: So it really got very bad and that's why he restored it. He paid twice as much again to restore it—500—I mean half a million to restore it. But it is a beautiful work and they do take care of it.

And I call it *Merging* because it feels like those two parts merged together into one, and the university had merged Case Institute of Technology into Western Reserve University. It's a merged university. So it's a kind of metaphor for the university and for land masses and for paths—circulation paths, etcetera.

AVIS BERMAN: Also, because this was done in '80—it sounds like you got enough budget this time.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, at the time, but barely though—again, I stretched it to the limits because it's a big piece, as you can see. It's one of the largest pieces I had done at that point. And, again, a quarter of a million you thought at the time was a very big chunk of money but it has a thousand—ten-hundred pieces of granite, each of them a different size and different shape, because—

AVIS BERMAN: A lot of cuts.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, exactly. It was a jigsaw puzzle put together, very difficult. And I had a wonderful man calculating—a granite man who cut them all with a local company in Cleveland, a famous granite company.

AVIS BERMAN: And besides that, were there any other challenges or obstacles in this one?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, the challenge was the water—I had to resolve the water to come evenly at all levels and not flood over. When there is some wind, you see it flood—[inaudible]. And the ledges here at the joining points have to be bigger, but technically they are very delicate jobs and the water spills a little, which is not a major disaster, but there were all those subtleties that—aside from the bigness and complexity of the execution, it was built with concrete underneath and then covered with granite.

So I found a good local contractor who did it—but small, and again, it turned out to be more complex than he expected, and therefore I don't know what problems he got, but something must have been cut in the mortar to make so much efflorescence. I mean, the mortar wasn't the proper mortar for that job.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, also—it also seems at least here, since with Cleveland you could get there easily.

ATHENA TACHA: I was supervising very regularly, yes, every week, several times sometimes. Like, I went millions of times there. Well, it was a bit over—it took over a year to build it. And underneath there is a pump room. The pump room entrance is someplace in the ground here—a big pump room to recycle the water, which means that was the challenge of how to calculate water to run over all those edges—over all those complex edges evenly, and how many outlets.

I mean, it was a tricky engineering job and I hired a water engineer. I did all the contracting myself. I hired the concrete contractor, the fountains contractor, the engineer for the fountain. The engineering for the concrete was done by the concrete contractor, and then a granite contractor. So there were at least four different contracts involved that I had to handle.

AVIS BERMAN: So you—

ATHENA TACHA: Very complex.

AVIS BERMAN: You were the general contractor.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes. On all of my commissions until 2000 I was the general contractor, which was a hell of

a job.

AVIS BERMAN: Is there any way that artists could avoid that?

ATHENA TACHA: Only if you have a strong enough reputation. If they want you enough, you can tell them, I only do design. I mean, that's what I've been doing the last years. I don't want to do anymore contracting. You deal with a firm you collaborate with—I mean a firm in place, architects who collaborate with you and do—I mean, all of these completed drawings I couldn't have done.

They have to do it. I'm not geared anymore to do that. I started when I was younger to have a program—a computer design program. But programs change constantly. Then you do nothing else. I mean, that's all you do.

AVIS BERMAN: Let's go on. I think we've discussed *Marianthe* a little bit but I think we should maybe take these two pieces—*Marianthe* and *Double Star*—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, these actually—

AVIS BERMAN: —so I think we should take these two together.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that's actually the only other mazes—well, isn't it, except for the *Ice Walls*?

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, this was a student-initiated program—

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, we're talking about *Marianthe.*

ATHENA TACHA: *Marianthe*. They only had $30,000 and they wanted something in the campus—they have a green in the campus with—it had a little pond in the middle with wild reeds on the edges, and they wanted me to do a water-step sculpture like *Streams* at the edge of the water. But when I got there, life in the reeds was so rich, from grasshoppers to birds to frogs to whatever you want that I didn't want to destroy it. I didn't want to interfere with it.

So I said, "What if we leave the pond alone and build something on the grass only?" It was pretty flat, so I said, "I'll build you a kind of garden pavilion so that you can sit or bring seminars"—see, there's benches.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: There are three benches, circular benches, and a little garden in the one part, and the air passes through—it's very pleasant—and at the same time it's a walking experience because—it's not just a maze, you don't get lost since it's transparent, but the walls go up and down and so they create constant fluctuation in your walking. And the other center of it has a light in the middle, in the concrete floor, so at night it becomes like a light lantern through the brick.

AVIS BERMAN: And did students work on this with you?

ATHENA TACHA: No, we hired—I hired, I should say, a local contractor who was rich enough that he donated to the university the labor and funds for the slab on which we built it and then his masons built it. I had to order the brick and the wood and the light and all of that, and I supervised the masons. I went almost—well, a month or three weeks in Fort Myers at the beginning to lay out the entire plan and the bricks and start all the walls.

I was telling you that my mother was dying—had fallen down and was in bed all that period and Marianthe was taking care of her. That's why I was suffering so for what she was suffering that I named it after her. But I just love the openness of it, and unlike mazes, which are claustrophobic, this is not claustrophobic.

I mean, I call it a maze because it's a meandering—two meandering spirals actually, one is based on shells—the spiral is a closed shell; the other is open based on galaxies where the spiral is branched—made out of many branches. So it's two spirals interacting. So it's—

AVIS BERMAN: It's a lovely form.

ATHENA TACHA: It's wrong to call it a maze because it's open, totally. Then this one near Cincinnati, they—

AVIS BERMAN: It's a *Double Star*.

ATHENA TACHA: A community in Cincinnati, a suburb of Cincinnati, wanted me to design a work for them, and actually—they had asked me to design two works, but they couldn't afford more than one, so we stuck with that.

And they have a famous observatory in Cincinnati that discovered the first double-star formation where one star turns around another one. It's called Antares, a Greek name and that—oh, the site is under the observatory hill. These are the photographs of the field.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay, that makes sense.

AVIS BERMAN: That's why the observatory came to my attention. And so I decided—I'm fascinated by galaxies anyway and I decided to have a double star—which was very important because it proved—I forget what it proved—the expansion of the universe or something like that. It helped. So, it was a very important discovery, Antares.

So I decided to call it Antares and to create two stars—one coming inwards and one coming outwards with simple walls but of different heights but converging always two at a time so that they support each other. And that's—because they had very little money, like $30,000, something like—25 thousand dollars. And a Greek contractor, local contractor, who was a patron of the museum offered to do it with cheap labor, you know, with less—discounted.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And so he subcontracted it to another guy who cut corners and therefore the walls were not very strong. They didn't reinforce them properly. See, these have reinforcing rods through the bricks at every point—

AVIS BERMAN: In *Marianthe*?

ATHENA TACHA: Both of them. In fact, what's the problem with these works is that the bricks—some of the bricks hold water. The rods were not stainless as I would have wanted them, not to rust. We couldn't afford stainless steel or even—well, epoxy coating didn't exist in those days in the '80s.

So they were plain rods and water seeped through and rusted rods, and when—steel rusts, it expands and breaks the joints. So this happened in both, but here I think we put stainless steel rods but not enough of them. That's where the sub-contractor cut corners.

And so, a batch of drunk students came and pushed against one of the tallest walls and knocked it down one night, so that was the beginning of the end because they got scared. They reconstructed it and the contractor reinforced it on the outside but it was not very good.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, this is *Double Star*. Yes, they would have gotten scared. They could have had a lawsuit on their hands.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, in those days this was supposed to be a—what do you call it—a playground sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Children could climb on it—and there was bark, a layer of bark—shredded bark underneath so that it was soft enough. If you fell, you wouldn't hurt yourself. I mean, all the playground structures are dangerous too.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: They are considered you take your risk. It's a playground structure. But this was not named a playground and it was open. It didn't have an enclosure. So, ultimately they took it down also.

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: So both of these—neither of these—these don't exist because the rods cracked in the walls.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, that was the pretext because they didn't maintain it, to seal—to watch for rust and seal it, but the thing is that the University of South Florida sold that campus to an adjacent college without telling them this is a work of art that you have to maintain it, as my contract stated. They maintained it earlier but then they sold it and got rid of it.

And, therefore, the new college didn't do anything about it and it started falling apart, splitting the walls. And so they called me too late, of course—and it proved that they anyway wanted the land to build an extension, so—

AVIS BERMAN: That's the real reason.

ATHENA TACHA: That's the real reason, right.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, so both of these no longer exist.

Well, let's turn to something a little more positive, I think, and a very successful piece, which is *Green Acres*, that was built—

ATHENA TACHA: In '85-'86.

AVIS BERMAN: No, it says '86 to '87 in Trenton.

ATHENA TACHA: In '86-'87. Well, yes, the '80s were my richest period, the middle '80s, because I had matured enough that things flowed out of my mind, ideas. And I had behind me all the—not physical experience only, but visual experience with this show that I had done at Zabriskie's, *Fragmentation*. We showed those drawings—very rich drawings.

And so, *Green Acres* comes from a segment of a drawing I had in the Zabriskie show. Well, this was a competition and I had submitted slides and they selected three finalists—Marisol. Who was the other finalist? Marisol—oh, Elyn Zimmerman—maybe four, and I forget who the fourth was—and myself.

So, we each—it was a square courtyard, surrounded by a seven-story building, Department of Environmental Protection, and they wanted a sculpture in the middle of that brick courtyard. So I designed this because the Department of Environmental Protection has a program called Green Acres to preserve—there is so little green land in New Jersey that they want to preserve it.

And I took that motif and I proposed to have a garden sculpture with a raised pavement—just one step raised from the brick—that is green, like a meadow or like a lake—green Pennsylvania stone—slate, and then interspersed in it are green granite pieces that have images of their endangered species—plants, animals, insects and landscapes. And the photographs were supplied to me—were to be supplied to me by the employees of the building. They did have a competition and they—

AVIS BERMAN: So they participated.

ATHENA TACHA: They participated. And the tops of the planters were nine planters that had, well, evergreens, mostly sedums, that blossomed in the spring, in the summer and in the fall in pink, yellow and blue, each area—I mean, one in each area. So it was always something blossoming but at the same time didn't need much watering. They had to be—because there was no watering system.

And then I put the boulders of red pumice as accents to interact with the green and blend with the red of the pavement. And this is brick—tan brick, the same color as the building.

AVIS BERMAN: What was—

ATHENA TACHA: So, it's very beautiful and very harmonious.

AVIS BERMAN: What was the building like that you had to—

ATHENA TACHA: The D.E.P. is a very bland, buff brick building with windows all around.

AVIS BERMAN: So, not a nice—

[Cross talk.]

ATHENA TACHA: The entrance was on this side of the—middle side of the courtyard, so people come often out of the offices and sit on the steps. But they put also—if you noticed in one of the images, they put benches because not everybody likes to sit on brick steps. And then now they have also a smoking area, which is a booth. It's horrible. And they had put a bench in the middle of my sculpture.

So, when I went and visited I wrote to Tom Moran and I said, "That bench has to be removed from there," because Tom is wonderful. I don't know if you know him. He is a wonderful Arts Council person but, again, very ambitious. He has too many projects he does and doesn't supervise enough and doesn't have any maintenance funds.

But he did find maintenance funds—they had also—this is tremendously complex brick work to make those points. To create curves out of brick is not an easy task, and I had a wonderful, wonderful foreman and wonderful masons. They had actually got a state prize for brick-laying for this work in '86 or '87.

But the points of course were fragile and snow machines, whatever, whoever, knocked a number of the corners. So they had to restore it and rebuild it, and they did. And they replanted with the same masons! And I did see—I went and saw it restored, but how long the restoration will last is another matter again.

But when I finished that, I was so proud. The images are very beautiful, and they show more when they get wet—sand-blasted on dark green granite. And there are also inscriptions, all of the divisions of the Department of Environmental Protection.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, this seems more specific than a lot of other pieces in your work in terms of these kinds of references.

ATHENA TACHA: That's one of the most specific in terms of context—I call my sculpture context-specific not just site-specific because it developed more like that with works like this. I mean, there is nothing you can do with a federal office building that is context-oriented; but with the Department of Environmental Protection, there is a lot, and especially what is the aim of the Environmental Protection.

And so, these are like 75 images and they are oriented in two dimensions—this way and that way. So it's a very complex gridwork of images because there is an entrance from here, a side entrance from here, access to the courtyard from here, so you can view them in different directions.

AVIS BERMAN: And also there's these buff bricks—this brickwork looks floral or leaf-shaped.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, exactly—exactly. It's like climbers—like plant life and water and all of the references to nature because it was the Department of Environmental Protection.

AVIS BERMAN: You simulate water this time without using water.

ATHENA TACHA: I do it in fountains too because the fountains are turned off half of the year, so you have to make a fountain that is beautiful even without the water and evokes water without the water.

So, this is actually—I considered it the peak of my work at the time and I thought, now I can die. [They laugh.]

AVIS BERMAN: And do you still feel that way?

ATHENA TACHA: I still feel it's one of the best, yes. It is—it was sad to see it not maintained. It was very sad. But, you know, what can you do? It's a complex work.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you feel that the audience—the people in the department, that—

ATHENA TACHA: Appreciate it? God knows. The American public is blind, really. They have no education in visual things. So god knows if they can perceive. And nobody looks out of the windows—I mean, I made it so that from all those surrounding windows you could look out and admire something. But with air conditioning, the windows are closed. Nobody looks out, you know?

So my concepts are misplaced in a way, from the point of view of where you look from. But I thought that with a building surrounding on three sides, seven stories high, full of windows all around, the employees would long to look out. No, they just sit at their computers and do nothing else.

I mean, altogether the American public is home-oriented and office-bound, and that's part of the misguided purpose of public art. I mean, they ask you to create something because they think they want to enrich that courtyard. Aside from during their lunchtime or the smokers, nobody looks at it. They go home and that's it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, they don't necessarily stay or think about using it in any other—

ATHENA TACHA: I don't know. I would say that they would want to take an office break and go down and enjoy it in good weather—only the smokers do that and then they fill the planters with cigarette butts; so that's why they made the booth for them to smoke there only. And also, they annoyed the other people who were not smokers. I mean, I have photographs of people eating their lunch out here.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: You know, lots of people sitting and eating their lunch in good weather. Somebody sent me photographs from above. In the early days, I mean, because later lack of maintenance maybe discouraged them.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, let's also just talk about this since you say it was a rich—

[Cross talk.]

AVIS BERMAN: Right, a rich work and you thought you were at your peak. Where does this fit into—how did *Green Acres* enrich your own overall work; in other words, the development of your work, you feel, from doing this piece?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, altogether my work needed complexity and fluidity to express complexity and fluidity, that turned out to be the principles of the theory of chaos, which I didn't know at the time in the '70s. And curves were an essential love of mine, and that's what creates fluidity. But I managed to create fluidity with rectilinearity like in *Streams*; *Green Acres* gave me the opportunity to express it with curves.

And, as I said, it's one—it's a section of one of my best drawings of the '70s, which will be—I don't think you've seen the book of drawings but I had a copy here.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I mean, that really—

ATHENA TACHA: I call it *Forms of Chaos*. Here is my first competition application, for Canberra, Australia in 1975, which I didn't win, of course; but this drawing here,

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: —the source for *Green Acres*, is much richer and much more complex—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and it's called—

ATHENA TACHA: —and I call it *Homage to the Tao*—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: —because I love Taoism and the principles of the Tao. So you see this is based on one of those cell structures. They are cells that open and close and open and close.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I was actually going to use the word "biomorphic," which I hadn't seen in the work before, which, you know—

ATHENA TACHA: Well, it is right—

AVIS BERMAN: And it may be a little bit anomalous anyway but—

ATHENA TACHA: No, no, because biomorphic is perfect—amoebas I love, and I did a lot of curvilinear works, that's why I wanted the soft concrete sculpture. This is actually the drawing for the first Norfolk project.

But I have a lot of curves. I designed a park—a whole park for Cincinnati. They asked me to. It was not a competition but was a project that the community was planning—seven acres I think it is—this is a huge bridge over the Ohio River—and an amusement park, which was going to be built—the city was going to build it.

But an ambitious curator of the Cincinnati Museum of Modern Art in 1977 asked 40 artists from all over the country to make proposals for it, because she was hoping maybe they'll hire an artist to design it. And eventually they did hire one of those artists to do parts of it. Andrew Leicester—he is from Minnesota, but I don't know how he pronounces his name.

In any case, I made that proposal, which is all based on curves, and—I had done the *Tide Park* of course with curves, which had just been built, but this was much, much larger scale and it had to be an amusement park. Therefore, it had a maze—you know, those things—

AVIS BERMAN: Curvy.

ATHENA TACHA: —that go up and down—

AVIS BERMAN: Roller coaster.

ATHENA TACHA: —Yes, and a Ferris wheel, a dodger, a carousel—and all kinds of features, a monkey island and all kinds of things, but I incorporated them all and connected them with curvilinear paths for bicycles or skaters and even a train that would take people all around the park and go to all the features continuously. Both the paths and the train line were maze-like too.

So, the curves and the biomorphism existed all along from the beginning. This is a—

AVIS BERMAN: This is just the first time we see a real—literally a concrete realization.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, it's because of money.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

ATHENA TACHA: Curves cost a lot of money. I mean, this was a cheap structure because—

AVIS BERMAN: Referring to *Marianthe*.

ATHENA TACHA: —it's open brick, but *Green Acres* is very expensive. The budget was 3 hundred thousand dollars or $400,000. And so that allowed me, for the first time, to make curvilinear steps. And that's why I said now I can die. [They laugh.]

But also I incorporated conceptual ideas in here, and my interest in the environment. I mean, a lot of things were brought into the work that I couldn't have brought before.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Any other anecdotes or thoughts about this piece?

ATHENA TACHA: No. Something more may come as we look at other work—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —because, you know, different ideas come out and come back to other works.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And Tom Moran was happy with this?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean the resolution.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, yes, yes. In fact, it's considered by many people one of the most successful or beautiful works of public art in America—I mean people who visit. I don't know how many people visit because it wasn't published—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: —you know, in any big way, but I have heard from museum people who have seen it that it is the best work of public art they've seen. And I think it is. It's a very beautiful work.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Okay, well, I think that this is probably where we should. I think we'll stop for today.

ATHENA TACHA: For tonight, okay.

AVIS BERMAN: For tonight. Thank you very much.

[End disc three.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman recording Athena Tacha for the Archives of American Art GSA Oral History Project on December 6, 2009, in her studio in Washington, D.C. And I want to continue discussing important pieces of public art that you have made. But I had another question as I was thinking about going over all of these things. And I certainly noticed that you have had a lot of commissions in Ohio.

In these commissions, was there a push to get an artist living in the same state or is this because you knew people? How did that happen in terms of things?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, the first one was, of course, the one that I did in my own town, Oberlin.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: I offered my NEA grant for it and they got an Ohio State grant. That made me sort of known in the area for outdoor work. And actually it was one of the earliest site-specific outdoor pieces—pieces in the country. Then a little bicentennial competition in Cleveland by the Cleveland Arts Council was one. And that was my first arches that I told you about—not Leaning Arches, the Tension Arches, number one. That brought me to the eye of the Cleveland community.

So then there was a competition in Columbus, two different competitions, again, one a bicentennial, one organized by a company, Ashland Chemical, and I won that one. I applied and won it. And then another one for the Columbus Arts Council for the airport, a spot in the airport. So I won that and I made a piece, another different kind of colonnade, this one here, which as I said—

AVIS BERMAN: Crossings?

ATHENA TACHA: —two years later, they destroyed it because they needed to expand. Crossings, yes. What else did I do? Then Findlay, Ohio, had a competition. And I won it. And there was a lot of community competitions in Ohio because they—after the bicentennial, everybody wanted to have something.

In Cleveland, the Mildred Andrews Fund, overseen by Harvey Buchanan, was commissioning pieces by different Ohio and later other artists for their grants. So Harvey Buchanan heard about me, saw my pieces and commissioned first Twist and then Merging. So that is how I ended up having like seven—at least seven pieces in Ohio.

AVIS BERMAN: Actually, I mean, was Ohio kind of advanced in the visual arts because you were certainly a more avant-garde artist? You certainly weren't plopping a statue on the plaza.

ATHENA TACHA: No, it was—I was—Oberlin was avant-garde because of Ellen Johnson and me. Later, because of the New Gallery, the Cleveland area developed more and Columbus. I did the Cincinnati one, again, a competition, the *Double Stars* for Cincinnati. Ohio was active early on, but not more than other states because after the bicentennial year, a lot of states started being interested in initiating competitions. That is how I have so many—applied to so many competitions all over the country, including Alaska.

Alaska, I must have applied to seven competitions, 10, for schools, for everything. And I won another one, but I didn't execute it—I forget for what reasons now. I was a finalist in at least five there. So a lot of the states started such activity.

AVIS BERMAN: I would say about the late '60s, early '70s, the concept of what the monument was began to change.

ATHENA TACHA: Not yet. The concept of the monument changed with the Vietnam Memorial in '82. And before that, there were no contemporary monuments or memorials at all. And if there were, they were the traditional type with the statues, etcetera. The Vietnam Memorial started a new era for memorials. And as a matter of fact, maybe there were stirrings about doing memorials because before the Vietnam competition, a little synagogue in Elyria asked me to do a memorial for the Jewish Holocaust. Well, that is another cause that started stirrings about memorials.

But, you know, what signaled it was just really the need to commemorate many people, batch of people, a group memorial. So I said to the synagogue, "How much money do you have?" And they said, "10,000 and a wall." And I said, "Well, what can I do for such a horrendous cause with 10,000 and a wall." So I thought and thought and thought and I realized that it is very hard to do a memorial without some representational means because there is human pain involved there.

But when the Vietnam competition was announced, I applied with an abstract piece, of course, which was this one. And curiously, the fragmented form—this was my application to the Vietnam Memorial. Because the condition of the competition was to have 60,000 names at eye level visible, so you needed walls, walls, walls. And that is how Maya Lin came up with the two walls, which was a marvelous solution.

But on the other hand, my fragmentation was something that probably influenced her because after she won the memorial, but before it was executed because—remember, it was a big fight and it took years.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: She was still at Yale architecture school. And a former student of mine, Jack Risley, who I mentioned, became an artist, was at Yale, graduate school of Yale. And they were having—her boyfriend and he were living together. So he talked to her about me and she had heard of me from—the Zabriskie show maybe and my very good review in the *Christian Science Monitor*.

She said, "Could you introduce me to Athena Tacha? I want her opinion." And so she wanted to be a sculptor, not an architect really.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: And I guess it was her father had pushed her into architecture like mine. And so she came to my hotel in New York one day and brought me a portfolio of ideas for sculptures. And, you know, they were students' ideas for large temporary pieces within the minimal idiom. But I encouraged her. And at that time, I had published my first book on my work in '82. And so I gave her a copy. And it included—it was after the *Fragmentation* show included not this—

AVIS BERMAN: Your model for the Vietnam Memorial.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, no. It included other fragmentation sculptures. And I think that influenced her because she does a lot of fragmentation herself now cutting pieces.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: This is what I gave her. And that was published in '82. It has a lot of the fragmented works—including *Ripples*. You asked me yesterday about fragmentation. And this is the initial continuum—and here fragmented differently. This is the ice principle of fragmentation, then the mud-cracking principle. I fragmented the same "flow continuum" form in many ways, but I forget all. This book is a summary of my art after that point.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But let me for the tape just say that what you gave her was a catalog called Athena Tacha: Public Sculpture [Oberlin, OH, 1982].

ATHENA TACHA: Well, it was not a catalog or an exhibition. It was a small book that I self-published.

AVIS BERMAN: I see, I see.

ATHENA TACHA: And with the articles on me by Theodore Wolff and by Ellen Johnson, which had just been published in *Artforum*.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. And that was 1982, a book.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, a book. I put together my best ideas and pieces. So in any case, my proposal for the memorial came out of that. But at that time, I realized that a memorial has to have images. And so how do you make images on public surfaces? I discovered the process of sandblasting, photographic sandblasting. And so the series of memorials that I created like my *Holocaust Memorial* included images that I found in the National Archives here—of the Nazi camps, etcetera, which would be sandblasted on the concrete surfaces of the wall, or stone surface, whatever.

So all of those—most of those memorials, e.g., Hiroshima/Nagasaki, and Vietnam/Laos/Cambodia would have all images on their walls. And that led me to the process of sandblasting that then I used in Green Acres.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because there are images in the—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. At that point when I did the exhibition at Max Hutchinson, of the memorials, I wrote a small essay about how the concept of the memorial has to change in this century. And so I think maybe my exhibition was one of the first stirrings in the real change of the concept, and Maya Lin's executed memorial was a major, of course, catalyst.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Okay, well, that is good. I am glad we have got that straightened out because now what I want to do is do what we did before, is talk about major executed pieces and we're going forward chronologically. And as you said, this was one of your favorites, which is the Fairmount Park Commission in Philadelphia.

ATHENA TACHA: Actually, it was Franklin Town: a development of 12 blocks that they had bought in the center of Philadelphia. It is halfway between the museum and City Hall, northeast of Benjamin Franklin Parkway—between 18th and 19th Streets at Hamilton Street north of Vine Street.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right.

ATHENA TACHA: But after they developed two blocks and they wanted to do a park for the 12-block development as requirement by the city, a financial crunch happened like now in '82—'83. But before that, they had started a competition for the park. And in order to fit the requirement of 1 percent for art of Philadelphia, it had to be designed by an artist.

So they formed a committee of the director of the museum, Anne d'Harnoncourt, the director of Contemporary Art Institute, Janet Kardon, and some other people. You know Janet Kardon? Have you heard of her?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, sure.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, she was a moving force in those days in contemporary art. And they selected finalists. They didn't contact us until they selected us as finalists.

AVIS BERMAN: So this wasn't a competition you entered. This was something—

ATHENA TACHA: No, I couldn't enter it. You see a lot of competitions are initiated by critics and museum people

who propose—or art consultants—propose a lot of artists and then a committee selects the finalists.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: So that was one of them. And George Segal was a finalist and a Philadelphia sculptor who is very well-known—and I forget now—was a finalist and me. I think three. And so I proposed this, which was the entire park to be a sculpture. And I proposed a waterfall here and an amphitheater here, etcetera. They loved it. So I was selected. And then as I said, the financial crunch came. And so it was abandoned and I thought that was it.

Then in '86, they revived—that is why it took so long. In '86, they revived the idea, but from the 2 million budget, they had already spent most of it, so the budget came down to $500,000. So I had to reduce it, remove all the high-level planters and we used this model [*Connections*, '86]. Meanwhile, I gave two other possibilities of proposals that were even cheaper. But they stuck with this and so that is what we executed. So it has very low terracing. It is 2500 square feet of planters and lawns and 50 trees. And then I designed the path, of course. And the paths connect neighborhoods from the corners. And that is why my title, *Connections*—it is between gentrified and non-gentrified neighborhoods.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. You can see there is actually some sort of track here.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, that is an old train line, which still exists, which is non-functioning. But I loved it because it had very interesting stone walls like Inca walls. And there were some native trees here that had grown that I kept. So that is the story of that. And it was a major undertaking. But they didn't maintain it. Although now they replanted because the neighborhood is being re-gentrified. The Barnes Foundation is moving there and building next to it.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that is great.

ATHENA TACHA: And the Four Seasons Hotel, of course, always existed like two blocks from here. But they also are building more interesting expensive apartment houses around. So that is why all that renewed interest in it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, besides the severe cutting of the budget, what were the challenges of this commission?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, the severe challenges were very severe, indeed. But another problem was that they hired a very good contractor and engineering firm who were very supportive and very excellent in execution. But then that landscape contractor was working with workmen that were not unionized. So as soon as we started digging the union striked. These are enormous boulders like 14 feet tall, which had to go underground, half underground in order to stay there. And they are immovable.

It is very difficult to do good rock work—I went and selected all the boulders up in the mountains with the landscape contractor from a farmer who owned hilly land and probably—he wanted to get rid of rocks, their local granite. And the stone walls were made of local brownstone, Pennsylvania brownstone. I had that dream of dry masonry walls that are very rustic for gardens.

So I arranged all the rock clusters with two cranes. It took me three days. They were very good workmen. But then as soon as we started building the walls, the unions came and struck in front of the park and stopped the work. So we had a lot of trouble with that and delays like a month delay. And then finally the contractor had to hire some of the union workmen who were not as good as his workmen. So the quality of the building is uneven. And meanwhile, the winter came. We started in the summer and we ended up building in the middle of the winter with snow and freezing. So the quality of the drywall is not good.

Moreover, after we planted, that summer or the next summer was a very dry summer. The sprinklers went bad, so they had no water at all, and most of the plants died. So those were the kind of problems I had—and a bench was stolen, a few trees newly planted died and they were not replaced because the Franklin Town corporation failed as a development really, they gave the park to Fairmount Park Authority with a $300 endowment for maintenance.

AVIS BERMAN: Three hundred dollars?

ATHENA TACHA: Three hundred thousand dollars.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. [Laughs.]

ATHENA TACHA: And they didn't maintain—they don't maintain it very well, although now they do better. That was 10 years ago. And now they did new replanting.

AVIS BERMAN: So it is kind of private economic forces that are going to be responsible for keeping this up if it is getting more gentrified.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I hope so. But still, it is done by the—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, the Fairmount Park Commission.

ATHENA TACHA: Right, which has been reorganized and is called something different, I think. But in any case, that is who maintains it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right, mm-hmm.

ATHENA TACHA: So that is one of my most ambitious works.

AVIS BERMAN: Despite the depredations, do you find it a successful piece?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, yes. It is very—it feels wonderful to be in it and so people tell me. I have been back myself. And I think the views from all the apartments around are magnificent as you saw in photos a neighbor, Jim Fennel, is sending me. And when it is well-maintained, it is a jewel. If it is not well-maintained—you know, a park is plants. What can you do? Because the walls are not maintained. Now they are starting a campaign to do something about the repairs. They did some repairs and then they used white mortar. And white mortar with brownstone looks awful. So he sent me lots of photographs of those, and finally the neighborhood "Friends of the Park" painted them!

AVIS BERMAN: Now, have they invited you back to consult or to do anything?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I have sometimes gone myself because I go often to Philadelphia for exhibitions, etcetera. I have gone at least five times since—or six—since the time it was finished. They never, of course, invite me or pay me. But I do inspect and write a report and ask for this and ask for that. And I really had gotten tired of doing that. Now since the neighbors are interested, including some nice people who are making an inventory of the trees on PPT, they are treating it like a garden.

AVIS BERMAN: What is PPT?

ATHENA TACHA: PowerPoint.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, sorry, sorry.

ATHENA TACHA: PPT is the abbreviation for—so they are treating *Connections* park as an arboretum kind of thing.

AVIS BERMAN: Because this seems to be and kind of satisfies a real classic idea of what public art should be—to try to establish the identity of a neighborhood.

ATHENA TACHA: Right, right. And to create a place that they enjoy.

AVIS BERMAN: Especially if it is something that was a bleak urban area. So it seems—it sounds, though, that this is slowly on its way up, although—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, at least not going down, which is a big accomplishment.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. And where do you see this fitting in importance in your overall body of work? I realize this—

ATHENA TACHA: Well, I was trying to think because you asked me yesterday what are my half-dozen or so favorite pieces. And I looked at the list of—long list of commissions, executed commissions I have, which I can give you. And I realized how not up to date it is because at the time I was typing, of course. Now it is all on the computer.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

ATHENA TACHA: So I have—I wrote all the things. And that is the last of the works I did. This wasn't completed yet. It was completed in '99 or something. After 1998, I moved here and I had thought I would retire.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ATHENA TACHA: Instead I executed seven new commissions. But actually, the two last ones are each three works. The Muhammad Ali had two fountains and the amphitheater. And Wisconsin Place has the plaza with the

fountain, the *Light Obelisk*, the arcade [*Light Riggings*] and the *WWW Tower*. So it is actually a dozen works I have executed since I moved here this last decade. (So those are in pencil on the list.)

It is hard to think what I consider my best. But I will tell you what I feel is in my heart more: *Streams* because it is my first earth work—I mean, landscape work.

AVIS BERMAN: It is beautiful.

ATHENA TACHA: And it is still beautiful, even though it is very small.

AVIS BERMAN: It has a classic look. When you look at the pictures, it just seems to be very classic.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Yes. Then Marianthe.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: And that I developed, as I told you yesterday, outside of the step sculptures or ramp sculptures, which are earth-oriented, ground-oriented, a batch of ideas for vertical pieces because a lot of the sites required vertical pieces. So the Tension Arches is the first strain of vertical works. And I did several from that series, Perspective Arcade, Curving Arcades, Leaning Arches. And the biggest is the Curving Arcades, which I will show you in a minute, in Arizona, the one that created the scandal.

Then I had to develop other ideas and colonnades, etcetera. And the open brick works as a type of major playground structure is another idea for vertical things. And by the way, I happened to see yesterday—I was telling you that Marianthe has two spiral systems that kind of come together.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, this is Marianthe.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh.

ATHENA TACHA: I am actually—

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, this is—

ATHENA TACHA: That is one of the new Hubble photographs.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, yes, for the tape, what we are looking at is a photograph of galaxies—

ATHENA TACHA: Cosmology is one of my main inspirations. And I was saying about the other open brick maze, the *Double Star: Antares* was also astronomical in inspiration—

[Cross talk.]

ATHENA TACHA: My real passion is galaxies. And so you can see why this is those two forms.

AVIS BERMAN: Why do you think that cosmology—why is that so meaningful to you in your work?

ATHENA TACHA: Two things. One, we were in Greece under occupation and it was dark and—the sky is wonderful in Greece so clear. It was, anyway. My father would talk to me about stars and the galaxy and the formations of the stars. He was very encyclopedically knowledgeable, as I told you. So I loved to look with him at the stars. And that was in my heart, of course.

But also, I am interested in the extremes of nature, the extremely small (subatomic particles) and the extremely large, which is galaxies and the universe—to understand it. And it turns out that they have merged actually now. Subatomic particles and cosmology have become one science through quantum physics. And so I have followed it all along.

When I was at MIT doing the Charles River, I was also taking—auditing a course on cosmology, which at the time was in its beginnings as a science. There were no books on cosmology. And a professor was giving a course with mimeographed sheets for the students. Then there were also a series of lectures on subatomic physics, the Feynman lectures, which I—

AVIS BERMAN: Richard Feynman?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right, who was talking about atomic science. So all of those things have interested me all along, and I am passionate about form that we cannot see but exists, like these. Now, we see them with Hubble;

before, we didn't. So I just feel so much part of the universe myself that I feel when we die, that is what we become. We are atoms and molecules and we will join the universe like a drop of rain joins the ocean. So I am one with it. And I feel that the trees are the same as me. The rocks are the same as me. And I participate in all of it.

AVIS BERMAN: Are you interested in, say, space exploration or anything like that?

ATHENA TACHA: I am. I have always followed it. And I was very excited from the beginning. But now so much is happening that it has become almost routine, you know? So I can't follow everything. But I always follow their discoveries and particularly new telescopes that can go into deep space so much.

AVIS BERMAN: Clearly, you were a lover of nature. But were horticulture and gardening history of interest to you?

ATHENA TACHA: I love plants, but I am not a good gardener. I enjoy doing it, but I don't have a green thumb, as they say, and I don't have the time to do it. But yes, plants and animals, zoology—if you look at the books I have here, you will see that from biology—but again, I like more the roots of each science—like cellular biology because it shows you invisible form. And I believe that form is the most important thing in nature. Nature operates through structure, form. And therefore, even where you can't see it, it exists. And now they find it, of course, with tremendous microscopes they have, they find form everywhere.

And cellular biology is based on the structure of proteins and how they create life. So without structure of proteins, there is no life. So all of those things impassion me and inspire me.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess because I have been looking at your work and I see plantings and wonderful gardens, but I haven't seen any references to historical gardens.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, I just love historical gardens. We went to China and Japan partly to see their gardens and to understand their rock planting—I mean, how they treat rocks and how they organize them. They are really masters. And then we went to England to all the gardens of the country houses, the two semesters that we spent there. And when Richard went for research trips we visited all the country house and their gardens. And, of course, the more formal gardens of France don't interest me as much because they are too artificial, too organized. I prefer the more chaotic English gardens.

So everywhere I study gardens. I have studied gardens very much. But plantings I introduce because they are living material and water. So I always have wanted in my art to have movement and interaction and life, if possible, plants. The problem is that they are very hard to maintain.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And you get the movement in there through water and through sorts of swirling forms, too.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, form or movement, but also forcing you to perambulate, to experience the form through the body. So participation is very important, your physical existence into the sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ATHENA TACHA: Oh, we were saying which are my other favorite works. Okay, we said—*Streams*—and then *Marianthe* and then Merging, which is the one in Cleveland, and Green Acres, which we talked about, and Connections. That is why I remembered it, the park. And then the Muhammad Ali—

AVIS BERMAN: Right, which we talked about.

ATHENA TACHA: Which we talked about. And Wisconsin Plaza Place, even though the architecture is in the way. [Laughs.] I had nothing to do with the architecture. It is commercial architecture. But the concepts of how I organized the space, how I gave shape to that plaza and how I lead you through the arcade into the other end of that access I think are very subtle and extremely—I mean, it is a very subtle work. And I think the light makes it satisfactory in terms of attracting people.

But I am very happy with it. And it was extremely difficult and one of the longest, like Philadelphia. It took 10 years.

AVIS BERMAN: That is all right.

ATHENA TACHA: But then I am thinking the GSA piece, *Ripples*, which is really one of the major works in my life. It is a little too geometric in appearance in spite of the fact that it has hidden complexity—

AVIS BERMAN: Now?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, even from the beginning because they forced me to do a—they put me in a grid on the pavement and also I had to change the initial project. I made it as irregular as I could make any geometry with the money I had. But in any case, it is a work that got some publicity. People saw it because Larry—

AVIS BERMAN: Kirkland?

ATHENA TACHA: Kirkland said when he saw it, he said, "I have to become an environmental artist." Apparently, it influenced him very much. He told me that. I had no idea.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that is interesting because he certainly—before he would—I mean, he certainly had a long career doing pieces before he got—did he see it before he moved?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, because this was '78-'79. How old was he at the time? He is definitely younger than me by at least 10 or 15 years.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, he is maybe a year or two younger than I am, I guess.

ATHENA TACHA: In his late 50s?

AVIS BERMAN: I think so.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Certainly I knew when I did it, but now I can't remember.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, so therefore, in the late '70s, he would have been 25. He was a beginning artist, he told me, when he saw it and it influenced him very much. So I kind of—Ripples is next on my list of best.

AVIS BERMAN: No, it is interesting because Larry really evolved. I mean, he started doing things and then he realized—I think he thought—he said he had come to a point where he was either too commercial or too decorative and he needed to change. And that was—I mean, he didn't repudiate earlier pieces, but he saw he was—you know, he was going to be like the prom boy. It will just be—he didn't want to be stuck just doing decorations for atriums for the rest of his life. He was very successful at them.

But I mean—I am not putting him down.

ATHENA TACHA: He seems to have a decorative aspect of his work. Some of his works are decorative and some are a little kitschy. But he has done some very good works. The science building here is excellent. I don't know if that is GSA—

AVIS BERMAN: It is not. It is not. No, it is interesting. And I made a mistake. I had said to you that he had three commissions. I think he had two. It was somebody else who had had three. But most people only get one or two. I mean, I think Keith Sonnier has two.

ATHENA TACHA: So I will give you this list because I have put dashes on the ones I consider my favorite. But this is something that was done now because they were—the University of Wisconsin had to tear down this piece—

AVIS BERMAN: Waterlinks.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, because they added a new building. So they needed the space. But they were very nice. And they said—well, first of all, an alumnus had paid for it. So they said, "If you want to design for us a new piece for the interior of the building, that would be fine." So I designed a waterfall on a huge wall made of granite. And I called it Waterlinks II (2006-'08). And the same alumnus paid for it. He loves it and they love it.

AVIS BERMAN: That is great.

ATHENA TACHA: It was done in '06 to '08. That is the other work of this decade outside of Washington. And then I forgot totally another work I did recently Riding with Sarah and Wayne—in Trenton. And that was—I did it partly because of Tom Moran's inciting me to do it. They selected me. They had selected some other artist for a competition to do a one-mile long track artwork for the new lightrail railroad. I mean, they didn't want to dig and have the metro, but a lightweight around Trenton center. And there were four stations. Two were at the beginning and end, connecting to trains at Pennsylvania Station and I forget the other, what it is called.

So it was a whole mile-long track that had to be "decorated" and made into a work of art somehow. A mile for $100,000 is a lot of space. So I proposed to do only four of the stations. (There are six stations.) I did a granite pattern, and I wanted to do something again context oriented. And I knew Trenton had a lot of jazz musicians, famous jazz musicians. Sarah Vaughan was from Trenton and Wayne—what is his last name—is a very important

composer of jazz.

And so I selected—I studied them both, their music. I selected the melodies, famous melodies of their work, two songs, Sarah Vaughan, and two compositions by Wayne [Shorter]. And I made the note pattern into a granite pattern for the rail, and words from the songs I sandblasted along the stations' pavements. I called the piece Riding with Sarah and Wayne because you see the track pattern and read the inscriptions as you stop at the stations or you see the track as you travel.

And it is like a musical pattern made of red and black granite on gray granite. And I divided the gray like a pentagram, a musical staff—I could show you something about it. It is an invisible work to most people because it is all in the tracks. But that is what the commission was, and it was illustrated only once. And the inscriptions on the pavement are on the side of the track with the songs.

So that is another commission that took a long time these years.

AVIS BERMAN: I want to pick up an unexecuted one just for a little change, because I thought it was very interesting, which was this Edgewater Paths.

ATHENA TACHA: I love that.

AVIS BERMAN: Because?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, because it is inspired by goat paths on mountains in Greece and elsewhere. The son of Mildred Andrews who gave that fund in Cleveland for the University, Peter Putnam. And he loved my work. I don't know from what. I had never met him. So he kept calling me and saying, "I love your work and I would like to pay—to give an amount for you to do the best work you can do." And I said, "Well, that would be $1 million." [Laughs.] And he said, "No, I can't give a million dollars. But I will give you—" I forget what we agreed—$400,000, something like that.

"So, design something for Cleveland."

AVIS BERMAN: I see 250,000 here.

ATHENA TACHA: Maybe it is. I can't remember. Yes, that is what it was because that is the same as for Merging. Yes, that is what it was. It was the highest at the time anyway I had gotten. So select a site in Cleveland and do it. So I selected the site of the Lake Erie banks, which was unused. It had just wild grass descending into the water. And from there, you could see the Cleveland skyline. I proposed it to be built with steps that turn in different directions and platforms in between where people can sit and watch the water. And you can descend all the way to the bottom to the water and you can go up all the way to the top.

And I also considered it as an erosion prevention thing. And then the—it was not approved by the state of Ohio because they own or supervise the banks of the lakes. It was not Cleveland property, you see, even though it was in Cleveland. So they didn't give permission. And meanwhile, Mr. Putnam was killed on his bicycle. There is again one of the people who normally would have been great supporters of my work, but died too early.

AVIS BERMAN: But this is a still model, though, right?

ATHENA TACHA: This is the model, now in the studio. It is the same as here, but it goes a little more to the edges, how the paths kind of peter out into the land.

AVIS BERMAN: But what I am rather confused about is that you went ahead even though you had no sense of being able to get the land or the site.

ATHENA TACHA: No, no, no. I had to make a proposal. I didn't know and the Cleveland people did not know. I had to get permission from the state of Ohio. And I made the model and proposed it to them. Or maybe we thought that they would approve it because I tried to convince them that it would be erosion prevention. But they didn't buy that. And they were wrong because—*Streams* proved it. So that is one of the things I didn't get a penny for or maybe he gave me a thousand dollars to make the model. I can't remember anymore.

You know, I am very bad with money as you can see. Much as I say I never lost money and I always made a little, even 5 percent from commissions and sometimes a lot, a lot more. But I am not very good with calculations.

AVIS BERMAN: I think you always want to try to get the best material you can, so that makes a big difference.

ATHENA TACHA: Of course.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, this is another piece that you used sandblasting in, which is Memory Path.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that was a big saga. Again, it started well. The committee of the Arizona—not Arizona—

AVIS BERMAN: No, Sarasota.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Florida. A Sarasota city art committee selected me—I don't remember if I had submitted slides or not—to do a work in their main little plaza, historical plaza called—

AVIS BERMAN: Selby Five Points Park.

ATHENA TACHA: Five Points, Yes. And where their opera is and so on. They were re-landscaping it, and the landscape architect was proposing a form in the middle of it.

AVIS BERMAN: Those chose you? This wasn't a competition?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, again, it was a competition, in fact international.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ATHENA TACHA: I think I submitted my slides—but they didn't choose three finalists. They chose me, I think. You know, I have submitted to so many, I can't remember the circumstance. But in any case, the plaza is triangular. And they were making a little mound in the middle. I don't know if it was in memory of the American Indian tribes or what. A berm, they called it, four feet high. So I had to do something on that berm. And I had to do something that would not allow people to hide behind—all the safety code—and that would be kind of amphitheatric so that people could sit on it and maybe watch little informal performances on the wide sidewalks all around the berm.

So I made a pattern, which is like a V path that goes back and forth irregular that starts low and mounts up to the top of the mound. And I was actually—I studied the history of Sarasota a lot—it is a remarkable city.

AVIS BERMAN: I see you have got the Ringling Circus here with Emmett Kelly.

ATHENA TACHA: Right, and then—yes, this is the opera. One of them is the opera. I forget which—this maybe.

AVIS BERMAN: I think that is—isn't that Mrs. Potter Palmer?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, indeed.

AVIS BERMAN: But she is from Chicago.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, but she had her summer home in Sarasota and she was a major force in Sarasota. So by studying the history, I realized that there were a number of events—the city was 100 years old—at the time. So I decided to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the city with images of important events, important people, important buildings of the history. So I selected with their help 75 photographs from their Archives and decided how to arrange them in a historical order starting from the bottom—no, starting from the top, where we started with Indians. The path was low, only a foot high, so that people could sit, but not hide behind.

It started at the top with the American Indian guy, chief, who was there still when Sarasota was built. And then at the bottom—at the other end, I had the logo of Sarasota, now with the image of the latest mayor, who happened to be a black man. So we started with an American Indian and ended with a black man.

And all of the photographs were in different directions so that walking from here, you could see some, read the dates—one date per photograph—read it from one side or pass and see it on the other side or if you were on top, you could see it that way. You could walk on it, of course, or sit on it. But the interesting thing for me was that the V shape of the path, which went—double V—was like fingers interlocking with the grass. And the path is not horizontal. It mounts slowly up to the berm.

But then by the time I designed it and all, the architects lowered the berm by one foot and made it three feet instead of four. So I had to redesign all the elevations for the granite sides. And it doesn't look as good because with four-foot elevation, you could see the winding very nicely. With three-feet elevation, it is too flat and you don't see those inclines between land and path that I wanted. It is a very subtle work.

So they liked it, but they have recycled watering for the grass, which I didn't know. They use recycled water, which is greenish. And I did notice that their heads of sprinklers were watering my sculpture. And I said, "You have to put half heads there. All the heads that water the sculpture have to be half, so that they water the grass and not the sculpture." Well, they didn't. And after two years, it started greening; all the images lost their white dye—they weren't visible and they started molding. So they called me and said, "Now what do we do?"

So we got again the guy who had done the sandblasting who lives in Florida near there—or Sanibel Island. Lucas, who is the guy who sandblasted the D.C. Vietnam Memorial names—

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I know who it is. He has got this amazing name, Lucas Century.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Lucas Century, that is right, Lucas Century. He did a number of my sandblastings, although he learned from another guy with whom I did more sandblastings earlier and later. And so he really was a student of Lucas Cooper, the initial guy who invented photo sandblasting.

[End disc four.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman continuing the interview with Athena Tacha on December 6th. So, okay, I'm sorry to have interrupted you.

ATHENA TACHA: I can't remember where we were, but I think I had finished with *Memory Path.* Oh, Yes, Lucas [Century] came with his girlfriend, and he and Richard and I cleaned all of the images and he came back and we re-sprayed the photos, which is a very laborious technique because you re-spray the dye and it dries and then you have to scrape it off with razor blades from the polished parts.

I have a videotape of it that Richard took, actually. That's why I know how long it took and how laborious it was. We stayed a couple of days there and did it. So we revamped the work. But they still didn't change the damn sprinklers. And therefore the work got eventually so damaged and so—the cracks of the granite, of course, the humidity of the water harms the caulking, too. They re-caulked it, but if water persists, there is nothing to do.

And somebody stole the portrait of the Indian, the slab with the portrait of the American Indian. So it was a wreck again. And they invited me—I was with Richard in Gainesville in '97-'98. So I went to Sarasota and we discussed the condition and they promised they would fix it. And then, a few years later, when I was here, they said, "No, we have to move it." I said, "You cannot move it. This is a site-specific work. It depends on the berm. And even though they lowered the berm, it still is part of it." They wanted to put all of the pictures on a wall. That's what they were interested in. *Memory Path*, of course, because it commemorates the history—so I said, no. And it was built—the contract is after VARA, that legislation that I told you about. So I threatened to sue them. Not that I would because I have tried to sue—oh, wait a second. I sued them once before.

AVIS BERMAN: The Sarasota—

ATHENA TACHA: There were two times, yes. I sued them once after I went in '98—no. They promised to fix it when my lawyer sued them. I paid the lawyer $2,000 and she got the promise that they would fix it. So we kind of stopped the lawsuit threat. And then, a few years later, they said, "No, we want to move it." And so I threatened to sue again. Finally we had to settle. So I said, "I want you to pay me the initial money for the entire work and then you can do what you want. I'll release you from"—well, they didn't. So we settled for something in between.

But now I have really thrown my hands up. I don't want to do anything with it. I don't know if they destroyed; I don't know what they did with the images, but I have no interest anymore.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's rather amazing at these places. They say they want a place and then they regard it as impermanent or something they can move or change at will.

ATHENA TACHA: Well, the governments change. They didn't want a black mayor's image there. Of course a new mayor came. You know, all of those political things are very important in public art. And that is the problem. It's not Pericles and Phidias. It's a different type of—changing society.

AVIS BERMAN: And now here about the same time, I think we'll move to this *Rose Fountain Plaza*.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that's a sweet little thing that I did for a small college [Berea College] with a budget of $5,000. And I used a very simple design in the benches. And this is a little fountain. And they have a rose garden around, which is a memorial to a student who committed suicide or something. That's why I called it rose fountain, for that reason. They executed it. That's why it cost little. They gave me a $5,000 fee for design and supervision. And I advised them with everything. But their workmen executed it.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, it seems to be very just self-contained and very nice and embodies a lot of principles in a small way.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, that's my least ambitious work, but still I feel good about it.

AVIS BERMAN: And I guess also they treated it with respect and—

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, and they love it because it's part of their campus and there is that garden commemorating that student and so on.

AVIS BERMAN: And then we've got this big piece here, which is, I guess, the motor vehicles department.

ATHENA TACHA: That is an amazing commission because they had two competitions. This is called water—

AVIS BERMAN: There's *Wave Fall* and there is *Transit*. This is for the Department of Transportation.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, both of them are for the Department of Transportation.

AVIS BERMAN: It's Newington, Connecticut, the motor vehicle department.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, outside of Hartford. It's a huge building, new building. And they had a front and the back. They wanted a sculpture in the front at the entrance and they wanted a sculpture in the restaurant/garden. So they had two competitions. And I won them both. I applied to them and they selected me for both, which was amazing because it was a big amount of work and of money.

So I proposed a granite fountain against—the wall they had circling the restaurant-garden—on one side was the building with the inside restaurant. And that was a wall that they wanted something done to, to look good. So I made a granite waterfall.

In the front I proposed a double colonnade that turned around their entrance with granite facing on one side.

AVIS BERMAN: What is this facing? What is that that you said?

ATHENA TACHA: Granite facing on one side of the column. The columns are pink concrete because that's what the building has as trimming, the same color as the building. And one side is red granite with a black granite slab. The columns change height, but each column has at eye level on the black granite an image commemorating or illustrating, if you want to say, some of the great accomplishments of the Department of Transportation, like bridges, etcetera.

I said, "What are your main works that you executed in the past as Department of Transportation of Connecticut?" And they gave me 25 photographs or more and I selected from them—yes, hundreds, I think, they gave me, but we selected—it's a very beautiful piece which is falling apart, again, because the caulking at the top has failed from water.

And it is partly my fault. I should have put a cap, a stone cap, there. But I thought caulk is—you know, sufficient, which it wasn't.

So you walk between them and you see all of the grand works of the Department of Transportation. And this is a wonderfully built fountain by a local company. It's the best construction of granite that I've seen—ever—[inaudible]—or anything. And, yet, what the problem was, I had a small fountain company that designed the fountain system, which was old-fashioned because they required brass piping. And nowadays they use PVC and other crap. And they didn't put brass. Brass piping does not require grounding and therefore—

AVIS BERMAN: PVC pipes, not brass.

ATHENA TACHA: They used piping that had to have grounding. It was illegal not to have grounding. And that would have cost another $5,000. I said, "Forget it. I don't have it in the budget. We have built it"—I mean, this cost me $75,000 to build—whatever it was. "And so you do the grounding."

Well, it took them five years to do the grounding and finally they sent me photographs of it with water. But for five years or so it had no water; it was just—but I design my fountains so that they are beautiful without the water. So the steps of the granite and their patterning evoked water. It is just as beautiful without the water. So it didn't matter.

But each of the commissions has—

AVIS BERMAN: I didn't know if there was any—so this was really, for the Hartford commission, this was mostly for the benefit of the employees and people—

ATHENA TACHA: Or the visitors, visitors who come to the Department of Transportation; that's how they enter. And they can see some of the main accomplishments.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So is this the entrance into the parking lot or something?

ATHENA TACHA: No, into the building.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay, because that looks—

ATHENA TACHA: It's reflecting, I think, the cars across. This is the entrance to the building, someplace here.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, the building architecture was pretty dreary.

ATHENA TACHA: It is. All of the buildings I built for—I mean, that's the problem. You have to do something that suits the building architecturally even though you don't like it, but at the same time enhances it and enriches it, either contextually or formally or both—

AVIS BERMAN: Have you ever been in a situation in which you have been called in, in the beginning, while the architecture is in the embryonic stages?

ATHENA TACHA: Very rarely. I'm trying to think. Well, the Mohammed Ali Plaza is that because even though they had the dictate of a Moghul -style garden and they had designed one which was rejected—of which we kept some of the idea on the upper level of the plaza. We started from scratch really with the architects. They kept the lower level of the plaza, which is mainly for entrance of buses and a beautiful staircase which the architects designed, but I participated in every aspect of the decisions. They selected the plans, of course, obviously.

What other people—let me go through the—[Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, as you say, it was rare.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, most of them are not for buildings, though, you see. Like *Merging* is for a quad, an open space. And a lot of them are open spaces.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, let's go into—I think this was the last one that we should—you know, pre-D.C., which is called *Rhythmics*, which is at the University of Minnesota. And how did this come about?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, again, I won two commissions for the University of Minnesota, almost simultaneous. One was for the department of—the gymnasium, the building of—what do they call it? Recreational sports, nowadays. Well, it used to be gymnasium. Do I have *Rhythmics* here? I must have it.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, because this is where I photocopied it from.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, right. I want to get it out because I want to show you something. Yes, this is it. The gymnasium's staff wanted something in front of it on the berm that overlooks the football field. So obviously it had to be a step sculpture. And I wanted to redo the *Streams* in larger form and not with rocks, but plants in the interstices. So this is it.

AVIS BERMAN: This is *Streams* updated.

ATHENA TACHA: Enlarged.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and rethought.

ATHENA TACHA: For the reason that I was afraid it would disappear, and it's my most beautiful concept. So I wanted to redo it. So we redid it in buff concrete, which is—*Streams* is buff stone, sandstone—and plantings. Well, they don't take care of it. It is of course under a huge tree so they do have—all of the landscape sculptures have the problem with leaves falling and stains from the fruit of the tree, whatever the tree is; I forget now. And they don't take care of the plants at all.

I selected sedums and things that don't need watering and grow very slowly—junipers, sedums, and other things—in consultation with a local garden supplier. And it looked beautiful when it started, but they don't—they did mow over. The lawnmowers break, chip off the corners—that is my nemesis—snowplows and lawnmowers, because they are all motorized now and they are the terrors of my sculptures. I had put, actually, gravel or pebble at the edges, but, of course, grasses grow around and over.

So it's not in very good condition.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Who was the champion here? Who was the person who wanted it?

ATHENA TACHA: Well, the—it is the—whatever you call that—public art committee of the University of Minnesota. And that's in St. Paul, the second campus of the University of Minnesota. And I think the director of the museum—

AVIS BERMAN: For the Walker or the university museum?

ATHENA TACHA: No, the university museum. What is it called, the first Gehry building that created the stamp of Gehry's buildings? Wei—

AVIS BERMAN: Weisman.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes, Weisman. Bravo. You have a much better memory than me for names. Being a foreigner, of course, I remember Greek names. But American names often escape me.

So I did two. I won another competition for the department of ecology at the St. Paul campus of the university. And there I decided to do an interior piece, which is not shown very well here, just one corner. But I can show you an image on the computer. I decided to collaborate with the faculty of the ecology department, which has a number of Nobel laureates in various fields related to environment and ecology.

And they have a lot of underground passages in Minnesota to go from one building to the other—

AVIS BERMAN: In the cold.

ATHENA TACHA: —which are dreary, dreary buff cement block. So I and the department chair Frank Barnwell, who was a wonderful man and a wonderful scientist, agreed that we would do something in collaboration with his faculty and to decorate, let's call it, all of the corridors that, out of the lobby, spread out like branches of a tree to the other buildings.

So I have five corridors enlivened on both sides with 280 photographs that were sandblasted on black granite. But they are—each faculty gave me half-a-dozen photographs of his principal research and a little statement about that research. So that's what these are. I pruned them down, and selected the best. But every science branch of the ecology department is represented. So it's a kind of history of ecology through the faculty of that department. That's what it amounts to. And I called it *Eco-Rhythms* because my contribution was not only to select the photographs and have them sandblasted but to place them along the walls in rhythmic fashions that both fit their subjects—each group is a particular faculty's work—but also make it a pleasant rhythmic passage through those corridors. It's really very handsome and instructive. And being indoors it has no problems.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, there is no maintenance.

ATHENA TACHA: The only thing, that there is no—[inaudible, laughs.] Of course, occasionally, maybe some slab will fall off the wall, attached with some type of epoxy. So far nothing has happened. And so far also the chair is still there and teaching. So it has been a good experience. I got those two commissions at the same time with *Waterlinks* in Madison, Wisconsin. They were my last things here in the '90s. The same contractor who did *Rhythmics* had been building also *Waterlinks*. He is from Wisconsin.

AVIS BERMAN: So when you say "this," *Rhythmics*, the same time—

ATHENA TACHA: *Rhythmics* and *Waterlinks* had the same contractor who moved from Madison then to Minnesota and built the second one. I mean, sometimes I reuse the contractor if I was happy with him and if he was nearby—because obviously you have to use somebody from the area.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, believe it or not, I think that I am pretty much—

ATHENA TACHA: We are finished? Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, unless you have—is there anything else you'd like to add?

ATHENA TACHA: I'd like to show you the photographs of the construction of*Ripples* because I am very—you know, being always supervising the construction, very interested in the process of the making of the sculptures, which has been fascinating in all of them. And I work with masons often.

In Smithtown, which was the first one, we used gunite. And that's a process that is very special. They use it for swimming pools because it allows you to make curvilinear shapes in concrete very easily, without molds. And so they hired a pool company. The architect who they asked me to collaborate with hired the local company. It came out of the budget that we were given. But I didn't know them. They didn't know me. They didn't even allow me to step into the site when I went to supervise.

So I went there—

AVIS BERMAN: Sounds very union.

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. I went there for 15 days. Well, their foreman was a—what do you call those men, very authoritative young men?

AVIS BERMAN: "Yeah, yeah, lady." One of those?

ATHENA TACHA: Yes. I sat there and watched and photographed and filmed. And eventually I got so friendly with the masons that not only did they let me in, but I started helping. So I learned the process of finishing gunite. I understand the entire process of gunite business.

Here is *Ripples*, I watched the casting of concrete. And it was a very unique experience. Again, I was very friendly with the masons. Also they did not—in no other circumstance they did not allow me to step in the site because they realized immediately that I knew the job. And, in fact—actually, it's not illustrated in this book. I built one brick relief on a building in Seattle, outside of Seattle, a little town outside of Seattle, for a high school. And it's a whole wall, front wall of—

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I know what it looks like. It looks a little bit Mayan or Frank Lloyd Wright-ish.

ATHENA TACHA: Did you see it someplace? Is it illustrated here? I don't think it is, though, because—

AVIS BERMAN: No, but I saw it in one of the catalogs.

ATHENA TACHA: Okay. And it is a little like that but it actually came out of brick—the fact that it was brick structure and brick masonry, how people use the principles of brick corbelling—vertical corbelling, horizontal corbelling—and also the fern patterns that were surrounding us because Seattle has a lot of fern woods. So you say Frank Lloyd Wright, but actually I don't think I was inspired by him at all there.

But, in any case, I went for two weeks and supervised the construction, a wonderful foreman again; just geniuses are those foremen of construction. And built with them—and I learned how to build the corbelling system of brick masonry.

And it was muddy. I mean, Seattle, it rained all the time—with rubber boots and raincoats the whole time. But in every commission I learned a lot and I enjoyed supervising. So since you are supposed to do this on the occasion of *Ripples*, I want to show you the construction of *Ripples.* Unless you have something else?

AVIS BERMAN: No.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]