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Oral history interview with Dore Ashton,
2010 November 21 - 2011 March 9

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Visual Arts Project, funded by the A G Foundation.

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Interview

**Interview with Dore Ashton
Conducted by George W. Sampson
At Ashton's home in New York, NY
2010 November 21 and 2011 March 9**

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Dore Ashton on 2010 November 21 and 2011 March 9. The interview took place at Ashton's home in New York, NY, and was conducted by George W. Sampson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Elizabeth Murray Oral History of Women in the Visual Arts Project, funded by the A G Foundation.

Dore Ashton and George W. Sampson have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

[Interview in progress.]

DORE ASHTON: — I am innocent.

GEORGE W. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: I read a lot of books, but I didn't have that much of an interesting life. I had perfectly — is that on?

MR. SAMPSON: I think so.

MS. ASHTON: I had a perfectly conventional sex life.

MR. SAMPSON: And how would you describe that?

MS. ASHTON: Missionary. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] You told me a great story once about Adja [Yunkers] giving you a key to his studio —

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: — and how it burned a hole in your jeans first?

MS. ASHTON: That's right; that's right.

MR. SAMPSON: I don't know how long —

MS. ASHTON: Because I was such an innocent.

MR. SAMPSON: And you took a long time to make that decision.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, [I] did. Did I also tell you that anytime I did visit him, I had to produce a bottle of Scotch — and not cheap Scotch, good Scotch?

MR. SAMPSON: No, I didn't hear that story.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Really?

MS. ASHTON: [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Well, you were 21, I guess. You could legally go out —

MS. ASHTON: Yes. I think I was — when I first went to him, yes, I just turned 21.

MR. SAMPSON: Just.

MS. ASHTON: [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: So acquiring good bottles of Scotch —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, right. [Laughs.] And of course, I had drunk Scotch before, but not like that. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Speaking of experience, I remember you telling me that — you've been socially active for a long, long, long time —

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: — going way back to when you were a young girl, and you'd come over to New York, I think you said.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I did.

MR. SAMPSON: What was the —

MS. ASHTON: The first thing I did was — I guess I would be 14 — there was a committee in New York that was sending CARE [Cooperative for Remittances to Europe, founded 1945] packages — as, you know, packing boxes with CARE packages. And some of them went to the Soviet soldiers.

MR. SAMPSON: And this was in World War II?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: The latter part of it.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Well, yes.

MR. SAMPSON: I had a memory of you also doing some protesting; was it against the treatment of Japanese —

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: — internment?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: Am I right on that?

MS. ASHTON: I did that, too. I connected up with a group here in Manhattan — I was going then to a Saturday morning class with Moses Soyer, painting, and that got me into New York, and with my mother's permission. My father was, of course, in the war, away.

And then I would go down to — it was a nisei group. You know, nisei were first-generation, born-here Japanese — a nisei group. I worked with them against the internment of the Japanese, which I still think of with horror.

MR. SAMPSON: And were those demonstrations here in Union Square?

MS. ASHTON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. SAMPSON: [Inaudible] — should stay in the neighborhood.

MS. ASHTON: Where all the soapbox orators were — yes. I was right in there. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: And there was - never really quiet.

MS. ASHTON: No. From then on, I was more or less — unlike my colleagues in my field, I was always politically active, always. And I worked with Peter Selz. Peter was the curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and I was on the *New York Times* as a reviewer.

MR. SAMPSON: So this is the mid- to late '50s?

MS. ASHTON: Yes. And we got engaged with CORE, which was the —

MR. SAMPSON: Congress of Racial Equality?

MS. ASHTON: Racial Equality. We gathered things for an auction to raise funds for CORE. And both of us were reprimanded by our employers — me, the *Times*, and he, the Museum of Modern Art — because as professionals and representatives of blah, blah, blah, we're not supposed to do — and my answer to them was,

that is my personal life; it's after hours, and it has nothing to do with my job. I'm sure that's one of the reasons that I got fired at the *New York Times*. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] That's just about when the whole civil rights thing started to heat up; it hadn't quite totally caught fire yet.

MS. ASHTON: Well, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: You left the *Times* in 1960?

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. SAMPSON: And it was, what, the summer of '61 when the —

MS. ASHTON: That's right. You're right.

MR. SAMPSON: When the bussing —

MS. ASHTON: Or, it hadn't — it was still —

MR. SAMPSON: And that was the big moment, or the early big moment. But it was still very much in the —

MS. ASHTON: I was just rereading this morning — I get the *Veterans of the Vietnam War* newspaper; they have an organization — and one of them was talking about Kent State [University, Kent, OH, 1970 shootings]. And that was something that upset me a lot, too. And I didn't remember exactly when it was, but I think it was around then.

You may remember that they murdered — the National Guard murdered, I think, three students, and incapacitated one; he's been in a wheelchair all his life. And there were nine others that were in hospital. It was a dreadful thing.

I'd like to tell an anecdote here: I was invited to give a lecture at the Cleveland Museum in Ohio, and Kent State is in Ohio. And of course, since I was a Distinguished Lecturer, their best collectors made a dinner for me, and I even had to stay overnight with them, with my — I brought my children because I was en route to California with them.

And in the gathering there, the Kent State thing came up. I, of course, said what a dreadful thing it was, and what a shock it was to me, and blah, blah, blah. And then one of the kindly gentlemen, who I was told later had the best collection of Renaissance drawings in the country — this very nice, well-spoken man — he said to me, "But those kids were throwing missiles —" [laughs].

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] Throwing missiles —

MS. ASHTON: Stones. A few of them did throw stones at the National Guard. But the National Guard - I was reminded reading this this morning — were carrying rifles with bayonets; they had machine guns on — I think tanks, or some kind of equipment. And it was certainly not in the American tradition, I wouldn't think, and I said so.

And everyone there defended the officials.

MR. SAMPSON: Did they? Interesting.

MS. ASHTON: All these civilized people who collected Old Master drawings - that was a big shock to me, really. I realized that I was whistling in the dark, I think, and nobody was hearing my message.

MR. SAMPSON: Now, that was actually a decade later. That was May fourth of 1970.

MS. ASHTON: Wow. So there, you see —

MR. SAMPSON: I won't forget that.

MS. ASHTON: Well, we are citizens of a quite violence-prone country. No?

MR. SAMPSON: Remember [President] Dwight Eisenhower's final comments —

MS. ASHTON: "Beware the military-industrial complex."?

MR. SAMPSON: Exactly.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. And do you know that 58 percent of our taxes goes to the military? Fifty-eight percent? That's one figure I read; maybe it's not accurate. But I'm sure it is, almost.

MR. SAMPSON: I bet it is.

MS. ASHTON: And if you ever look at a map of military bases — did you ever look at a map of our military bases? Every inch of the world has a U.S. military base.

MR. SAMPSON: I — tell you a related thing that I noticed this summer. We just had the World Cup play in South Africa, and I watched many of the games. For the first three or four days of broadcasts, the voiceover announcer made a point of saying, "And this is being broadcast live to American servicemen and women in 197 countries around the globe."

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God.

MR. SAMPSON: I was absolutely horrified. And after about two days of that, they stopped, and they never said it again. And you just wonder if somebody, you know, sort of said, hey, that's really not the message —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, wow.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: Have you been following the PTS[D], post-traumatic stress [disorder] debates that these vets of all our wars —

MR. SAMPSON: Not closely, but —

MS. ASHTON: That's not considered a medical condition, and Walter Reed hospital won't accept them. So they go and shoot their wives, or they become homeless. What a — okay. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: It's a threat; it's a threat.

MS. ASHTON: So, yes, you asked me if I was politically active when I was young. Yes, I was.

The first actual gesture that I remember is that two couples — in Wisconsin, there was not a legal segregation, but there was a de facto segregation. So we went — I with a black guy that I knew, and my friend, a black woman, a very close friend of mine, went with my friend Fred Licht, who is in Europe — I'm still friendly with him.

We went to a restaurant, and the two white people went in to engage a table. Then, our black accomplices — [laughs] — came in with me. And they then said there were no tables available, where it was obvious there were. So we did a big picketing sort of thing then. That was one of my first active things. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Interesting. I don't think you told me that story.

MS. ASHTON: I lived in the University of Wisconsin; I lived in a house — I was the one Caucasian, and there was one Japanese girl, and everybody else was black. I learned a lot from those black women about my country. One, who was a Ph.D. candidate — no, she already had a Ph.D. She was a postgraduate something or other, an older woman — told me that when she went —

I have to tell this kid, George, don't I?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah. Wisconsin?

MS. ASHTON: Whatever you say. Well, yeah, I applied to Yale in comparative literature — and it turned out that you had to have ancient languages, which I didn't have, so they wouldn't have accepted me — and to Harvard in art history, which, don't ask me why I did that — [laughs].

MR. SAMPSON: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And I got a full scholarship at Harvard because I had very high grades.

MR. SAMPSON: I think I remember you telling me that.

MS. ASHTON: And then, I think I told you, I failed the entry thing there.

MR. SAMPSON: Right, yeah. You had to get —

MS. ASHTON: I got as far as saying that the one professor, who was this famous art historian, Jakob Rosenberg,

the Rembrandt scholar — he did a course — I think it was called "Connoisseurship"; I don't remember. I was in that class. It was in [the] Fogg Museum, so he would bring works into class, and we'd talk about original works.

And the other students had all this stuff about three-dimensional design and two-dimensional design and all this formal terms, which I never had heard in my life; I didn't even know what a picture plane was. But of course, I had been an art student; I was sensitive. And so I looked — I remember when he brought one of my favorite painters to this day, a Tiepolo gouache. And I commented on it. And he gave me an A+ for the whole course.

He was so happy to have somebody that really was moved and looked at works of art, and wasn't art-historically, analytically approaching them.

MR. SAMPSON: Got away from the jargon a little bit?

MS. ASHTON: Oh, definitely. I told you, I didn't even know what a picture plane was, even though I had been an art student of Fernand Léger in Paris — but he never talked about the picture plane.

MR. SAMPSON: That's right. I remember you telling me, you did have an interesting interlude with Léger.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, I did. I did.

MR. SAMPSON: How did that come about?

MS. ASHTON: Well, when I was at the New School, which got out very early, I went to Europe for the summer. My parents actually said it was okay if I went to school. I had to go an art school; I wanted to go to an art school.

And I had, by that time already, studied with Adja Yunkers, who had one friend that he gave me the address [of] in Paris. It was a Hungarian woman painter who lived near Observatoire. I got in touch with her, and I asked her where, and she said there were two academies run that you could go and pay by the week. One was Léger, and the other was — I forget who. So I said, Léger, Okay. And I went.

MR. SAMPSON: What was the key moment or takeaway from that?

MS. ASHTON: From being in the Léger atelier?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah.

MS. ASHTON: Well, for one thing, you weren't allowed to paint until — he had a drawing master — until the drawing master said you could. And the drawing master made me get a very hard pencil and a small sketch pad, and draw, among other things — I remember as clear as yesterday — the pose was a young boy, maybe a 16-year-old boy - a ladder. And the boy had his arm through the rung of the ladder, and the hand hung down. And you were supposed to do that hand. Hands are the hardest things in the world anyway.

I struggled and struggled; and you weren't allowed to paint until the drawing master said you could. Finally, he said I could. And then I did a little painting. And the master in those situations — I think it's probably still today — he only came on Friday. He'd go, and he'd look at the student work.

Léger was a big, avuncular, kindly sort of man, as I remember him. And he would look at what I — [laughs] — put there, and he'd find something. He only made one or two comments. The one I remember was, "Ça, ça saut de la peinture ." He'd find a place, and he'd say, "That jumps out of the painting." Or he'd say — he had this, I think, Norman accent: "Ça commence ." [Laughs.] "That's beginning." And those two — no — but he had body language, too. You knew if he liked it or if he didn't like it by watching him.

MR. SAMPSON: How many of you were there in this atelier when you were there?

MS. ASHTON: There were about 20 or 25. I think at least two of them were GIs. They never talked to me, the American GIs. And the rest were foreigners from Hungary, Romania, who knows where. I didn't have any friendships with any of them, but it was an important experience.

MR. SAMPSON: That's terrific. That was a month or so, or all summer?

MS. ASHTON: I was there from around June 15th to the beginning of August, and then I went off to Italy to see art and to meet my childhood boyfriend — [laughs] — who met me in Florence. And then he ran away. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: That's a great summer, though.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah. It was — [laughs] — what would you say, a growing-up summer, or —

MR. SAMPSON: I'm sure.

MS. ASHTON: So that's my bildungsroman. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] But you had already encountered Adja. How did that — I mean, you were fairly young.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, well, as I went to the New School — I was 18, I guess —

MR. SAMPSON: And that was here, in the teens?

MS. ASHTON: On 12th Street.

MR. SAMPSON: On 12th Street. Okay.

MS. ASHTON: Twelfth Street. It was 12th. I tried to get into the most popular teacher then, and the only one whose work I knew was Kuniyoshi. Kuniyoshi's class was always packed. Adja Yunkers had just been brought over; nobody knew his name. So his class was not packed enough. So they pushed me into his class.

Again, I was a very flirtatious young lady. I'd be flirting with the guys in the classes. Sometimes I didn't come to class, and he started sending the guy to where I lived to bring me to class — [laughs].

Then he had a — he wrote wonderful letters on Japan paper in different-colored inks, and he started to write me these letters. But I then went back to the university, and then I went off to Harvard. And he came up to visit me in Harvard. And that's the beginning of that. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: That's terrific. So it was a long-term sort of courtship, in a sense.

MS. ASHTON: Well, not long, very — two years.

MR. SAMPSON: That was a couple years, though. Right. Yeah — had to be. Right. So what happened after Harvard?

MS. ASHTON: Well, then I came to New York, and I tried to find a job. I had a hard time finding a job. I had known one very famous art dealer who was always kind to young people, J. B. Neumann. He was very famous — dealer. And J. B. said, "Well, maybe I could find you a job in some gallery. I'll try to see."

He found an Old Master gallery that needed a receptionist. So I got that job. Then the guy, at the end of the week — he was in Europe; he comes back — and he says, "Change this pounds into dollars." And since I had always flunked math all my life, I just couldn't do it. I tried, but I couldn't. Then I said to him, "Well, I can't do this." He said, "Then you're fired." [Laughs.] So I had the job two weeks. And I was fired.

Then somebody told me that they were looking for reviewers at four dollars a review at *Art Digest*. And I got in touch with them, and they let me review — little reviews for four dollars a review. That sort of kept me going.

Then I got a job in a factory; that was horrible. They produced — what are they called — you know, indexes: an index of art books, index of this, of bibliographies, and that sort of thing. And — oh, that was unbearably boring. And they fired me. The guy said to me, "You're too intelligent for this job. Thank you." And then I was out of work again.

Then the woman at the magazine gave me a few more reviews to do. So I started working as a reviewer, art reviewer. One day I was reviewing, and there was a man there who was also reviewing the same exhibition. His name was Howard Devree, and he was the chief art critic for the *New York Times*.

Now — [laughs] — there used to be this ad, "I got my job through *The New York Times* —"

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. Right.

MS. ASHTON: I got my job through being a kind of cute little girl that this old art critic, I think, fancied. I think that's the real reason I got the job.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] Do you recall the show you were reviewing?

MS. ASHTON: No, it was a group show. I don't remember. [Laughs.]

And then, what happened is I got together with Adja Yunkers, and we lived together. Then he won a Guggenheim [Fellowship]. It the same time, the reviewer at the *New York Times* left or was — I don't know, and Howard Devree offered me his job on the *Times*. So there I was, faced with the possibility of going to Italy for a year on my husband's Guggenheim or working on the *New York Times*. And I chose to go to Italy.

And the guy at the *Times* said, "Well, I'll let you write from Rome once a month, and I'll try to hold your job for you."

MR. SAMPSON: Wow.

MS. ASHTON: And he did.

MR. SAMPSON: Wow.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, I was so lucky — so lucky.

MR. SAMPSON: That's amazing.

MS. ASHTON: Very unusual.

MR. SAMPSON: So that would have been, say, 1954 or something like that? Fifty-three, '54?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, around —

MR. SAMPSON: Or '55?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Around then. I think it was '54 or '55, that year that I was in Europe. We spent a month in Paris, and we settled in Rome and traveled in Italy. It was a good year — [laughs].

MR. SAMPSON: But when you came back then, you were suddenly sort of starting at the *Times* full-time.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm.

MR. SAMPSON: And finding yourself, were you not, sort of smack-dab in the middle of the explosion of the Abstract Expressionists, or the latter part that —

MS. ASHTON: Well, they were already well established. And I had known them before, because I hung out around here, which is where they all had their studios. I knew most of the guys — [laughs]. So I was pretty well situated.

And even though most of the New York City sophisticated public, or people interested in the arts, had long since accepted them, the *Times* still thought of them as way out.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, really?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah. So they — among the other accusations they made when they drew up their long accusation to fire me — and they had to have it written, because I belonged to the union, the guild; they couldn't just fire me. And I went to the guild, and the guild said, "We can protect a job here, but not your job."

It turned out that I went back after this guy exploded, and the first thing he did was, he called home at quarter to nine, and said, "Where are you?" And I said, "Well, I don't usually come in in the morning; I go out and do the rounds, and I come in in the afternoon because it's a morning paper, and I write it up." And he said, "You're to be here at nine o'clock." So he began to harass me.

I decided to stick it out for a couple of months. And I did; it was humiliating, but I did. And of course, it infuriated him. Then word went around in the so-called art world, and they wrote a letter, and the International Art Critics Association wrote a letter to the *Times*. And that was an unjust — well, but there it was.

MR. SAMPSON: But you started to say earlier that there was a connection between knowing a lot of the painters and —

MS. ASHTON: Why I was fired.

MR. SAMPSON: — your work at the *Times*, and/or why you were fired —

MS. ASHTON: One of the things they accused me of — I was writing about my friends. Also, in one group exhibition — my husband had been in a group exhibition, and I had a list of names [of] who was in it, and his name was on the list. I didn't say — no qualifying — nothing, just his name. And they said I was pushing my husband. It was [a] totally nefarious thing they did. And when I told the managing editor, I was upset.

When they gave me the document, which had very neatly underlined, red lines, with a ruler, they wouldn't let me touch it. They had it on the table. I could look over and read a little bit of it.

MR. SAMPSON: My goodness.

MS. ASHTON: I told the managing editor, I said, "But these are lies." And he said, "They are?" And that was my first introduction to the real world. He knew perfectly well they were. And he smiled. And that was it.

MR. SAMPSON: But there's a missing link, it seems to me, from here and social activism — involved with the community a lot, then away to Wisconsin. And even though the French sojourn, or the European sojourn with Léger — now to Harvard - how did you crack into the — so you were friends with all these people—I mean, that still doesn't get us into the Cedar Tavern, or get us into the — [laughs] — in with the boys.

How did that —

MS. ASHTON: Well, I was naturally drawn to the artistic milieu. I would hang around when I was young; I'd find out who was having a show on 10th street, and so on. And I'd go. And I knew some younger artists my age. And by that time, I was already living with a painter.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, this was when you were — in your early days of living with Adja?

MS. ASHTON: With Adja Yunkers. So it all went together.

MR. SAMPSON: Sure. So it was after Harvard, or just about that time, when you really started to move in those circles?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, a little bit after. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

MR. SAMPSON: That makes —

MS. ASHTON: The exact opposite. Even though I think I once told you that I tended to dress quite conservatively. I wore suits and skirts, usually tweed, and low-heeled shoes. Still, they told me that — a friend who came to look me up at Harvard told me that the doorman, when he asked if he had seen me, the doorman said, "Oh, you mean the bohemian?"

MR. SAMPSON: Really?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Also, there were very few Jews at Harvard then. They claim there was no quota, but very few. The first day I was there, a boy, who turned out to be a very nice boy, came over, and he said to me, "I've never met a Jew," you know? I didn't even know how he knew I was a Jew.

MR. SAMPSON: Interesting.

MS. ASHTON: Well, it's not called "Ivy League" for nothing.

MR. SAMPSON: No. And they have recently admitted to a lot of that in the last —

MS. ASHTON: They have?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, that I've bumped into at least — Yale and —

MS. ASHTON: Well, yes. Some of them have admitted that they —

MR. SAMPSON: Brown [University] has now admitted that —

MS. ASHTON: — that they didn't have full professors who were Jews.

MR. SAMPSON: That was discrimination on lots of different fronts, I think, for a long period of time. And they finally started to come —

MS. ASHTON: Well, now they're probably after the Muslims, right? [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: They've got to have somebody.

MR. SAMPSON: So just out of curiosity, of those years on the *Times*, are there moments that jump out at you, either exhibitions that you felt then, and still feel, are particularly important to you, or —

MS. ASHTON: Well, what I did on the *Times*, I introduced a new genre, which was a combination of an interview and a review of an artist that had a show up then. I would write these little feature pieces about individual artists.

I remember I wrote one about Theodoro Stamos. And then I wrote — oh, yes — I got into trouble with a very significant man who was the — one of the managing editors, who was [President Harry S.] Truman's son-in-law? Or somebody like that. I don't remember his name. He was related to a president of the United States.

I had written a piece about George Grosz. There was a big George Grosz exhibition. Well, George Grosz had been a communist, and he was a political activist, and I said all that.

And I came — oh, his name was Clifton Daniel. I do remember. I was on the elevator, going up with him on the elevator, and he said, "Ms. Ashton, you deal with the art; leave the politics to me." And I actually knew exactly why he said it that week. I should have known then that they were already plotting to get rid of me, but I was too naïve at that time — [laughs]. Now, I would recognize it.

MR. SAMPSON: How about from an artistic standpoint? Were there particular — either people you encountered during that time, or work that you saw that —

MS. ASHTON: Interested me particularly?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, that even looking back now leaps out at you.

MS. ASHTON: I was a keen admirer of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. I wrote features about them in magazines. I wrote for several European magazines and several in Latin America. So occasionally, I'd do feature stories about artists that interested me. I remember doing a kind of long one — I don't remember for where — about Franz Kline. And I did do one long, long-ish, piece about de Kooning, which wasn't an interview; it was a review.

Then I wrote — I think I told you that before, but I'll tell you again. I had made friends in Paris with Christian Zervos. Now, Zervos was the publisher of a wonderful magazine — wonderful — called *Cahiers d'art*. And he invited me — I was in my early 20s — to write, and I wrote for *Cahiers d'art*; I wrote about American art — the first one.

Then I was hired by another French magazine, run by younger people, called *Cimaise*. And *Cimaise* let me write also anything I wanted. So I also wrote about the artists I was interested in, who happened mostly to be — not exclusively, but a lot of them were — people that I knew in downtown New York that are now called "Abstract Expressionism."

MR. SAMPSON: What was it about Franz Kline that —

MS. ASHTON: Interested me?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah.

MS. ASHTON: Well, Franz was a lot of fun, to begin with. I think that was one of the things.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: He had a studio near where I lived on 14th Street, so it was easy. And he hung out with a guy from New Orleans who was in love with me. That guy was a wonderful guy; I really loved him. He wasn't the best painter in the world, but he was a terrific guy, a very funny guy. He had been a racing car guy in Indianapolis, and he used to sometimes come out with his motorcycle to the *Times* and take me home on the back of his motorcycle — [laughs].

He hung out with Franz, and they had absolutely hilarious stories to tell, because they'd get drunk. And what I do remember was the other guy telling me, one night he and Franz were looking for some girls — it was pretty late; they probably closed down the Cedar Bar [Tavern], and they were back in Franz's studio. But they were so drunk, they couldn't read the telephone book.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: Stories like that. And once I was with Franz after New Year's Eve somewhere, and he and I went in the streets picking up all the discarded Christmas trees and putting them on the roofs of cars. [Laughs.] The critic from the *New York Times* — with such hi-jinks, right?

MR. SAMPSON: Today, that would be conceptual art, and — may make you a fortune.

MS. ASHTON: Right. Exactly. Absolutely. I should have stuck with it.

MR. SAMPSON: And how about de Kooning? What was so interesting about — there's the European connection

with Adja, so there was a natural affinity there.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Well, I've always loved painting, what we used to call "painting" painting. And de Kooning was the eminent "painter" painter, and so I was really very engaged with his work. I didn't always like it, but I was always interested. And now I think he's the best of the lot.

MR. SAMPSON: His work has stood up, hasn't it?

MS. ASHTON: For me, yes. Definitely.

MR. SAMPSON: So, okay, let's keep on moving here. I think about the time the *Times* let you go was about when Cooper Union gave you an offer, was it?

MS. ASHTON: No, no. After the *Times* let me go —

MR. SAMPSON: Or it was the New School.

MS. ASHTON: — I tried to survive — I was married by then to Adja, but he wasn't making a penny. I tried to survive [by] freelancing, and that's out of the question; I discovered that very quickly. So then I thought, well, I have to find some way to make a living.

And then, this guy [Silas H. Rhodes] that owned the School of Visual Arts — it was a business; it's still a business — he was a shrewd guy, and I had a byline in the *Times* every day for five years. So I was a name then, right? So he went after me, and he asked me to organize the humanities department, which I did there. I taught art history there — so-called art history.

So I worked there for — I don't remember how long. Then there was a dean at Cooper Union [George Sadek] that was keen to make his department — he was the dean of art and architecture. He invited me to lunch one day, and he made me a — [laughs] — oh, and he said he always wanted to talk to me about possibly teaching at Cooper Union. So I called a friend who was a real professor, Andrew Forge, and I said, "If he asks me what my salary should be, what should I tell him?" And he said, "Well, think of what you're worth, and then double it." [Laughs.]

And I did, and he accepted it. So then I got a job at Cooper Union at a very — in those days — high salary. But then, out of my sense of justice and everything, I went and instigated there, founding a union. And when the union came in, they said, "Well, look at your salary compared with ours." And I had to adjust my — first off, I had to teach more. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Then downwardly adjust your salary.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Well, I don't remember if I did that, but I did have to teach three courses, like they did.

MR. SAMPSON: Okay. Instead of —

MS. ASHTON: Before that, I only had two.

MR. SAMPSON: Instead of — instead of two?

MS. ASHTON: So I did the right thing, but it wasn't to my advantage.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] So that was early, early '60s, though, right?

MS. ASHTON: Yes — well, no. I was at Visual Arts [in] the early '60s. Cooper Union — I started after '68, I know. Maybe '70 — I'm not sure when. I should know.

MR. SAMPSON: Sixty-eight is the year that sticks in all of our minds, I think.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, absolutely — mine especially. Yeah, yeah, that was an important date, and just as I told you, I've been rereading accounts about Kent State, which I think was '69, wasn't it?

MR. SAMPSON: Seventy.

MS. ASHTON: Seventy. And I felt like, yeah, those were fraught days.

MR. SAMPSON: They were fraught days. Why was '68 so particularly fraught for you?

MS. ASHTON: Well, I was, as you know, always very much interested in Latin America. And I think it was '68 that the Tlatelolco Massacre occurred in Mexico City, when they killed the students.

MR. SAMPSON: With the students — I think that was '68. Yes, it was.

MS. ASHTON: And then came Kent State, which also upset me a lot.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. Well, in the intervene, you've — you would have lost Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. They were both '68.

MS. ASHTON: Absolutely. And the guy in Chicago that — Fred Hampton —

MR. SAMPSON: Fred Hampton.

MS. ASHTON: — was shot in his bed, in his back. Nice, huh? Some country. [Laughs.] When you think of all the assassinations in this country, it's pretty impressive.

MR. SAMPSON: And around the world —

MS. ASHTON: Well, that's true, too.

MR. SAMPSON: — that we might or might not have a hand in is —

MS. ASHTON: That's true.

MR. SAMPSON: — my point.

MS. ASHTON: Well, that's true. But you have to say that this country always represented itself as "not like them."

MR. SAMPSON: True. Absolutely.

MS. ASHTON: And still does. All this discussion now about — what's that called? They have a name for it — where they take prisoner to some country, some third country.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yes, right.

MS. ASHTON: What is the word? There's a cant word; it's not a good word. It's —

MR. SAMPSON: Exactly.

MS. ASHTON: But they know what they mean. Rendition.

MR. SAMPSON: Rendition, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Rendition. Well, that's just coming out now.

MR. SAMPSON: Other countries have called it "the disappeared," I think.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, well, in Latin America.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: Absolutely.

MR. SAMPSON: And some of that came through Adja, right? The Latin American piece to your — because I remember you introduced me to Octavio Paz; you introduced me to so many writers and poets and people that I might not have —

MS. ASHTON: Right.

MR. SAMPSON: — come upon.

MS. ASHTON: Well, Octavio was me, not my husband. When I came to Mexico City once, for some reason the Israeli Ambassador, of all things, General [David] Shaltiel — he was a general — invited me to lunch.

It was very interesting because, as I walked in, I looked — he had a library near the vestibule. You walked in and saw his library, and I saw all these books by Paul Valéry, and you know. And I said to him, "General Shaltiel, how does a general like you come to have a library like that?" And he said, "Madame, you've asked the question in the wrong way; what you mean is, how does a man with a library like that become a general?"

[They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: Well said.

MS. ASHTON: I never forgot that. And then, at lunch, I was sitting next to Octavio Paz. Octavio Paz was already a very famous poet, and I knew it, and I was impressed. He was very genial; he talked with me and so on, and we got to be friends, and we stayed friends till he died. I corresponded with him, and so on. And then Adja and he did a book together.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. Which?

MS. ASHTON: A poem, *Blanco* [Octavio Paz, illustrations by Adja Yunkers. 1974].

MR. SAMPSON: Right, which I've seen in your care a couple times.

MS. ASHTON: It's very beautiful.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yeah. I think we — did we show it —

MS. ASHTON: You showed it in your show.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. That traveled — to a couple different places, I believe.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, so that was a fruitful engagement. And Adja met him through me because I was the one that flirted with Octavio Paz, who was very glad to flirt back. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: But Adja had already spent time in his life in —

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: — Cuba and Mexico.

MS. ASHTON: That's right. Adja had been — definitely in Cuba. I know that for a fact.

MR. SAMPSON: Venezuela? Didn't you tell me that he was — [inaudible]?

MS. ASHTON: Oh, that was later. Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Okay, later.

MS. ASHTON: Then he apparently did go to Mexico, but I don't have any evidence that he did. But I know he was in Cuba because I've seen Cuban catalogues and illustrations he did.

MR. SAMPSON: Yes, there are collectors, or people, who have Adja's work in their collections in Cuba to this day.

MS. ASHTON: He was there before I was born [1928], in 1926, I think.

MR. SAMPSON: And then, at some point, there was a connection — you think — in Mexico with some of the muralists or some of the —

MS. ASHTON: He said that he met the three —

MR. SAMPSON: Right. This —

MS. ASHTON: — muralists — Siqueiros and Orozco and Rivera. I don't know if he did, or if he knew them, really.

MR. SAMPSON: As far as you know, he didn't have a show there or an exhibition —

MS. ASHTON: Not in Mexico, but he did in Cuba.

MR. SAMPSON: Did he work there? Did he paint in —

MS. ASHTON: In Mexico?

MR. SAMPSON: In Mexico?

MS. ASHTON: No, I don't think he did.

MR. SAMPSON: Not there.

MS. ASHTON: I don't think so.

MR. SAMPSON: And then the Venezuelan one was much later.

MS. ASHTON: Much later. That was after we were married. I think I was going to Caracas to do a feature story for somebody or other, a magazine or something, and he came with me. We met this dealer — Clara Diamant Sujo — there, and he and she got along very well, and then she gave him a show in Caracas.

MR. SAMPSON: And that's before she came here?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Interesting — which is why she always had a few pieces of his or always had an interest and so forth.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Did she give him shows in New York later?

MS. ASHTON: No, the first show that he had that I remember, he had at a wonderful gallery, Rose Fried [Gallery], who showed mostly Europeans, and good Europeans. That's the one that I remember; it's the first one that I was involved with in any way. And, after that, I don't remember.

He showed at André Emmerich, and he had a fight with him. He was hard to get along with, and Emmerich got rid of him. Then he had a show at the Whitney; I don't remember what year — which, you'd think, would mean something, but apparently it didn't mean much.

MR. SAMPSON: It hasn't yet, anyway. Let's put it that way. What was the show — the first large show — what was his work at that point? This was before the string paintings?

MS. ASHTON: He was doing pastels; he was doing these large, very beautiful and — I think — very good pastels.

MR. SAMPSON: And they were in a variety of colors, if I remember correctly. The times I'd seen them —

MS. ASHTON: And they were a variation — yes. Very rich color of violet.

MR. SAMPSON: That's when he was very —

MS. ASHTON: And he also — there were earlier colored woodcuts, where he'd do — like with 20 blocks.

MR. SAMPSON: Woodcuts, yes — that I remember going to Santa Rosa to see — drawer after drawer full —

MS. ASHTON: Santa Rosa?

MR. SAMPSON: Santa Rosa, California.

MS. ASHTON: And they had all his prints?

MR. SAMPSON: Not all, but they had — there's someone out there with a —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, an art dealer? Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: An art dealer. You were aware of it — and I think I'd met — no, I couldn't — Sasha [Yunkers] couldn't meet us there. Her son got sick or something at the very last minute. We were supposed to all meet. That's right.

MS. ASHTON: That's right. I had forgotten that.

MR. SAMPSON: But those are very striking woodworks. I remember your telling me that you thought, to some degree, that was some of the best work that he had actually done.

MS. ASHTON: I do. I really think — he did a polyptych. I think it was magnificent, and several museums do have it. I know that the Philadelphia Museum has one, and I think one in —

MR. SAMPSON: Is it — one in Cleveland? There used to be —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, one in Cleveland. I think so.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. Because I remember that we got some work from those collectors, that male couple in Cleveland, that were —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah, there was a collector there.

MR. SAMPSON: Right? I can't remember if affiliated with the museum or not, but — and I think they had some of the *Skies of* —

MS. ASHTON: *Skies of Venice* [1960] — that's where —

MR. SAMPSON: *Skies of Venice* — the large — the large works, don't they?

MS. ASHTON: They were beautiful, too.

MR. SAMPSON: They're gorgeous.

MS. ASHTON: I loved them. He did those — we were in Venice one summer. We exchanged this house with [Emilio] Vedova and his wife, who — and we stayed in their apartment in Venice. It was nice.

MR. SAMPSON: How did the rhythm of his creativity work in the course of a day? Was he an early riser, get up and —

MS. ASHTON: No, he wasn't an early riser.

MR. SAMPSON: — or did he work late into the evening? Or did he put in almost a full day?

MS. ASHTON: He was very erratic, either morning, later in the morning or sometimes in the afternoon through the — well, when we had small children, he was always home for dinner. I guess he worked during the day.

MR. SAMPSON: But not late into the night, necessarily, or —

MS. ASHTON: Sometimes he did, but not every day.

MR. SAMPSON: So he'd get on a roll and get —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: — get something really — that he'd need to finish —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah. Like many artists, if he had an exhibition coming up, he'd work harder. [Inaudible, laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: I guess I've thought of you as an intellectual, but you're saying not necessarily the trained academic.

MS. ASHTON: I'm not it. I'm not it. One year of graduate school doesn't make you a trained academic, especially if you're having an affair in New York and leaving every weekend.

[They laugh.]

Which I did, and they noticed it.

MR. SAMPSON: They noticed it? [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, they told me: "You're not in the library on the weekends."

MR. SAMPSON: Really?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Boy, those days are gone.

MS. ASHTON: I wasn't fresh, though. I didn't say, "Fuck you," or anything like that. I just smiled — "I'm not?" [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: But did you get a — this is a one-year master's there?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Because they regarded the master's as merely a place to look you over if they were going to invite you to do a Ph.D.

MR. SAMPSON: I see.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: And chances are, you think you might not have gotten an invitation even if you had stuck around?

MS. ASHTON: Oh, I hardly think so. Besides which, around mid-semester, I told them that I wasn't interested in going on for a Ph.D., and that — they were very annoyed, because I was on this full scholarship. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Right, and that's not the proper academic response, is it?

MS. ASHTON: Definitely not. I guess I was in some ways — although I think I'm a very middle-class person by background and behavior and everything, but, by them, I was a very bohemian, out-of-control type of person. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Well, that's a possibility. And it strikes me, just having heard the stories thus far, that you really were, at that point, pretty deeply engaged in the New York art world at a time when it was —

MS. ASHTON: Well, I wasn't really in the New York art world yet. No, I wasn't, but —

MR. SAMPSON: Or a weekend visitor there, too? Shall we put it that way?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, I did meet — through having an affair with Adja, in his loft on Grand Street, I did meet a few people.

One very important person was Jeanne Reynal. She had parties. All the ladies wore peasant blouses and peasant skirts and huge earrings and teeth — lion's teeth - hanging all over them. And I was absolutely — I was really rapt there; it was a milieu I knew nothing about. I walked right into it. They were all older artists — they were people he knew, and then I got to know her and that milieu better, but it was brand new to me.

MR. SAMPSON: So would that have been —

MS. ASHTON: That would be 1950.

MR. SAMPSON: Would that be the Rothkos or the Pollocks or the — who are we talking about?

MS. ASHTON: I don't remember meeting Rothko, but he was a friend of hers. They were all friends of hers. And she was the great patron of Arshile Gorky; of course, he was dead by then, I guess. But she had several Gorkys hanging there, some of which are in MoMA now.

It was, for me, the little bourgeois, a doctor's daughter from New Jersey, an incredible introduction — I guess you'd call it — to what their world had been, their true bohemian world had been.

MR. SAMPSON: And from our perspective, we look back and say, "Well, it still was," at least as early as —

MS. ASHTON: What?

MR. SAMPSON: It still was, sort of, truly bohemian, at least —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, it was. Absolutely.

MR. SAMPSON: It wasn't as the way it was in the '20s or something, or it wasn't the same way that it was in the '30s, but for us looking back from 2010 —

MS. ASHTON: It probably was. I don't —

MR. SAMPSON: — 1950s seems like it was the heartbeat of the whole —

MS. ASHTON: Well, yeah, and they — those people don't change.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: What was interesting when I saw that — you remember Robert Redford did a — I forget which film — about the McCarthy era, and in the beginning, he interviewed some people in San Francisco, some old people with wonderful faces, who were still on the left, and so on. And those faces — I remember thinking, because they did what they thought was right, they had these good faces. That's very romantic, yeah, that's how I felt.

MR. SAMPSON: So the social scene and the parties and so forth that you walked into were not so much left or right, one or the other, but they were art world.

MS. ASHTON: They were bohemians.

MR. SAMPSON: Okay — so one would assume — the assumption would be, but also deeply involved in the arts and so forth. And that's kind of who was there.

MS. ASHTON: But of course, if you ask about political positions, I never knew any artist who you could call right-wingers. They're must have been, but I never met any.

MR. SAMPSON: I don't associate that either, actually.

MS. ASHTON: No.

MR. SAMPSON: But some years ago, I asked you directly, and you did tell me that you had encountered, or seen across the room a couple of times, Pollock, before his untimely passing.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, but I didn't know him; I saw him.

MR. SAMPSON: You didn't have a chance to speak to him or come to know him at all?

MS. ASHTON: No, I didn't. No, I didn't try either. No. He wasn't the one that interested me so much then. I now see why he's so celebrated, but — is this on?

MR. SAMPSON: Mm. [Affirmative.]

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, Pollock wasn't my hero. I was really, as you know, drawn to Rothko and his work. That was much more important to me. I knew the work of all of them, and as I told you, I liked the work of Franz very much — Kline. So I liked Kline and de Kooning and Rothko. Those were the ones that I was most engaged with, as artists, and I was interested in the youngest of them, Stamos, too.

MR. SAMPSON: Theodoro Stamos. And a little bit later on, Philip Guston, too.

MS. ASHTON: Well, then — Philip, around '51 or '[5]2, I saw a show of his, and then I really was — and I got in touch with him. We met, and then we became quite close friends, as was obvious.

MR. SAMPSON: So what was the first encounter with Rothko — because you developed a friendship with him that went on and on and on.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, until he committed suicide, in fact.

At that time, Sidney Janis had a gallery in the front, and Betty Parsons had a gallery in the back. The elevator opened right onto Sidney Janis's gallery. And Betty had a Rothko show — I'm pretty sure it was Betty, in the back. I walked in there, and I just fell for it immediately.

I don't know why, but it was very emotionally satisfying to me. And then I got in touch with Mark, and we had a corned beef sandwich [at the] Sixth Avenue delicatessen — famous delicatessen. He lived on 55th Street, I think, then, and he did invite me to come and see the paintings. And then I went and saw one major painting, which now hangs in MoMA, I believe, and I got very involved with his work and him.

MR. SAMPSON: Can you be more specific about what it was that — now we hear all these transcendental — [inaudible] — all of that —

MS. ASHTON: Well, I think, yes — I know that's a big terrible word, "transcendental," but I would guess that that was what I was hungering for myself.

And, yes, that's probably what engaged me with his work. Then when I got to know him a bit, we never talked about art. I think I've told you that before. Never. But what he used to say is, "You think the world will last 10 more years?" And this is, don't forget, the age of atomic bombs.

MR. SAMPSON: That's right. We all had those questions. I remember, absolutely. We really did; that was an important part of that.

MS. ASHTON: So we talked about things like that, about life. You could say that I sometimes think that the tradition — I'm a Jew, and there was a tradition of, sort of, intellectual inquiry about the meaning of life. And even though I'm a materialist and hardly a mystic, there was something in me that wanted to talk about those things. Mark and I did talk about things like that.

MR. SAMPSON: I remember you telling me — I probably won't get the quote right, but something like, you said,

"The I that painted that is not I."

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Is that the right —

MS. ASHTON: I think we talked about the idea that when an artist is at work, engaged totally in his work, the famous Rimbaud line, "I is another," holds true. I believe that.

MR. SAMPSON: That appears in *A Fable of Modern Art* [Dore Ashton. 1991], I believe, that Rimbaud line.

MS. ASHTON: I think so.

MR. SAMPSON: I think so, too.

MS. ASHTON: I haven't ever reread it, but I hope so. [They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: I told you that my jazz world days of being around Leroy Jenkins, the violin player, who said something similar, to the effect that he told me once, "Sometimes I play the music, and sometimes the music plays me."

MS. ASHTON: Oh, that's good.

MR. SAMPSON: Which is, I think, the same kind of sentiment.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. But you were hanging around with Bob Dylan, weren't you?

MR. SAMPSON: Well, no. I just did that one tour with him.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, well, you got a novel out of it.

MR. SAMPSON: Didn't necessarily — hung around with him yet.

MS. ASHTON: You were what, a gofer?

MR. SAMPSON: I was a gofer. I was indeed. And now the Smithsonian knows about this, you sneaky person. [Laughs.] It's been a hidden secret all these years. So we'll see what happens next, but —

MS. ASHTON: Well, we're going to get it published; that's what's going to happen next.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] So tell me more about Mark, because I really enjoyed reading the book about Rothko, which has enormous depth to it and obviously is the kind of thing you can only write when you have a long-standing back and forth with him.

MS. ASHTON: Well, I think that probably one of the things that I should mention, I'm a dedicated reader of Nietzsche, and I think he was, too. And, you know, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the whole title they never give, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. Mark was a great music lover. Mozart was his — he could lie around for hours listening to a Mozart opera, and really listening. So that connected us, too.

MR. SAMPSON: Did he paint to music?

MS. ASHTON: I don't know. He never let me be there when he was painting.

MR. SAMPSON: He never did? Okay.

MS. ASHTON: No. I don't know, I would guess yes. Writers can't do it, but painters can listen to music while they work.

MR. SAMPSON: I know some, maybe many, who do.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: The ones I've seen actually working often have.

MS. ASHTON: But I never saw him working.

MR. SAMPSON: Was that something he kept entirely to himself, do you think, or it just happened that you're — the way your lives —

MS. ASHTON: I don't know. You know what happens when a figure of his breadth dies. Everybody knew him; everybody saw him working; everybody can tell you how he worked. I didn't go to see it, but there was a play on Broadway called *Red* [John Logan, 2009].

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, called *Red*, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, and I didn't want to see it. Everybody thought it was wonderful and I said, "How many characters are in it?" They said two. And I said, "Well, he never had anybody around when he was working, as far as I know," certainly nobody talking philosophy or whatever with him.

MR. SAMPSON: I remember once you told me something that for some reason I thought came from Rothko, but I don't — maybe I don't — think he ever said that, just put two and two together. We were together at the end of Montauk [NY] one day, and the sky was just right —

MS. ASHTON: That was such a nice day.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, we've done it a couple times. And I remember you — I think you looked at the sky, and you said something [to] the effect, "Blue: the most difficult color."

MS. ASHTON: I probably did. It is.

MR. SAMPSON: Where did that idea come from?

MS. ASHTON: I don't know.

MR. SAMPSON: It being a particularly difficult color?

MS. ASHTON: Well, if I said it, it came from my trying to deal with it as an amateur painter. [Laughs.] But I don't remember anything more about it. I didn't ever talk with Mark about color, per se, that I remember, at any rate.

MR. SAMPSON: Which, of course, that's what you think now, might have been included in some of the conversation just because he's sort of known partly for these —

MS. ASHTON: Well, I assumed — I assumed that I probably wrote it in that book; I haven't reread that book about Rothko. I assume because he lived very close to MoMA he went in and looked at that Matisse painting, *The Red* —

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah.

MS. ASHTON: I'm pretty sure that that had a big impact on him. But I never talked to him about it.

MR. SAMPSON: I don't know too much about colors in —

MS. ASHTON: You want light?

MR. SAMPSON: No. I'm fine. Whatever, this is fine.

MS. ASHTON: Good, the less light on me the better. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: That's not true, you know, you have —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah, blah, blah. I don't like being old. I'm vain, my good looks are gone.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, who does like getting older? No question about that.

Okay, we could talk about quite a bit of other stuff as you go on through the years you spent both curating shows all over the world and exhibitions and writing about people, on and on.

Noguchi, and all these somewhat — 30 titles, which I have not been able to keep up with, I have to tell you, have come pouring out over all these — is this all basically the result of personal interest or curiosity about something?

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Nobody ever asked me to write a book about so-and-so. I just did.

MR. SAMPSON: So none of these were on commission ahead of time really, per se; you just —

MS. ASHTON: None of the books, no.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, they were all things that you —

MS. ASHTON: One of the first real book-books that I published, which was called *The Unknown Shore* [1962], I think I had talked already with the editor, but that's about it.

MR. SAMPSON: And that covers, *The Unknown Shore* —

MS. ASHTON: *The Unknown Shore*, I hardly remember it. It had two sections. One was about the - mainly the Abstract Expressionists, I guess. And the second dealt with the European counterparts, and for that, I got slammed. America was already creating their most famous of all art worlds, the best painters in the world, blah, blah, blah. And I come along and say, "No, but there's Giacometti, there's Fautrier, there's — got to think of them, too." And they didn't want to. I remember, I got bad reviews, some bad reviews, because of that.

MR. SAMPSON: So give me a little more insight into — is it entirely impossible to describe the kind of trigger that really, looking back, has galvanized your interest in certain particular artists? Is it something about the times, the day — is there a connection between what you're seeing and —

MS. ASHTON: Well, I think I have a temperament — no, no. Although many of the people that have reviewed things I've written, they always — I'm usually boxed in with the so-called Abstract Expressionists, but I was interested in a lot of different artists. I was in Europe, and I went to see all kinds of artists that had nothing to do with Abstract Expressionism. I visited Giacometti, who you couldn't call an Abstract Expressionist, in the '50s, you know.

There were other Europeans I was interested in, some they don't even know the names of here but were well known in Europe, that I also wrote about. And I wrote about some American artists that — for instance, I wrote about - what's his name, he was a follower of Mondrian - and I wrote very enthusiastically about him. I can't remember his name now, but it will come to me.

MR. SAMPSON: It'll come, right. So when did you meet or visit Giacometti?

MS. ASHTON: I went to see him in his studio in the late '50s.

MR. SAMPSON: So you were already at the *Times* at that time.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, but I didn't do anything for the *Times* — I had an agreement with the *Times* that I — in the beginning — that I could take the summers, and I would go and catch up with what was going on in Europe. And I did, and I became very friendly with some artists my own age in Paris. And I worked for that magazine, *Cimaise*, that was run by people my own age, in their 20s, late 20s. And I kept one foot elsewhere.

I also did go to Mexico and to Caracas and to — no, Argentina I went later. But I moved around, and wherever I went — I also was interested in the West Coast. That also made me somewhat different, because most people around New York thought that we were the big cheese, and nothing existed elsewhere. I got very engaged with seeing the work of Diebenkorn, who I still think was a wonderful painter, and others in the West Coast that I wrote about.

MR. SAMPSON: You see that Baldessari has a large show at the Met.

MS. ASHTON: I saw it, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: You saw the show?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Eh.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: Much too big.

MR. SAMPSON: Is it? I haven't seen it yet. I thought —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, it's too big. And to me, it's not that interesting at all.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, but that Diebenkorn show that was at the Whitney a couple — a few years ago, I thought was nice.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, very nice.

MR. SAMPSON: Because he was someone that I encountered in Albuquerque.

MS. ASHTON: Right, exactly.

MR. SAMPSON: Because he's got that whole series and so forth. That was another way in which we connected years ago, because Adja had been —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, he's been there, and he knew Diebenkorn. Diebenkorn was a young guy then, and Adja did know him.

MR. SAMPSON: Did he serve as a bit of a mentor?

MS. ASHTON: I have a feeling yes, but my memory there is shaky. I think so.

MR. SAMPSON: I think I remember you telling me that there had some kind of — not long-term.

MS. ASHTON: I think so.

MR. SAMPSON: I don't know whether classes would be the right idea, necessarily —

MS. ASHTON: I can't remember now, but, yes, there was a connection with Diebenkorn.

MR. SAMPSON: I think so. And of course, Elaine de Kooning was out there, too, was she not, at about that time?

MS. ASHTON: I don't know, was she? No, later I think, later.

MR. SAMPSON: Was it later?

MS. ASHTON: I think so.

MR. SAMPSON: Okay, I've lost track of the timing then, but —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Because Adja was in that part of the world in the early '50s, I think.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: I believe. And then he had some sort of trouble and had to — and didn't stay.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah, yeah, he was — he got into a fight with one of the bigwigs there, and he lost.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. [They laugh.] And you've been here in this place since the '60s?

MS. ASHTON: Here in this house?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah.

MS. ASHTON: No, I think since around 1964 or '[6]5.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, so the '60s.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: That's what I thought, long time.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] Okay. So, yes, you were saying about — back in the political —

MS. ASHTON: Well, I got involved with a group that was called the United States, US — Committee for Justice in Latin America [United States Committee for Justice to Latin American Political Prisoners], USLA, and I was the eminence grise behind the scenes and also the front man.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: It was very strange. That's how I got quite engaged with Latin American politics. That was a time, you'll remember, where there were generals and *desaparecidos*, and there was a lot wrong in Latin America. We were activists, really activists. I had been in Brazil, that's a — I like that story.

I had been to cover the biennale in Brazil. I forget who sent me now; somebody paid for it; I didn't pay for it. I

knew the director of the [Sao Paulo] Museum of Modern Art there, who was a really good friend of mine at that time. His name was Mario Pedrosa. Mario and I had met in 1960 on a junket in Europe of art critics to Poland. And we became very good friends. Then he went back, and he had this museum. And he had to flee for his life when the generals took over in Brazil.

So I was already a little engaged with this political situation in Latin America. Then one of these people from USLA got in touch with me, and I agreed to be the person behind things, et cetera, and we - for instance, during the coup in Chile when Pinochet took over, we worked with whoever we could to help people to escape.

One of the people I helped to escape was Pedrosa, so. I have an authentic political past, although I myself was not threatened, being hung or shot or anything, but it wasn't the best of all things to do, according to our own FBI, right?

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] So without giving away too much detail, how would you make that work from here in New York? It was someone who knew somebody --

MS. ASHTON: Well, for instance, when Mario Pedrosa went to Chile, Allende invited him to set up a museum of modern art for workers. The idea was that workers would be exposed to abstract art and contemporary art and so on. He put together an international committee, and I was the North American representative of that committee. That's how I met Orlando Letelier, who we later assassinated, right?

Orlando, then, was the ambassador from Chile to New York, and he would call me every Monday morning — [laughs] — like at 8:30, before my class, to say, "Have we got some new things?" and I was collecting — twisting the arms of everybody — painters, some of whom were not that eager — to donate work to this new museum for workers, and it now exists. It exists there.

It's the Salvador Allende Museum, I don't know, I don't remember the title [Salvador Allende Solidarity Museum, Santiago], but — so the paintings that we collected, some of them probably burned when they burned the palace and killed Allende, but apparently some of them were not there; they were out in exhibition. There was one exhibition in the north of Chile for miners, and he wrote to me - I have those letters — Mario Pedrosa — about how they liked it. Probably what they liked was being recognized and thought worthy of it, you know? I would guess.

MR. SAMPSON: Sure.

MS. ASHTON: So that was a big thing in my life, too.

MR. SAMPSON: And then I know later on, and this is by now much later, you and Daniel Ortega had a fairly long friendship and relationship, did you not?

MS. ASHTON: Not Ortega. I was friendly with the vice president, Sergio Ramirez. He was a novelist, a good novelist. When I went to Nicaragua, Sandinista in Nicaragua, Sergio Ramirez came for me in a jeep, and we went to his house for Sunday dinner. And I said to myself, "Oh, here I am, riding in a jeep with a vice president of a country." [They laugh.] It was great; it was a wonderful experience for me.

MR. SAMPSON: But was that only one — a one-time. I thought for some reason —

MS. ASHTON: No, I went to Nicaragua twice.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, okay.

MS. ASHTON: I was engaged in, again, helping Nicaragua to establish a museum of modern art, and I did. I was active on that front.

MR. SAMPSON: I think I remember you telling me that was something that you — yeah. You still feel proud about it?

MS. ASHTON: I do; I am proud. And I regret that my own country made sure that that didn't survive, that experiment — which, as I told you, George, it was never a communist country. If anything, in terms of the way we talk about politics, it was a social democracy.

Their ideals were, in fact — when I went with Matti [Megged], my Israeli husband, to a party here in Manhattan for [a] couple [of] the junta, members of the government of Sandinista Nicaragua, the minister of agriculture, who also was a writer - they were all writers — had a very animated conversation with Matti about the principle of the kibbutz. And [he] said, "That's really what we want to do," associated kibbutzim, you know. And I was there; I heard it myself.

And I had a party for Sergio Ramirez and his wife and also the minister of education - I forget his name now - here in the house. And the FBI came, too.

MR. SAMPSON: Did they?

MS. ASHTON: Absolutely.

MR. SAMPSON: In disguise, or —

MS. ASHTON: No, openly. They put a man on the roof. I think that was to protect me rather than anything; they were afraid that somebody would come and shoot up the Sandinistas — [laughs] — very exciting stuff. And then the wife of the vice president of a country washed dishes at my sink. [They laugh.] I was impressed.

MR. SAMPSON: That's terrific.

MS. ASHTON: We met also, we met in Paris; Matti and I went. They were there trying to get support for the government in UNESCO, I think. Sergio invited us to where they were staying. The poor guys, they were staying way, way near Bellevue [Hospital], which is a working class — pretty far out. We had to go in this crummy hotel they were living in; it was really — I was impressed. I mean, you're government members, like this. They had almost no money because, as you know, the dictator had taken everything out of the bank when he left. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah.

MS. ASHTON: And the woman who assassinated him —

MR. SAMPSON: Letelier?

MS. ASHTON: No, no, what's his name, the fascist who was the head of Nicaragua?

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, right.

MS. ASHTON: She was appointed to the U.N., and somebody brought her here for dinner; she was this beautiful, exceptionally beautiful, woman. Very poised, very well spoken. It was very hard to imagine that she actually killed a man.

MR. SAMPSON: I remember you telling me, speaking of the house and so forth, Alger Hiss would pay —

MS. ASHTON: Yes, well, Alger was a good friend of mine, and that's a whole other story.

MR. SAMPSON: It is a whole other story, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: I ask students, both the graduate students at Yale and at Cooper, did you ever hear the name Alger Hiss? Never has anybody said yes in the last five years. Can you imagine such a thing?

MR. SAMPSON: Well, unfortunately, I can imagine it, yes. I teach undergraduates, too.

MS. ASHTON: That's shocking to me — what are the other teachers teaching? Don't they teach history? I don't understand. His case was a very — then when I do tell them, I usually bring the picture of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin sitting in the front, and at the shoulder of Roosevelt is Alger Hiss. That's pretty high up. How could they — I don't understand it.

MR. SAMPSON: That was at Yalta [Yalta Conference, 1945], right?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: That famous photograph.

MS. ASHTON: It's so baffling to me.

MR. SAMPSON: We won't get to that at this point, but maybe down the road. I remember that we got to Alger Hiss by —

MS. ASHTON: You what?

MR. SAMPSON: The last time you and I broached the subject together, we got to Alger Hiss by talking about jail, I believe.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah. [They laugh.] I probably told you about his taking me to dinner in Little Italy.

MR. SAMPSON: Yes, I think that might have been it, that's right.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah, that was so funny.

MR. SAMPSON: So I can't remember that one, did —

MS. ASHTON: Well, he used to go and walk around the yard, and one day a little guy sidled up to him and said —

MR. SAMPSON: Around the prison yard, right, yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: — that, the boss wants to talk to you. Already one of those left-wingers had been murdered in jail; probably they paid the gangsters to kill him—Remington was killed in jail. So Alger knew that, and he wasn't that pleased about it, but when he, of course, talked to the boss, and the boss said, "Hiss, you been framed." [They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: And he was safe from then on, right?

MS. ASHTON: He was — they absolutely protected him all through the four and a half years in the federal pen. For a man like that, can you imagine? He apparently kept in touch with some of them, because when he took me to the Italian restaurant, they didn't let him pay. [They laugh.] And so that's an adventure, too.

MR. SAMPSON: I bet, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: He liked to talk to me. I think I told you, he was interested in painting, of all things.

MR. SAMPSON: You did tell me that. And I can't remember right now, I think you may have mentioned which particular people he was —

MS. ASHTON: Monet. He loved Monet.

MR. SAMPSON: Was it?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. He had gone to specifically to Giverny. Interesting man - you would have liked him, George.

MR. SAMPSON: So he would have seen — he had full understanding of that landscape and of what Monet was trying to do —

MS. ASHTON: He did, and he — absolutely. He was a cultured man. And also was curious; he would ask me questions about painters and - I think I did tell you how I met him.

MR. SAMPSON: Now that you mention it, the story I recall is the Italian restaurant and that other — but maybe not how you met him.

MS. ASHTON: I met him because my uncle, who's only 10 years older than I, I think, was a blacklisted Hollywood writer.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yeah, maybe —

MS. ASHTON: And he had an affair with a very beautiful woman who had been "the" *Vogue* model, Isabel [Isabella Albonico], but Isabel was kind of a — she seemed to have been friends with the Hollywood Ten, all of them. And that's how she met Alger.

MR. SAMPSON: Wait, okay, so how did —

MS. ASHTON: And I met Alger because — my mother was visiting, and I was away, and she was in my apartment. When I came back, there was a little notebook in the living room. I looked in it, and I couldn't see whose it was, but in the back there was a quotation from Albert Camus written out.

So I called my mom, and I said, "Mom, who were you entertaining who would have a little notebook with a quotation from Albert Camus - because he left it here, whoever it was." And she said, "Oh, that was Alger Hiss." [They laugh.] I said, "What?" And this was because her brother had dated Isabel, or they lived together for a while. So it's a very funny connection.

MR. SAMPSON: It is interesting. But then it happened early enough, because then he would come here when your daughters were still young.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah. I told you he used to bounce down the stairs with Marina, my younger daughter, on his po-po. He used to go upstairs, because the little children were on the top floor, and I'd have to call and call when he came for dinner, with Isabel, because he was up playing with the children. He was — people don't know what kind of a man he was. His son does; his son wrote a very nice book about him. Tony Hiss.

MR. SAMPSON: He's still — yeah.

MS. ASHTON: I'm sure he's still alive.

MR. SAMPSON: He's still active today, isn't he?

MS. ASHTON: I haven't heard anything about him in a while, but — not since about four years ago. They had a big conference at NYU about the case.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, all right, that's about the right time frame.

MS. ASHTON: I wonder if they ever published that. His oldest son came out of the shadows that day.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, that's interesting.

MS. ASHTON: His first child from his first marriage.

MR. SAMPSON: And they had little connection between the two of them, or —

MS. ASHTON: I couldn't tell. But it was their great coup that — the people that organized that conference — which went from eight in the morning until seven at night. It was fascinating, really very, very interesting. And they were all lawyers; they were young lawyers, interested in the case.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, that's a good sign.

MS. ASHTON: Very good, yeah, very good. And a few people like me. But it seemed to be a lot of them. There were some European lawyers interested in that case, too. They didn't forget, I'm sure. But we've forgotten.

[END CD 1.]

[BEGIN SESSION MARCH 9, 2011.]

MS. ASHTON: Well, no, I don't remember exactly. It was true that I and [art historian] Peter Selz, as you may know who he is — Peter Selz had been interested in - and this is the time of upheaval in the United States. I was interested in CORE, C-O-R-E, which was — you know [Congress of Racial Equality].

MR. SAMPSON: Sure.

MS. ASHTON: And so he and I decided to do an auction — get artists, twist their arms, put works, give us works to auction for the benefit of CORE. And we did; we did do it. That's when I got started getting into trouble with the *New York Times*, because we put the ad in the *Times* with his name and my name on it. And they told me, a *Times* person doesn't do that.

I think there was still intellectual middle-class reluctance to get involved on that level with the civil rights movement. They'd send money, yeah, but to go out and do things, nah, you know?

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. ASHTON: So then, I don't remember exactly how I discovered Tougaloo [College, Jackson, MS], but it was probably through my activity with CORE. I got to know somebody there — oh, I got to know — there was this German artist who taught there. And I got to know him, I don't remember how, and I thought, oh, that's a good idea; we'll make a really good art collection, where people from the north would have to go to Tougaloo if they wanted to see certain works of art by major artists.

That's how I got involved with Tougaloo. And guess what Tougaloo did eventually? They sold them.

MR. SAMPSON: Sell it.

MS. ASHTON: It was heartbreaking for me. They needed money, but why did they always think that that's the way to do it? They should have had a bake sale or something. [Laughs.] I don't even know what happened to some of them, and I got them some really good things, too. Twisted arms, too — major artists didn't feel like sending a really good work to a little pokey black college in the south. But they got it. Actually, I never really followed out what happened, because I was so disgusted with it, I just said, "Okay, to hell with it; that's it. I'm

finished with them." [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: This would have been the early '60s, then?

MS. ASHTON: No, it would have been — oh, yes, it would have been. Yeah, I guess it was.

MR. SAMPSON: Was it about Freedom Summer or something along those lines —

MS. ASHTON: I don't really remember. That I'd have to look up; I never remember dates. But it was quite awhile ago. [Laughs.] It was still a very turbulent moment in what they used to call race relations, right? Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: When CORE was still going as an active -

MS. ASHTON: Yes. CORE was still there. I formed a committee of intellectuals in New York City, which I called the — what did I call it? Now I can't remember, some kind of name. And I tried to get other things going with them, but it turned out that I wasn't that good at engaging other people.

MR. SAMPSON: Who did you try to engage from the intellectual circles, can you remember?

MS. ASHTON: Well, there was a woman who had been probably the mistress of the photographer Stieglitz, and she had money. I don't remember why, but she'd married — I think she married money. And she was involved — what was her name, now? I forget. It'll come to me [Dorothy Norman].

And my friend Peter Selz, who at that time was the big curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and a couple of other writers and people like that, and we met a few times, and not much happened from that. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: What else did you do during the civil rights era, can you remember?

MS. ASHTON: Well, what I didn't do was go. But I had a close friend who did. Mostly what I did was around here. Alerting people or trying to organize things, and I once had a party here to raise funds, and that sort of thing.

MR. SAMPSON: Remember who was at the party?

MS. ASHTON: Oh, *tutti quanti*. Artists that I knew and a few intellectuals that were reluctantly engaging. [They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: So my notes here include — about probably the same era, maybe a little before — notes about the Cedar Tavern.

MS. ASHTON: Well, the Cedar Tavern was from my real youth; that would be the early '50s. Unfortunately, I always had to have a job. I was never free to stay up until four in the morning drinking. So my Cedar Tavern visits were - usually before midnight I'd go home. [They laugh.] And, at that time, there were the usual suspects, Bill de Kooning, Franz Kline — well, sometimes Elaine de Kooning — I can't think of other names right now, but you'd know —

MR. SAMPSON: Would Rothko have been there?

MS. ASHTON: No, Rothko, no. There was an uptown crowd and a downtown crowd. The family men, which he was, were uptown. They didn't go in bars until three in the morning. The downtown men usually just had mistresses or girlfriends who would stay at the bar with them. Or they'd pick up somebody in the bar. [Laughs.]

A couple of people that I liked a lot; I liked Franz Kline a lot. Sometimes I'd go there and sit and talk with him, at a table, not at the bar, although they often stood at the bar. And there were fights, and it was very lively. [Laughs.] But basically, I'm a bourgeois lady; I didn't go in for that.

MR. SAMPSON: If I remember correctly from hearing about it, that was more of a cross-cultural thing than some people are aware of. For example, Cecil Taylor was part of that at one point, was he not?

MS. ASHTON: Cecil Taylor?

MR. SAMPSON: The pianist? Who'd come down from --

MS. ASHTON: I don't remember him, but he may have. I don't remember him. They didn't have a piano there, that I recall.

MR. SAMPSON: No, he was just — my understanding —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, just hanging out at the bar.

MR. SAMPSON: Just — occasionally part of the group, and —

MS. ASHTON: Well, this is New York City, and it never was racist. Artists, no matter what color they were, were artists, it seemed to me at the time.

MR. SAMPSON: Was that also a location where the early downtown theater scene would cross paths?

MS. ASHTON: No, actually not. No, I don't remember any of the theater people around there, no.

MR. SAMPSON: So, pretty exclusively painters, or artists primarily, or writers —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Well, there was a jazz scene down here, in this neighborhood, Lower East Side, as you know. Very rarely I would go. Again, it would always start at midnight. [Laughs.] And I couldn't do it.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. You had a great story for me at somewhere, at someone's party, sitting in a backroom on a pile of coats talking to Allen Ginsberg for a long evening. How did that —

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I did, yeah. I remember where it was; it was a loft on 14th Street and Fourth Avenue. And it was a New Year's Eve party, I think. They drank a lot, those people, but I'm not a drinker. I drink a little bit, but not — I never liked to get drunk. I hate being drunk. I've only been drunk once in my life, and that was enough for me. [Laughs.]

And somewhere along — in the loft there were no coat hangers or anything, so everybody just threw their coat down. There was this great mountain of coats near the door, and I was taking time out from dancing, I guess, and I went and sat down, and Allen came and sat next to me, and we had a conversation about [Percy Bysshe] Shelley.

So that was an Allen I wasn't familiar with, and I wasn't too interested in that crew anyway. They were pretty exclusively homosexuals, and I didn't have any particular reason to be involved with them. I'm very heterosexual. [Laughs.] But I knew Allen, and I had several occasions where I worked with Allen. That night we just talked about Shelley.

Another occasion - it was during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and I came to class, and I said to my students, "I don't know about you guys, but I'm going up to the United Nations to picket." I went, and it was me and - I don't know if you ever heard the name Dorothy Day, the Catholic Workers — Dorothy Day and half a dozen Catholic Workers and Allen. [Laughs.] Nobody else, nobody else was that alarmed, or worried, or wanted to talk about it, you know. That's one time that I was with Allen. The other time was —

MR. SAMPSON: And the protest, the picket there was for peace, for disarmament?

MS. ASHTON: Peace. Peace, peace, I've always been a peacenik. Then the other time that I remember was quite interesting. There were — Allen was following censorship and prejudice, and there were a fair number of smaller publications — there's only one left now, the *Brooklyn Rail*, but there were others — and I was working - I was, in fact, the head of the Freedom to Write Committee at PEN. And of course, he was a member of PEN, too.

And he collected a file of, I guess, issues of censorship and right-wing interference and so on, and he came here with his little friend — what's his name, I forgot his name, always wore this big —

MR. SAMPSON: Peter Orlovsky?

MS. ASHTON: Peter wore this big beret?

MR. SAMPSON: I don't know who that — Peter Orlovsky is who I think of —

MS. ASHTON: Maybe it was him. Maybe it was, I don't know. So they came to my studio downstairs, and the kid, or Peter, or whoever it was, ensconced himself on the floor. [Laughs.] But Allen came and sat next to me at the desk, and he had a perfectly impeccable file — this is a side of Allen I hadn't known, because he was an awful slob. He never washed his hair, and if he wore a tie, it had soup on it.

And there he comes with this file in perfect order, very, very carefully put together. And that showed me a different side of Allen. So we were quasi-friendly.

MR. SAMPSON: Do you remember what was in the file?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, they were all censorship issues, that he'd followed and documented.

MR. SAMPSON: Based on his work, or just generally?

MS. ASHTON: No, no, no, in general. And this probably was because I was running the Freedom to Write Committee, which I was appointed by, of all people, this poet Richard — oh, what's Richard's last name [Howard]?

MR. SAMPSON: Eberhart?

MS. ASHTON: No, no.

MR. SAMPSON: I was going to say —

MS. ASHTON: It'll come to me in a minute. We're the same age, and he's a famous poet.

MR. SAMPSON: Wilbur?

MS. ASHTON: No, not Richard Wilbur. Richard Wilbur was not political. No way.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, I didn't think so. [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: Although I knew Richard, because I spent a year in Rome, eight months in Rome, when my first husband had a Guggenheim, and Richard was there with his wife. We were friendly, and we saw each other and did things together.

But all of a sudden one day he told me that he and his wife were going to see Padre Pio — I don't know if you've heard of him; he was one of these Catholic proselytizer, slightly shady cult figures. People went on their knees to him. And that bothered me. That made our friendship a little less warm. [Laughs.] Although he wrote a poem which is dedicated to me and my first husband, *The Fountains of Rome* [sic], yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: That's interesting. To you and Adja?

MS. ASHTON: It really was for me, but he had to be polite. [They laugh.] I don't think he and his wife liked Adja that much, I always sensed that.

MR. SAMPSON: I only met him once, because his son was in my class at Amherst College.

MS. ASHTON: Really?

MR. SAMPSON: Nate Wilbur.

MS. ASHTON: He had a very disturbed son; I wonder if that's the one. Because I remember, I came there with my first child for the weekend to see them, and this very disturbed little boy tried to push my daughter off the porch, which was about six feet off the ground. And they watched him all the time. I don't remember how many children they had. They had a nice girl, I know that. And this disturbed boy. Maybe they had three; maybe they had another boy —

MR. SAMPSON: I don't know. Of course, if he was real young, maybe he grew out of it or something. I never heard that story, but — that's interesting.

MS. ASHTON: I don't remember.

MR. SAMPSON: So *Cahiers d'art*?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, the *Cahiers d'art*. Well, I went early to Paris, and as often as I could in the '50s. And I actually looked up Zervos, who was a really interesting man. We hit it off very well, and I'll tell you the primary reason. I'm a leftist, as you know, and he was a communist sympathizer. And he'd never met an American — because you know how anticommunist we were supposed to be — like me, and also I was young and, I imagine, fairly attractive, and he took a liking to me.

He let me write for *Cahiers d'art* in my early 20s, which was, to me — I mean, *Cahiers d'art* was a magnificent publication; it was the top. It was such a great honor. And I wrote about American art for him in that magazine. Then the other reason - I was always and am still a great admirer of Picasso, so he was "the" Picasso — he did the catalogue raisonné, and twice I missed the opportunity to meet Picasso because I was basically too shy.

Isn't that funny? Zervos — well, the first time, Zervos invited me to come with him to the south of France to see Picasso, I was too shy. The second time, I didn't want to be alone with Zervos. [They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: So I missed my chance.

MR. SAMPSON: So you never did meet him?

MS. ASHTON: No, never.

MR. SAMPSON: I would have thought you would have crossed paths at some point, but — Picasso rarely came to this country, did he?

MS. ASHTON: Never came, and he couldn't have come.

MR. SAMPSON: Because of his politics?

MS. ASHTON: In 1946, Fernand Léger, who was in New York - and Picasso joined the Communist Party, officially. And we didn't let commies in, remember?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, that's right, once he — and Léger was already here.

MS. ASHTON: He was here. Léger telephoned Paris after the war from New York to enroll in the Communist Party. There are reasons why they did that. They were not ideologically communists at all. They were leftists, but things were shaping up in Europe, as you know, in a way that the United States was not very happy with, and intervened.

Italy was very close to going communist, and there were plenty of communist sympathizers in France, because during the war — well, this is my explanation, and I think I'm right — during the war, almost all the people in France were what they called "collabos" — collaborators, except the communists.

And they were mostly the underground, and they were the partisans — and a lot of them were killed.

MR. SAMPSON: At least some of it came out of the Spanish —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes, the civil war, of course. Which my students never heard of. I'm definitely going to give them a lecture — [laughs] — next month and fill them in.

MR. SAMPSON: Because you knew Léger here.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: We've had this conversation, if I remember — yeah.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, well, I went to Paris in 1948, while I was still an undergraduate, for four months. And I enrolled in his school.

MR. SAMPSON: That's right. I remember you telling me this. That's right.. So when he came to this country, you already knew each other.

MS. ASHTON: No, no.

MR. SAMPSON: This was after?

MS. ASHTON: No, he — this was after.

MR. SAMPSON: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: He came here — I don't remember what year, but it was during the war —

MR. SAMPSON: During the war —

MS. ASHTON: — like many French guys did. He was in New York all that time. But he never, as far as I know — he and André Breton didn't learn English very well. But Léger gave a very important talk at the artists' union, or — what was it called?

MR. SAMPSON: The artists' league? Artists — [Unemployed Artists Group of the Emergency Work Bureau] —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, the artists' league, here, I think, in 1936. A very important talk.

MR. SAMPSON: That was early.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, you can read that. There's an English anthology of his writings, or — and speeches and so on.

MR. SAMPSON: So had you known him here before you went — no?

MS. ASHTON: No, I was a little girl when he was here. No, no. I got there, and I didn't know what to do or where to go. I had one person's name to look up. And I went to visit her. I asked her where I could go to art school, and she gave me the names of three artists that ran — they didn't really pay much attention to the students, but that's how they earned money.

MR. SAMPSON: And it was [inaudible] — you did mention this.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: [Inaudible.] So the *Cahiers d'art* experience, then, was a subsequent trip to Paris?

MS. ASHTON: Sometime in the early '50s, I don't remember the exact date.

MR. SAMPSON: Right.

I wrote down people that we needed to talk about: Rothko, Octavio Paz, de Kooning, and Motherwell. And I'm not sure we got to all of those.

MS. ASHTON: I don't remember.

MR. SAMPSON: I'm not sure we mentioned Bob Motherwell, because you ended up being very important to his estate. Didn't you have a great story about being alerted after his death that he had named you as one of —

MS. ASHTON. Oh, yes.

MR. SAMPSON: Caught you by surprise.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, because — I think I may have told you — after that horrible fiasco, the Rothko affair, I swore I would never —

MR. SAMPSON: At the Marlborough Gallery — that, all that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, and that whole trial, and all of that. I swore I would never get involved with any artist's — [laughs] — foundation. So I may have told somebody that there, and so they didn't tell me until the day he died.

MR. SAMPSON: That he had named you as one of the —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: And — are you still involved?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: That's what I thought.

MS. ASHTON: Well, it's a little awkward, because I'm absolutely furious with the guy that runs it [Dedalus Foundation], this Jack Flam, whom I regard as a rogue. Worse than a rogue, a real turd. [Laughs.] And he is. And I have lots of reasons. So I haven't resigned. And they don't dare get rid of me, although I'm sure they'd love to, I think because I'm a writer. If they try it, I'm going to blow them sky-high. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: But you knew, obviously — knew Bob for a long time before that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. I was really a friend of Motherwell. I liked him. Not everybody did, but I did like him, and I got along with him very well. Well, you can imagine, he was very intelligent, and interesting conversationalist, and very respectful to me. He treated me very well.

MR. SAMPSON: Which they weren't all, I think, right?

MS. ASHTON: Pardon?

MR. SAMPSON: They weren't all as respectful to you as —

MS. ASHTON: No, no. The macho factor —

MR. SAMPSON: Right.

MS. ASHTON: I was a woman, and — you know.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, I remember you telling me sometime previously that Adja and de Kooning, particularly, hit it off well because they both had European roots. They both came to the New York scene kind of from a different place than many Americans.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: And was that sort of the main duo that were — or was Motherwell in that grouping? How did that work socially?

MS. ASHTON: No. Motherwell was quite friendly with de Kooning in the early years, and with Rothko, and with David Smith especially.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. ASHTON: Very friendly with David. And when David would come to town, Motherwell was the rich guy. He lived uptown in a beautiful town house. David would come, and he'd always stay there. They had servants, and fantastic food, and a chef, and all of that. And then he'd come downtown and visit his old buddies. [Laughs.] So I saw him at both places.

MR. SAMPSON: And so who would he visit downtown in those days?

MS. ASHTON: Well, there was a minor painter — not a very good one — called Herman Cherry; he was from Los Angeles. David was very friendly with him. And usually he would come down — once or twice I would go down to Herman's — he had a studio in a basement downtown in SoHo somewhere. And then David would come slumming and eat baked beans, that kind of thing. We'd sit around on the concrete floor the couple of times I went to see David.

MR. SAMPSON: Did this building exist in your life in those days?

MS. ASHTON: What building?

MR. SAMPSON: The house we're sitting in? Was this part of —

MS. ASHTON: This was built in 1858.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, but I mean in your life, did you own this, or were you living here then?

MS. ASHTON: No, I came here in around '63.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, this is before that, then, isn't it?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. So who —

MS. ASHTON: Well, no, it was in the '60s, too, I guess, but — no, no, it was before. It was the '50s.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So who else is in the most compatible part of that group of painters, for you? Who are the people who you really — I think you mentioned Franz Kline as, obviously, one name.

MS. ASHTON: I saw quite a bit of Rothko. And David, when he came. David always stayed with Helen Frankenthaler and Robert Motherwell, so that entailed going uptown to their place.

I was quite friendly with Jack Tworikov, who lived on 23rd Street, not far from me. And then I was very friendly with a composer, Stefan Wolpe.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. And some of the artists knew him, too.

MR. SAMPSON: He's had some work done recently, I think, Wolpe.

MS. ASHTON: I hope so. I liked his work very much.

And the guy that they celebrate so much, Morton Feldman, he got a lot from Wolpe. It took him a little while to acknowledge it, however. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Feldman is one of the, sort of, musical New York School, too.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: The five or six involved with that, of whom I think Christian Wolff was one of the last surviving. Yes, he is. I'll see him next month, actually, I believe.

MS. ASHTON: I don't remember him.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, he was younger. He was a Cage student, I think, right?

MS. ASHTON: I think so.

MR. SAMPSON: So you must have crossed paths with John Cage, and —

MS. ASHTON: And Merce Cunningham. I liked Merce. In fact, this morning, I just looked at the photograph that he gave me when we were — "for glory, with love," or whatever —

MR. SAMPSON: From Merce?

MS. ASHTON: From Merce, yeah. He was a nice guy, very nice guy. Well, I was friendly with both, John and Merce.

MR. SAMPSON: And also that second generation of painters, then, too, I'm assuming.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. I saw a fair amount of Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchell. And — who else? Well, Helen, for a while. And others that I don't remember.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, Rauschenberg, and those — that younger generation, too.

MS. ASHTON: Well, I worked with Bob. We did his *Dante's Inferno* [*Rauschenberg: XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno* . 1964] together.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. ASHTON: I did the text. It's a *livre deluxe* with — each canto has a plate of the *Inferno* , and I wrote the text.

MR. SAMPSON: Do you have a copy of that?

MS. ASHTON: I have my text. I think it may be in this house. But I haven't seen the plates. I'm worried about that. Somebody may have made off with it.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, no.

MS. ASHTON: But the text, I have, for some reason.

MR. SAMPSON: Because I remember you showing me the Octavio Paz work that Adja did.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: You've got a couple copies of that, I think.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, I have *Blanco* . That was beautiful.

MR. SAMPSON: *Blanco* . Exactly. It is. It is beautiful.

I didn't realize that you had done this work. When was that?

MS. ASHTON: With Bob?

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah.

MS. ASHTON: When was it?

MR. SAMPSON: I mean, roughly. Early '60s?

MS. ASHTON: I guess, something like that. [Laughs.] He had a studio in SoHo then. And he had a kinkajou. It's like a little monkey.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, right. It would ride on his shoulders and so forth, or is that just —

MS. ASHTON: Well, when I saw it, it was in a cage, but —

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, my goodness.

MS. ASHTON: [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: And other people were a part of that grouping, too. You must have encountered —

MS. ASHTON: I knew — well, I met — God, I'm really in bad shape - his boyfriend — [laughs] — for a while, who's still around. The guy who painted the numbers [Jasper Johns].

MR. SAMPSON: Right, sure.

MS. ASHTON: What's his name? See? I met him through Bob, when they were together, later. Later, I wasn't so much interested in him. He hung out with a different kind of crowd then. Susan Sontag was his close friend, and that was a different New York, not my New York.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I remember you saying you had crossed paths, and sometimes swords, with Susan Sontag over the years on a couple of different occasions on different topics.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: So — Octavio. How did you get —

MS. ASHTON: How did I meet him?

MR. SAMPSON: Was that through Adja?

MS. ASHTON: No. I was in Mexico City. And for some reason —

MR. SAMPSON: Jasper Johns.

MS. ASHTON: No — [laughs] — Jasper Johns, right.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: The Israeli ambassador — for some reason, I was invited to — I don't remember the circumstances — to lunch at the Israeli embassy to Mexico City. And when you went in — they live well, ambassadors — on the right was a library with lots of books. And as I walked in, I — always curious about what people read — I saw there were these books by Paul Valery and — oh, Gide, and da da.

And when I met this ambassador, I said to him — he was a general. I remember his name, General Shaltiel. "General Shaltiel," I said, "how does a general like you come to have a library like this?"

And he said to me in French, "You ask the question wrongly, madam. What you mean is, how does a man with a library like this get to be a general?" [They laugh.] And so he was a graduate of Saint-Cyr [Ecole Speciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr], which is very rare, because Jews, the French didn't like Jews. [Laughs.] And, in fact, the great famous Dreyfus case, he was one of the very rare — also went to Saint-Cyr.

So at the luncheon table, I was seated next to a man who flirted with me — and in those days I was young and, I guess, fairly attractive. And it turned out it was Octavio Paz. So before we left, he found out where I was staying, and he called me, and we had lunch together alone, and had a long chat. I, of course, knew that he was — already, then — a famous poet. So I was interested. And from then on, we remained friends until he died.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Because I remember, you introduced me to him, actually, years later.

MS. ASHTON: I did?

MR. SAMPSON: You did. I had not read his material until we encountered each other at Columbia [University].

MS. ASHTON: Oh, I see.

MR. SAMPSON: And, then, of course, you showed me *Blanco* and so forth, over the years.

You took me through *Blanco*, leaf by leaf, at one point, downstairs, I think somewhere. In fact, we brought it to Virginia, didn't we? Didn't we have that in that exhibition? I think we did. I think you had a copy there.

MS. ASHTON: I think so, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: But I think that we first looked at it here, if I remember correctly.

MS. ASHTON: Look at that. We go way back.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.] Not this far back, but —

MS. ASHTON: I suppose, when I taught at Columbia — what year was that?

MR. SAMPSON: Nineteen eighty-two?

MS. ASHTON: I probably was still living with Adja then.

MR. SAMPSON: I don't know.

MS. ASHTON: I think so. I didn't leave him until the mid-'80s. Something like that.

MR. SAMPSON: I don't know. But when did he pass away?

MS. ASHTON: Eighty-four [1983], I think. I'm not good on dates.

MR. SAMPSON: This would have been just before that, then.

MS. ASHTON: [Laughs.] [Inaudible].

MR. SAMPSON: You were there for a year, right?

MS. ASHTON: At Columbia?

MR. SAMPSON: At Columbia?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. Then they fired me.

MR. SAMPSON: Too radical.

MS. ASHTON: Well, you remember what program it was in.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yeah. Sure.

MS. ASHTON: So I was certainly not useful in that program.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yes, you were; you were to me.

MS. ASHTON: To you, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: But I bet not the others. Except that one boy who cheated. He was interesting, a South American boy.

MR. SAMPSON: I remember that; that was a scandal. *Scandale*. It was.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: So let's stop for a second. [Pause.]

MS. ASHTON: Of course, I should point out that I had my differences with Octavio, politically.

MR. SAMPSON: He was at least liberal, right? Or not?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, what we call a liberal.

MR. SAMPSON: But not really a true leftist.

MS. ASHTON: I'm closer to being a radical, if I have to give a label.

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: And at the end of his life, he behaved shamelessly. He cozied up to power, as writers often do.

MR. SAMPSON: After the Nobel [Prize for Literature, 1950], he became more important and prestigious. He was sort of a figure for Mexico, in a way, wasn't he?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah. Very important. And he was married to a woman who liked to cozy up to the president and the vice president, and — and he was mad about her. [Laughs.] A French woman, Marie-Jo. So he did whatever she wanted.

But I think he, himself, as writers often do — they're deluded, because they never have any power, even if they're up there.

MR. SAMPSON: They're sort of trotted out as —

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah, sure. As they still — [French President Nicolas] Sarkozy still does it.

MR. SAMPSON: It's part of the furniture, in a sense.

MS. ASHTON: [Inaudible.] What's his name? A French writer wrote a very good book that was called *Le Scribe* — *The Scribe* — and it was about that.

[END CD 2.]

MR. SAMPSON: This is George Sampson with Dore Ashton, and the date of this interview is March 9, 2011, and we are at Dore's home in New York City. For the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution, this is the first tape of today.

Guston?

MS. ASHTON: Philip Guston. I got to know him early on. I went to see an exhibition on Madison Avenue uptown, and I didn't know the name at all. I was very taken with the early work that I saw there. Not the earliest, but it was — he was just beginning a kind of — later, somebody called it "abstract impressionism," but I don't think that was very accurate — but a very beautiful, diaphanous painting. He was a very good painter *qua* painter; he knew what paint was. I was very taken with it. And I imagine that I probably got in touch with him after I saw it, but I'm not sure.

And of course, he was a very intellectual-type artist. He was very well read and had very interesting ideas about the history of art and about all kinds of things, and had been kind of on the left politically, in the '30s, late '30s. So we hit it off in conversation, and we enjoyed our conversations. We also exchanged books, I remember.

At that time, Barney Rossett had just started his press and was doing these little monographs. I knew Barney — I don't remember why, but you know, you did meet people around — and he invited me to do one of them, and I did one. The first thing I did was about Philip Guston; it was a little paperback [*Philip Guston* . 1960]. I've never reread it; maybe it's lousy, I don't know. But that was the first book I did about him. That was, I guess, the mid-'50s, that it would've been.

When I first knew him, he still had a studio in New York. And I would go and hang out at the studio quite a bit, which is where Morty Feldman used to hang out once in a while, too. That's how I got to know Morty.

And later, he [Guston] moved to Woodstock [NY]. And then I would sometimes go up and spend a weekend looking at his work. I really kept track of what he was doing. I paid a lot of attention to whatever phase he was in.

And when the — who was it who approached me? I don't know — I think it was University of California Press? And I said, "Well, I'd like to do a monograph about Philip Guston." And I did. The original title was *Yes, But* . Then it was reprinted, and they just called it *Philip Guston* . [Laughs.]

So that's more or less — I would see him. We had occasional disagreements, and sometimes — I was very involved with the — when the Chilean revolution and Allende came into power, I helped to found what they called the Museo de Solidaridad — the Museum of Solidarity. I was the New York — the United States - representative, and there was another person in Paris who represented France, and somebody in Italy. It was going to be an international — the first ever museum for, quote, the people, including the miners, with modern art.

I got to know — I may have told you that — no, I don't think so — the ambassador from Chile was a man called Orlando Letelier. Orlando was very, very enthusiastic about this Museo de Solidaridad. Sometimes I would come into my office at Cooper Union at 8:30 in the morning, because I had a nine o'clock class, and the phone would

be ringing. It would be Orlando asking, "Have we got — what have we got for our museum?" So I got to be quite friendly with Orlando — poor guy. And, as you may know, he was assassinated in Washington, very near the White House, which was a big blow.

Well, so my engagement with Chile was political, basically, I guess you would say. And I was very, very, very much interested in it and worked hard at it, and twisted arms to get contributions.

Eventually, when Allende was assassinated, I got a letter from a man called General Heitman, H-E-I-T-M-A-N, a really nasty letter about the Museo de Solidaridad. I was trying to get the work back. I didn't want Pinochet to have it there. And I didn't succeed. I got some back, but nothing like [what] I needed to get back. It was a sad thing.

MR. SAMPSON: Is that work still in Chile, as far as you know?

MS. ASHTON: Some of it. The Museo was reopened, and I did have a visit from — I forgot her name now — just after the so-called democracy was restored in Chile, and she said that they were reopening the — some of the work was burned when the palace was burned, but some of it they had someplace else. And it was still there, and so they reopened. I've never been, so — I was supposed to go, because my friend that I worked with, whose name was Mario Pedrosa and who was a marvelous person that I had met in Brazil originally - he wound up very poor as a refugee in Paris, and that's the last I saw of him.

The woman who came to see me said they re-did the Museo, and that there were works there. Some of the European works were there still, the ones that hadn't been destroyed in the — when they destroyed the palace. But I've never been.

MR. SAMPSON: Was there a Philip Guston connection to that story?

MS. ASHTON: Well, you would've thought that Philip would be very eager — a socialist government? He always said he was on the left, blah, blah. He wasn't eager. I had to twist his arm. But eventually, I got one.

MR. SAMPSON: But he did contribute, eventually.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MR. SAMPSON: So did people like Bob Motherwell, then, participate in that?

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: So you had a substantial collection there.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, it was quite a good collection. I don't remember now all the names, but — and some of it was sent back. Some U.S. artists demanded their work back. Frank Stella, for instance - he was pestering me; he wanted it back.

MR. SAMPSON: Was that for political reasons?

MS. ASHTON: Who knows?

MR. SAMPSON: Or because he thought he could make more money if he did something else with it?

MS. ASHTON: I have no idea. And actually, I didn't work very hard at that afterwards, after Allende was killed. That was that, for me.

And I was declared persona non grata under the Pinochet regime.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. So you wouldn't have gone anyway —

MS. ASHTON: I couldn't have gone if I wanted.

MR. SAMPSON: Couldn't have gone. Right.

MS. ASHTON: I was to go, and the coup happened three days before I was supposed to leave, so — yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: So what has been — well, you mentioned this as a segue, maybe into talking briefly about your curating experience —

MS. ASHTON: Spain.

MR. SAMPSON: — elsewhere, Spain in particular.

MS. ASHTON: I did a large exhibition in Spain — I don't remember the date — which was — I called it " *A Rebounds* ," "Against the Grain" [1999]. And to this day, nobody has done anything quite like that.

I wanted to show that what happened after the Second World War in, particularly, painting happened all over. I had South American artists; I had French and Italian artists, as well as American. You may remember that the Americans were very actively propagandizing the fact that we were the Abstract Expressionists and all of that, whereas, in fact, there were artists all over the Western world that I knew about. So I made that show.

It opened in the Canary Islands. I knew an old sculptor who was from the Canary Islands, and he arranged for me to do the show there. And then it went from there to the main modern museum, the Reina Sofia in Madrid. That was a very interesting project, and —

MR. SAMPSON: Was that the first - because during our time together, I remember - you have curated at least a couple of shows in Spain, so you'd gone back repeatedly.

MS. ASHTON: I did, and in Italy, too. I did a show of Morris Louis in Milano, and in Spain I did — well, what did I do besides "A Rebounds"?

MR. SAMPSON: You did Motherwell.

MS. ASHTON: And a Motherwell show [at the Reina Sofia].

MR. SAMPSON: Right, I remember that.

Well, Morris Louis must have been someone you knew.

MS. ASHTON: I never met him.

MR. SAMPSON: You never did?

MS. ASHTON: No. I met his widow, a very nice woman. He was dead when I did the show.

MR. SAMPSON: Right. And then — was it —

MS. ASHTON: There's actually a film about it, making that show. Somebody did a documentary from the beginning, including taking the crates to the airport in New York and all of that.

MR. SAMPSON: I wonder who did that. That's interesting.

MS. ASHTON: I can't remember. Must be somewhere around here.

[They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: And then, did you do a Noguchi show in Japan?

MS. ASHTON: No.

MR. SAMPSON: But you've done — I know you've written about it.

MS. ASHTON: I wrote the book about him called *Noguchi East and West* . I visited his studio in Mure, which is in southern Japan, several — twice, at least. I was supposed to meet him there, actually, and he died just before we were supposed to rendezvous there.

MR. SAMPSON: So again, just missed?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, it was a pity.

MR. SAMPSON: Interesting. Well, on another topic, I'm not sure we did cover this before, but I remember you telling me in a completely different circumstance — and we're shifting gears back to the States — of having been to at least two or three of the "Nine Evenings" of art and technology ["Nine Evenings: Theatre and Engineering," October, 1966] that —

MS. ASHTON: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Well, I knew Billy Klüever. I liked him a lot. And although I was never very much interested in technology, I was interested in Billy. So when — he organized the nine evenings, and I think I wrote about it, covered it for some magazine. And I did go to a few of the evenings, not all. I went to one where Bob Rauschenberg played tennis in the Armory on 23rd Street, right, with the wired tennis balls or whatever it

was.

And I went to a couple of the others. There was a group show that I did cover. It was in MoMA; they had part of it, and I covered that, so, yeah. Billy was a fine guy. He worked for — what was it? Not General Electric. No, it was —

MR. SAMPSON: Bell Labs.

MS. ASHTON: Bell Labs.

MR. SAMPSON: Over in New Jersey.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, yeah. And it was so strange, that double personality he had.

MR. SAMPSON: And his —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, and then — oh, yeah, that's interesting. Billy and I saw a lot of each other because I knew Tinguely in Europe.

MR. SAMPSON: Yves [sic, Jean] Tinguely.

MS. ASHTON: And I persuaded — at that time, my friend Peter Selz was the chief curator at MoMA — I persuaded Peter to have Tinguely's crazy machine installed in the garden. And I was very naughty because I knew that it was going to — the last part of it - was going to be a fire. It was going to burn itself up, but I didn't tell Peter or anybody there.

[They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: And so it did happen, and —

MS. ASHTON: Luckily it was raining that day, and it did; it did. It burst into flames, and everybody was very upset, from the museum point of view, naturally.

MR. SAMPSON: But that was what was supposed to happen?

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, that's what was supposed to happen. And I knew it.

So when Billy was helping Tinguely with the technical part of it, and if I were in the neighborhood, I'd drop in, because they were in the yard, in the garden, and — you know, kibitz — and, yeah, so in a way, I was kind of part of it.

[They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: And then — so that's a good lead into — if you can recall, or think back, I know Nietzsche has been important to you. Other particularly important, either schools of thought or philosophers who you —

MS. ASHTON: Well, I was never a big philosophy reader, but I regard Nietzsche as a great writer. So I read a lot of Nietzsche all along.

I dropped out of my university and came to New York City and went to the New School, and I took courses there. Nothing memorable, except I took this course with — oh, God, it's terrible; what's happening — the man, the psychology of art, Rudolf [Arnheim] — what was Rudi's last name? Rudi — you know who I mean.

MR. SAMPSON: I know him too, but I can't — because I'm blanking on Rudolf Bing, the head of the Met [Metropolitan Opera].

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. No, no, this was Rudi, Rudi — well, it'll come to me in a minute.

Anyway, he taught a course in the psychology of art. I wasn't interested in psychology, but there weren't so many courses I was interested in, so I took it. And it turned out he was a lovely man. I really liked him, and I eventually found out he'd been very important before he came to America, when he was in Germany and wrote the first book ever about modern cinema, the first serious book about the aesthetics of cinema.

And so, I was an attentive student. And the New School was a terrible place, because there were people like me taking courses for credit, and there were all these so-called adults not taking it for credit, and they loved to talk. And he was a little bit on the shy side, and very polite, and very European. So these sons of bitches in the audience would get up and make these long so-called questions, and it would drive me mad.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, right.

MS. ASHTON: You had to write a term paper for him, and I remember I wrote a paper about James Joyce — and not a serious paper; it was mostly about *Portrait of the Artist*. And he gave me an A and a very nice comment on it, and I thanked him, and that was that.

A few years later, I was in a museum in Paris, and there I saw him. I looked at him. I was too shy to go and say, "I was once your student, remember me?" But he remembered me. I was so shocked that he remembered me — thrilled. After that, we became friends, and we corresponded until he died.

Arnheim. Rudolf Arnheim was his name.

And he was a very civilized man, a lovely man.

MR. SAMPSON: So did he lead you to other philosophic writings, or other — a perspective that was valuable?

MS. ASHTON: Well, yeah. Yes. I think that he referred to theories of perception that I'd never heard of. And while I was not very attentive, I did, a little bit, follow some of his suggestions. And of course, he, in general was, since he was a trained German Jew — although he never told me that; I found out years later — he naturally had that background that I didn't have. I never took philosophy in college; I never read Kant or Hegel or anybody. I did read John Dewey, and the reason I read John Dewey was only because of the title of the book. It was called *Art as Experience*, and I thought, yeah, that's what it is. [Laughs].

MR. SAMPSON: Right.

MS. ASHTON: So I had read him, but other than that, nothing much.

MR. SAMPSON: [Inaudible] — you're self-educated in a sense, and —

MS. ASHTON: Well, a little bit here, a little bit there.

MR. SAMPSON: Hit or miss, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: And then — well, I don't know if we talked about that. There was a French philosopher that I absolutely was totally impressed by in the '50s. I was passing a bookstore in Paris, and his book had just come out. And it was — the title in English would be — I can't remember now, but it was about space. It had the word "space" in it, "*l'espace*" something [Gaston Bachelard. *La Poétique de l'espace*. 1957]. On an impulse, I bought the book and started reading it. And I loved it, and I did something I very rarely do. I wrote to him.

In those days, they had something in Paris, you're too young to know about, probably. It was called a *pneumatique*, a *pneu*, a *pneumatique*. There were all these — old post offices had these — I don't know what you'd call them, some kind of tubes that went from — and you could send a letter in the morning, *pneumatique*, and it would get there in the afternoon. It was much more efficient than we are today.

So I read this book, and I just loved it, and so I wrote him a fan letter. And he answered me immediately and invited me to come and visit him. And that was Gaston Bachelard, who I notice recently - just recently they've translated all his books now into English. But I was the one that first [brought Bachelard] here.

I had met a young publisher, and I was just about to go to — I met him because I was working on the *Times*, and the editor was a nasty brute. He assigned me to interview Chagall the day I was going to take a ship at five o'clock in the afternoon. So I had to go to Chagall, go back, and write it up. And on the elevator, there was a young man who was publishing Chagall's memoirs. I said, I'm in a terrible hurry; I have to go. I told him my name, and he knew the name because I had a byline in the *Times*. And he said, if you find anything in Paris, when you come back, tell me. So I found Bachelard. And I came back, and I said, this is what you should publish. And he did.

Unfortunately, the translation wasn't very good. But it was *The Poetics of Space*; the title of it was *La Poétique de l'espace*, the poetics of space, which, of course, was just the right title for me.

I'm still thinking of writing about my experience with Bachelard. I have still a folder with the title that I would have given, had I ever written it, which is based on Hokusai, who called himself "the old man mad about drawing," or "painting," because they're the same word in Japanese. I was going to call it *Gaston Bachelard: The Old Man Mad about Reading*, because that's what it's all about, you know? So it appealed to me a lot.

And I corresponded with him. He was very nice to me, the old man, very grateful because, since I arranged for him to be published in English and nobody else had done, he was very glad.

MR. SAMPSON: You should write about him.

MS. ASHTON: Well, I've started several times. But I never get it. Maybe I will someday. There's an aspect of his work that I can't write about — that's one of the problems — because he began as a philosopher of science. And two of his books, you have to know a lot about physics, chemistry and — so I don't know anything about that. So I could never even talk about it. That wouldn't stop me, necessarily, but —

MR. SAMPSON: Yeah, there are other aspects of —

MS. ASHTON: — but I couldn't be a real expert.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, you wouldn't want to talk about him from an expert's point of view as much as your own relationship with him, would you?

MS. ASHTON: Well —

MR. SAMPSON: Or both?

MS. ASHTON: I don't know. I've never thought it through. Often I say, why should I write? He wrote perfectly well about himself. He doesn't need somebody to write about him. [Laughs.]

MR. SAMPSON: Okay. Are you getting tired? Should we stop?

MS. ASHTON: We can go another five minutes, and then I think I better lie down a little bit.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, is there any concluding comment you want to make, or concluding thoughts for this process?

MS. ASHTON: [Laughs.] No, not — I don't want to conclude, no.

MR. SAMPSON: For this process, that's all.

MS. ASHTON: Oh? No, I can't think of anything. Can you think of anything that we should have —

MR. SAMPSON: No. It would be great to review the written record of this and just see what — [inaudible] — I have a chance to look at it and see what I know is missing, if there are things, or — you know, who knows, revisit.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. We didn't talk about Cuba.

MR. SAMPSON: No, we — did we a little bit in the last —

MS. ASHTON: Did we? I don't know.

MR. SAMPSON: Maybe you should a little bit.

MS. ASHTON: We don't have to.

MR. SAMPSON: Sure. [They laugh.] It's up to you. Are you to the point where — you know, it may be more than five minutes —

MS. ASHTON: No, I think it should be on the record that I was very much interested in Cuba, and I wasn't anti-Fidel. I'm still not, although I have, of course, criticisms about that country. But I have criticisms about my country, too. So it doesn't — it's not that important.

But I went three times to Cuba. And there were things that were very different, because I had been--when I was nine years old--I had been to Cuba. And even though I was just a little girl — but I was a smart little girl, and I remembered; I had a very, very vivid memory of the Cuba when I was nine years old, which was a horribly corrupt and glitzy and, as you know, filled with American gangsters and what have you and lots of advertising.

My father took me to what tourists do. They go to a rum factory, and the guy put me next to a rum bottle for advertising — [laughs] — yeah, that kind of thing.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, my goodness.

MS. ASHTON: So after the revolution, I was very curious about Cuba. I did go — I don't remember what year — and interviewed the minister of culture. I wrote about it, I don't remember where now, and met some of the artists. And at the time, at any rate, the visual artists were very free. There was no censorship. They were doing

what they wanted to do, and there was no intervention at all on the part of the state. Writers were a different matter, but I didn't meet any writers the first time I went; I just met painters and sculptors.

And then — well, there were other people that were also very much interested in the Cuban Revolution. It was only after the first five or six years that intellectuals turned against [it]. And in the beginning, there were a lot of people that we'd call liberals who were curious and who went. So I was one of those.

And there's no question that, from an intellectual point of view, I was not that easily conned by the regime. But the children were all well fed. The schools were beautiful. I visited schools; I did that, which most of the other intellectuals didn't bother with. As you know, they still are internationally famous for first-rate medical facilities for everybody, and nobody pays to this day.

There were some things I thought were very good in Cuba.

MR. SAMPSON: Was Adja's work collected there? Didn't Adja Yunkers have —

MS. ASHTON: Well, that was another thing. He had spent a year in Cuba in the late '20s. And there was some work there of his, yeah. There was still some work there, but I didn't go in and try to find —

MR. SAMPSON: Right. There is still some work of his there today, right? I think you said so.

MS. ASHTON: I think so, I think so. Once in a while, I meet a Cuban official — not lately, but 10 years ago — who did know the name.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, you remember when you came to Virginia, we also had Burt Glinn.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right, and he — yes.

MR. SAMPSON: Remember? And you and Burt were on about —

MS. ASHTON: Yes, he still around?

MR. SAMPSON: No, he's passed away now. But there was a photography exhibition, I think last fall, at ICP [International Center of Photography, New York, NY on the Cuban Revolution and, upstairs, the Spanish Civil War. It's a very interesting combination. And there were three or four —

MS. ASHTON: It's still there.

MR. SAMPSON: Is it still there?

MS. ASHTON: I think so. I saw it recently.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, could be. Okay, yeah, there were three or four of Burt's works downstairs.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, were they? I didn't look to see who did what.

MR. SAMPSON: Because he had some of those shots of Fidel riding on the tanks as they came into downtown Havana, et cetera. He was — that was part of what he did there.

MS. ASHTON: Fascinating.

MR. SAMPSON: And I've seen a great picture of — recently, well, now, what, 10 years ago, maybe — of Fidel with his arm around the Glinn's son, pointing out something. His arm is extended, and he's in consultation with the young Glinn. [Laughs.]

MS. ASHTON: There hasn't been any news that I can get from Cuba for the last year. I don't even know what's going on there. For that matter, Venezuela either. I don't know what's going on there. We — no news here. It's just terrible. What are they thinking of? The *Times* is lousy. I don't even buy it anymore. I get the weekly *Guardian*, and they don't do much with Latin America, but they do very well on the Middle East. That — lately, they've been excellent.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, I remember when I stayed with you on [Long] Island, the evening BBC news is a regular ritual.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah, I watch the BBC News. [They laugh.] The BBC for the U.S. is not as good as the radio BBC.

MR. SAMPSON: Right.

MS. ASHTON: But it's still better than the Americans, who seem to have given up on news. Those bimbos they have are ridiculous, when you think of - when they first had television, the newscasters were people of some substance, and usually men. And now you put it on, you see some little blonde who's telling you what the news is. [Laughs.] What do you watch? Do you watch; do you? No.

MR. SAMPSON: Very little. I try to read. I don't get very far afield, as far as I should. But I read books a lot, because I use that material in my classes and because I think it's kind of important to be au courant with your students, so that you can relate to things that are currently being discussed in depth, not just in the daily newspapers.

I do read the *Times*. Again, same purpose, really. But, yeah, I think — and I don't read nearly enough fiction or enough poetry as I should.

MS. ASHTON: I'm just reading Heinrich Böll again.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh.

MS. ASHTON: Good, it's good. I'm rereading — I may never have read it. It was the first novel published in English in '57 and it's called *Billiards at 9:30* [*Billiards at Half-Past Nine*. 1961]

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: Very interesting book.

MR. SAMPSON: Is it?

MS. ASHTON: Oh, I'm finding — I'm not finished. I still have another 50 pages to go. I was thinking maybe I'll get ahold of his other books, which I've read, and reread him.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But are you continuing to write, yourself?

MS. ASHTON: That's a sore question, George. No. No. It's not good. I should.

MR. SAMPSON: The spirit may move you again.

MS. ASHTON: I might get back to it. Who knows? I do little things. I did a catalogue —

MR. SAMPSON: You do things with —

MS. ASHTON: — for this sculptor who just came today. And strangest thing is, it has no dates. It's an exhibition —

MR. SAMPSON: Tom Doyle?

MS. ASHTON: — it's for an exhibition, but it doesn't say when the exhibition is [Sundaram Tagore Gallery, April 7-30, 2011].

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yeah. *Tom Doyle*, by Dore Ashton.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, this just says Roxbury, Connecticut, 2010.

MS. ASHTON: But that's the caption.

MR. SAMPSON: That's the piece, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: No, it doesn't have — I looked at it carefully; it doesn't say when the show is. I wonder if they just forgot.

MR. SAMPSON: Boy, that's a — that's kind of a big omission. Well, this is a fairly substantial piece of work. So that's not to be —

MS. ASHTON: Oh, I do — I still do occasional catalogue forewords and things like that, or little editorials for the *Brooklyn Rail*.

I don't know if he published my last one. I haven't heard from him in a long time. I did something because all of the — they're trying to bust the teacher's union all over the place, and I find that really reprehensible. So I did

write a little — oh, no, and I wrote a review of [Krzysztof] Wodiczko's show. I don't know if he published it. I never heard from him. I hope he did. Wodiczko was born in Warsaw in 1943, and he's half Jewish. He's a big-time artist. You don't know the name? Yeah.

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative], but I didn't know that part of his background.

MS. ASHTON: Yeah. I just noticed him when I was going to write this review, and I thought, that is interesting. So I did a little thing quoting from Shakespeare, pretty good on his antiwar speeches.

MR. SAMPSON: He was. Is.

MS. ASHTON: Well, I had fun with that. I do little things like that occasionally.

MR. SAMPSON: And last summer, or the summer before - you were doing something during the summer. You had a project you were working on a good part of the summer, I think you said.

MS. ASHTON: Well, I wrote an essay, not a very long essay, but an essay about Modernism and Jews. Was that it?

MR. SAMPSON: I think so.

MS. ASHTON: That was really interesting, because I had to do research to do it. And I found out everybody is an anti-Semite. [They laugh.] I didn't know that because I live in New York City, right? Unbelievable — Churchill, I quote Churchill in the piece. He talks about "that man Bronstein, you know, Trotsky? He was a Jew, you know, Bronstein." Even Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt, in a letter saying that she wished that she could join some friends, but she had to go to that Jewish couple, whatever they were. It was really a shock to me to discover.

MR. SAMPSON: Where was that published? Or was it?

MS. ASHTON: It's supposed to be published in Europe. I think in the spring they're bringing it out. There are other writers. It's a whole, apparently, big project about — and it's an international committee, one professor from the Sorbonne and one from the University of Basel and one from the United States, from Yale, I think, and one from — I forget. There were four. Apparently, it's a big project.

I did write that.

MR. SAMPSON: So the work goes on. Maybe more slowly.

MS. ASHTON: I'll probably do something this summer, I think. I'm supposed to. I'm supposed to write a little monograph, actually.

MR. SAMPSON: On whom?

MS. ASHTON: On — well, I have two projects. One I'm not working on yet, which is about Marisol, remember her?

MR. SAMPSON: Mm-hmm, yeah.

MS. ASHTON: And the other — what's the other project? Yeah, I was asked to write about Harvey Quaytman, whom I knew and followed. And I will do that. So that's what I'm up to. That's what I'm supposed to be doing. I haven't been doing much.

MR. SAMPSON: Well, you've also had a couple of sessions of flu, or illness, this winter, I know.

MS. ASHTON: I did. And I have troublesome daughters and family things that distract me quite a bit. I don't know. I wouldn't call me exactly vigorous right now.

MR. SAMPSON: One more dance, though.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yeah. There's a dance left in the old dame yet. Absolutely. I can still dance. [They laugh.] And I can run up and down stairs. That I can do; I just can't think very well. I think, but who knows? I'm still a good teacher.

MR. SAMPSON: I'm sure you are. You've been a good teacher to me for — I hate to say it, but 30 years?

MS. ASHTON: Oh, thank you so much, George. [They laugh.]

MR. SAMPSON: Long time.

MS. ASHTON: I still have — my students, I think, get something from my courses. Not exactly what they're supposed to get, but —

MR. SAMPSON: Probably not, and probably not the richness you'd like them to bring to the classes.

MS. ASHTON: I find students these days not very curious. It may be just me, but some of my colleagues also have noticed that. There's something wrong here, in this culture. Don't you think?

MR. SAMPSON: I do. I teach, too, and I think I see the same thing. It's too easy to find information and not reflect on what it means.

MS. ASHTON: Well, I say to them, information is not knowledge. But I can see by their faces that they're not impressed with that. [Laughs.] I even have students who take notes in class on a computer, which I find really irritating.

MR. SAMPSON: I did, and then I had other students in the class come to me on more than one occasion and say, you may look at the backside of a laptop and think they're taking notes, but they are actually surfing the web and doing all kinds of other things. It's very distracting.

MS. ASHTON: That's what I suspect.

MR. SAMPSON: And so this year, for the first time, I have said, this must be a cellphone-free and laptop-free environment.

MS. ASHTON: I think I'm going to do that.

MR. SAMPSON: If you're going to stay in my class, put them down, and pick them up after you leave, or open them up again.

MS. ASHTON: I did say something about cellphones, because they hold them underneath.

MR. SAMPSON: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: And they're always looking down, and that irritates me.

MR. SAMPSON: Yes, yes. And they're surfing the web on the phones.

MS. ASHTON: It's ridiculous. So I'm not a very authoritarian type of person, but I'm beginning to think that if I keep teaching, which I will for another couple of years, I imagine I'm going to have to do that. I'm going to have to become more authoritarian. I don't believe in grades, and that seems to be the only thing that can pull them to order, are grades, these days.

MR. SAMPSON: If this helps you, the interesting thing that I discovered is there's actually a sense of relief among a number of students — quite a few, even those who have their laptop open — that this is something that is not permissible. And so they feel suddenly freed to let it lapse.

They're also connected all the time. This is almost a vacation for them to sit in a classroom where they can't do that. It's a very interesting psychology. So you could easily be doing them a favor.

MS. ASHTON: [Laughs.] Well, I might try. [Laughs.] There are always — of course, there are always a few real students who I teach. So I teach them.

MR. SAMPSON: Oh, yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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