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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Brenda Richardson on 2011 July 29 and 30. The interview took place in Baltimore, MD at Richardson's home and was conducted by James McElhinney 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.

Brenda Richardson has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. *Editorial note:* This transcript was finalized in 2019; it replaces a draft version which was published to this website.

Interview

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Brenda Richardson at her home in Baltimore, Maryland, on Friday, July 29, 2011. Good afternoon.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Good afternoon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where're you from?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Baltimore, Maryland—now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And that's your hometown? I mean, your hometown?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, I was born and raised in Michigan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In Michigan, and you studied at the university at Ann Arbor?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: For my B.A., yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: For your B.A., Okay. [Audio interference, inaudible]—don't want to handle it.

And you chose that school because?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Because I was a Michigan resident and had free tuition, and I was putting myself through school. So it was the only financially viable option, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is one of the great universities in America. So I was very lucky that that coincidence was part of my life. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did you become interested in art?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The short version, I suppose, is that I grew up in a working-class, small town situation where, as far as I know or recall, I never visited a museum. I didn't know about museums; that's not how we grew up.

And when I went to Ann Arbor, that was my first exposure to art. And I was an English major in the honors program at Ann Arbor, and one of the courses I took was with a professor of English, Herbert Barrows, who was interested in art. And through his references—just occasional references to art, I became interested in learning more about it, and so I took an art history class.

And in that art history class, I was shocked, as a consistently all-A student, to get a "D" on my first examination because all the virgins looked exactly the same to me in—on the screen, when the slides came up. I think that's true for a lot of people who have no exposure to art or anything else. When you first start, it all seems a blur. [Laughs.]

And so I went to the professor and said, "This is—[laughs]—this is pretty shocking for me. What am I supposed to do?" And he said, "You're supposed to keep looking and then they'll start looking different, and you'll see their distinction." And so that's what I did. And got pretty committed to it and then took a class with a visiting guest professor, Wolfgang Stechow, who was a specialist in Baroque, and he was at Michigan for one year, and I took his class.

And one day in his class, he began to show slides of the many paintings that had been destroyed in the bombing of Dresden—Rubens primarily, but others as well—and as he talked about them, he began to weep. And I was so overwhelmed by this that—I mean, it sounds like fiction, but this is actually true—that I sat there, and I thought,

if art can make people feel this way, can take it this internally, that's something I want to be involved with, and from then on, I was an art history major. And then I went to art history, as a graduate student, to Berkeley.

And I didn't choose Berkeley for any intelligent reason, like, that was where the best modernist professors were —[laughs]—because they weren't. It was because I wanted to go to Berkeley. I just wanted to get away from Michigan, and I wanted to go to Berkeley. And the minute I set foot in Berkeley, I was a Berkeley girl, and I still am.

I just loved it, completely loved it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the years you were there were sort of the hot years for—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The best. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —student activism—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, Mario Savio on the steps. They were the best years, absolutely the best. But I want to point out that I was in Ann Arbor in the best years, too.

SDS was—if you're a liberal like I am—SDS was founded in Ann Arbor in '63, '64—which is, you know, I left there in '64—and I attended those SDS meetings. I mean, I wasn't an organizer; I was a listener. I didn't go on bus trips to the South, but I was at every meeting. I was very engaged with that political movement, and so it was a pretty predictable extension that I would head for Berkeley and away from the cold and snow of Michigan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So were you from, you know, the lower—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —area of the state?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, was born and raised in a place called Howell, Michigan, which is a ways from Detroit, but in the Detroit—general drift to Detroit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In the general—so it was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's sort of between Detroit and Ann Arbor.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —sort of like the Michael Moore, like—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: He's a little further west and north, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —but that kind of—that kind of world, kind of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, although the town I was—is much smaller. I mean, he's from Flint, Michigan—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right—which is a big city, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —which is a fairly substantial city compared to where I grew up. I grew up in very small towns, and my parents were farming people. So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, they were farming people. So they weren't involved in—[inaudible]—life?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, they didn't farm for a living then, but their parents—they grew up on farm situations or, in my father's case, his father was a traveling tinker, I mean, with a cart and a horse or later a car, selling things in the countryside. So it was—that was the family background.

My father was the youngest of nine and my mother, the youngest of 12. So they were big families and working class. My father was a tool-and-die maker.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were the first to attend college?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I was, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And how did they regard that?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They were entirely supportive, and both of my parents are—were—they're both dead—were very smart. So they were entirely supportive.

My mother was a bookkeeper and, as I said, my father was a tool-and-die maker, and they encouraged college. They encouraged education for their children. Now, they weren't able to finance it. I have two younger sisters—all of us went to college, and all of us put ourselves through school by working—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hard.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —and grants, of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Are either of your two sisters involved in any way in the arts?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, no, my middle sister is a botanist and ecologist, and teaches science courses. And my younger sister is someone who does health surveys for the U.S. Census and operated her own bicycle shop—bicycle repair and sales as an alternate mode of transportation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Enterprising? Huh.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So when you got to Berkeley, what did you imagine you would be doing for your master's? What kind of work were you hoping to tackle at that point in time? Were you going there to study with a particular professor or were you drawn obviously by the political climate—was attractive to you and the change of weather?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Although as Mark Twain observed, he spent the coldest winter of his life when—a summer in San Francisco, right?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Could be. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, you know, the weather can be quite irregular there, but—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I probably was drawn by the mystique of Berkeley, San Francisco, as much as anything. I mean, I was a Midwestern girl, and I wanted to get out to California, and it was something I just imagined.

It—as I said before, it was very naïve. I had no idea about how intelligent it was to choose your graduate school based on the professors who were there. I mean, the modernists at Berkeley in those years were Peter Selz and Herschel Chipp, neither one of whom was exactly a—you know, I don't know how to put it. They weren't breaking any new paths in modernism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, but Herschel Chipp put together that anthology of early art theory, right? The early—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, but he didn't write it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Theories of Modern—no, but—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: He compiled it. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He compiled it and sort of made it more accessible to people. It was a book that we all—when I was in school, that we all read, and I saw also that you worked with him on Hundertwasser, sort of an artist nobody speaks about anymore but, at the time, was an extremely interesting sort of eccentric point of view apart from the mainstream of Pop and Minimalism and Color Field painting and all that stuff. So—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I didn't work with Herschel Chipp on Hundertwasser because I believed in Hundertwasser's work.

I—you know, to back up a moment, when I got to Berkeley, the first thing I did was go visit the art history department and ask for a job. Again, I'm putting myself through school. They asked, "Do you type?" I said, "Yes," because my mother forced me to take typing in high school, bless her heart. [Laughs.] I don't know what I would have done without it. But, indeed, I got a job right then and on the spot because I typed, being quote [a] "research assistant," which was exactly what I was called in Ann Arbor when I worked for the anthropology department for four years. That means you're a typist and a gofer. It doesn't mean you're [a] real research assistant.

So I was assigned to committee—the university committee that had been established to determine whether it was viable for the Berkeley campus to establish an art museum on the campus. It did not have an art museum at that time. It had a converted powerhouse, which was an art gallery, which is where, in all the early years—

when the museum actually did start, the committee determined that there should be a museum, and a handful of us, five to be precise, operated a program in the powerhouse—an art program.

And in the course of that, I worked essentially with two—with Peter Selz and with Herschel Chipp. As with—I think is common with graduate students, "working with" means doing their research, but it also means doing a lot of their writing. And in *Theories of Modern Art*, which was Chipp's book, I did a lot of work on that book, and then I also did a lot of work on Hundertwasser.

By the time I got to Hundertwasser, however, I was courageous enough to suggest that it was time that I got some credit for this work that I was doing, and Herschel Chipp denied that. But I went to the head of the department and made the case and was given co-authorship and credit or some kind of credit that suggested I had worked on the project, and of course I did.

So those were important steps at an early point of, you know, on the one hand, getting credit for the work even as it wasn't work that I really believed in, and I don't think that's terribly unusual for novice museum people who are just getting started. You do assignments that, you know, you take on because that's part of your job.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did a professor at Berkeley, your employer, get support to do work on a kind of eccentric—was he Austrian?—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —painter whose work was not really in the dialogue with anything that was happening at that moment? It was just sort of a—where did the backing for that come from? Do you know?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, Peter Selz had been brought out to direct this incipient museum that didn't exist except as the powerhouse plant at that point, and Peter Selz had a lot of clout. I mean, he'd come from MoMA and was considered a real catch, a star, for the Berkeley campus in terms of this museum. And so from that perspective, I think it's understandable that basically whatever Peter Selz said was okay—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —was what happened, and he and Herschel were in agreement about Hundertwasser.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It still does not really quite answer—illuminating why, but I guess that they didn't share their reasons.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You mean why they supported it?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, just curious. Because you're also in a place where you've got a burgeoning scene of young artists like Joan Brown and Oliveira and David Park and Diebenkorn and all these guys and a kind of gallery scene that starting to emerge—people like Charlie Campbell and other people dealing this stuff and creating interest in it both regionally and elsewhere. And you think that like a Bay Area venue in—at that time would be more engaged with that—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not for Peter Selz.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —than an oddball Austrian painter, you know.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, I think that's not clear thinking about Peter Selz wanting to make a mark—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —and to be in—you know, to take an international—certainly national, but also international approach to what would happen at the museum.

And thank heavens because you don't want to declare yourself a regionalist at the outset. I mean, certainly Peter Selz wouldn't, and I give him high marks for that. I think he understood that coming to that campus was something that you had to establish that it was a leading university that should be looking beyond its own region. It has to reach out to the rest of the world. It has to be about civilization at large, and I think that's a really, really important statement that was made there. So there were certainly artists that Peter believed in, and he believed in Hundertwasser.

Now why he believed in him, that goes to, you know, all sorts of personal things. I mean, Hundertwasser led a sort of lifestyle that Peter Selz enjoyed participating in. I mean, there were all sorts of behaviors that play into that as well as, you know, thinking that art was colorful and interesting and historically harked back to certain things that he was interested in—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Inaudible]—right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —and also German expressionism and expressionism in the larger case—Viennese—and I think they believed in Hundertwasser, both of them.

So you know, this—I think that's pretty straightforward and admirable. I mean, you should do what you believe in.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And I think the statement about, you know, "We're not here just to show the local artists," is important too. Now, gradually we did an enormous amount with regional artists in making major statements. I mean, I did the Joan Brown retrospective.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, there was a lot of regional art, and we did early exhibitions in the power plant of regional artists. But that was not the *raison d'être* of the—of the institution.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Guess it's easy—it makes more sense perhaps to get behind a regional artist, once they're no longer a regional artist, like Wiley for instance, who you also worked on, I noticed.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That—not at a time when he was just starting out, but at a time when everybody knew who he was.

So—but, yes, I mean, that's a whole other conversation about what regionalists might think today everything is regional because everything's global. So there's no kind of uniform "high art" anywhere that everyone agrees on is the high art for the whole planet. And if one were to propose that, someone in China or India—or India would have to tell you you're wrong. So it's a discussion. But it's an interesting kind—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But globalism now doesn't have much to do with the 1960s, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, no, no—exactly.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, that's the difference. We're talking about a moment in history—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Inaudible.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —which is so far from what we are now—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —as to be, you know, Neolithic. It was completely different.

Now, the Bay Area artists certainly felt that they should get more attention, both within the Bay Area and further afield. I mean, there was a marked sense that New York paid no attention to them, and that's not without truth.

There were plenty of other institutions. Well, I shouldn't say "plenty of." There were a number of other institutions that focused on regional art, smaller places, of course, for the most part. And never forget: We were, at that point, still a power plant. I mean, by the time the Mario Campi building got built, and we had a major facility, it was significantly later than the period we're talking about right now when we first stated that power plant gallery—program.

But I think that, on balance, even looking back on it, the early years were pretty good in terms of presenting both international and national artists and regional artists. And by the time we had the building in place, there were a number of major, major presentations of the regional artists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was the dynamic at that time between the sort of burgeoning art scene in the Bay Area and Los Angeles?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Different planets. There was virtually no relationship.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Same state—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Same state, different planets.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But planets can be at war with each other, in competition with each other, or mindful of what the other's doing and trying to get a better position in some way. So I'm just curious how that informed any of the—or if anybody making those choices at the higher level—people for whom you worked shared any of that with you, just to, like, lend a little insight into the—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There was virtually no meaningful contact between those two art communities.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No acknowledgement of existence or—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Almost like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's—well, that in itself is interesting.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, almost like that. They were really different. And their styles with different—you know, the thing with—[inaudible]—of LA versus the funk of Bay Area. It wasn't that there was no contact. I mean, there were artists that had friends in LA—Bay Area artists with friends in LA and so on, artist friends.

But that was really thin. I mean, that contact was minimal, really minimal. And we didn't—in the museum in those years, we did very little with Los Angeles artists, and I think that maybe—I mean, I don't know. I don't think it was that we didn't find them interesting. We did. We saw them in the magazines, *Artforum*, certainly, especially—it was based in LA in those years. But it wasn't part of our universe, really.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you never jumped on the 5 and headed south?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I did head south, but for different purposes. For instance, I went to Pasadena for Claes Oldenburg's retrospective, or I went to Pasadena for Jasper Johns's retrospective, to see it.

I didn't go to studios in LA. I wasn't there looking at contemporary artists' work, which isn't to say I didn't go to the galleries when I was there. But I wasn't there very often. And the Pasadena museum, at that point, was doing really, really important exhibitions, so that would be a draw. So that answers that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And those were the years when they also—was it LA County, Maurice Tuchman did that Art and Technology show too?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I saw Art and Technology there. I saw the Kienholz show. I don't remember other shows I might have seen. There might have been—I don't remember. I started to say Matisse; I'm not sure. I don't remember. But I would go for specific exhibitions. But I know I went to Pasadena for openings of artists, for instance, that I never went to the LA County for—with the LA County Museum for openings.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's interesting. I think that a lot of people who don't know the geography of the state of California would assume that Pasadena is to LA where Towson is to Baltimore. But it's quite a different place, isn't it. [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, it is. Yes, it's different.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So once you survived Herschel Chipp and Hundertwasser and went to work at the museum that was then established, your CV says that you were a research assistant and then, you were an exhibition assistant?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: My titles changed pretty often, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But what did an exhibition assistant do at that time?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In the early years of the museum, those of us who worked there—as I said, it was around five people most of the time in all those early years—we did everything. We did everything. I mean everything. I mean, we cleaned the floors. We typed all the labels. We did all the registration forms. We organized the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, you licked all the envelopes, everything.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Everything. I'm not exaggerating, we did everything. That was a—and it was wonderful and it was also meticulous, and we got to do everything perfectly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you know how to wield a radial arm saw, right?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I know how to do almost everything that has to be done in a museum, you know? And it was wonderful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's great.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It was just fantastic. Because the best part about being in a museum like Baltimore, which was a big museum—when I came here—was that I had infinite respect for what every single person did to keep that museum going—130 employees—and respected them for the work they did when it was great. And that meant the world to them and to me.

So you can't do that if you don't understand what it takes to prepare a label properly. You really can't if you have never done any—in fact, I've given tours in my Baltimore years, and people will say, "How do those labels"—you know, somebody with curiosity says, "Well, how does that label come on [the wall]?" And I say, "Someone types it." And they look at me like I'm crazy. You know, they can't believe that someone actually types the label. Of course, nowadays it's done with laser printers and all sorts of things, but they're still typing the label.

So you know, it's really—to be in a museum like the Baltimore years, where if there's a piece of scrap paper that's fallen on the floor, whoever is walking by picks it up—because that's what you do, you keep your museum tidy—you keep it clean—and you present a certain impression to the public.

And if you've done that yourself, you know what it takes to think that way and to act that way. And it's really important. It was certainly important to me and important to the people that I worked with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did the museum in the early years—[phone rings].

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It gets picked up.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, the telephone. So how did the museum, once it opened, serve the community? Or how did the community interface with it beyond, you know, the campus, but you know, Berkeley, the East Bay area? I mean, was it sort of like, you know, a UFO landing and all of a sudden there's art under the eucalyptus trees? I mean, how did people take to it?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think the art community, the larger Bay Area art community, was just thrilled that there was another major venue for the presentation of art. It opened some more opportunities, and that was certainly true.

The campus itself—that was tough, that was really tough. The museum never really had the support of the art history department. It never really had the support of the practicing arts department, because from the practicing artists' position, we didn't show enough of their work. The art historians were dismissive because we weren't academically serious enough.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was not historical, especially.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It was historical, but it wasn't serious, as far as they're concerned.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you mean? How do you think they meant?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They believed that museums are not scholarly; only the traditional academia produces scholarly material worthy of a university's support. And so there were really—I mean, it was kind of alienation which was very hard to overcome. And the museum took all kinds of steps—I mean, appointing the art historians, the faculty members, to be advisory curators and so on.

I mean, all the things that you would expect a museum to do, we did. I would say none of that made a dent. They were on our advisory committees, but it was a very distant relationship, and very tough—and maybe even tougher with the practicing artists, because you know, they were friends, and you see them at openings in your community. And that was very problematic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So did that create challenges in terms of the financial allotments that you received from the university, or you know, the support for programs, operations, et cetera?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It was an odd situation, really, because the university—we were under the division of arts and humanities as basically a department, in some sense. So we were funded. And although the funding might never be quite adequate, it was very consistent and it was guaranteed.

So it was an unusual situation for the whole time I was there, basically—no, the whole time I was there. There

wasn't a board of trustees. There wasn't much private fundraising, because you didn't have to. You had this monolith providing you with funds.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it was a budgeted entity?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, yes. It was a budgeted entity. And we had to provide all of the usual academia rituals in terms of reporting on that and so on. But it's more than most museums have, actually, in terms of stability. I mean, that stability of funding is pretty crucial.

So you know, it wasn't really comparable to the museums as we know them today, where frankly, the main thing you worry about is where your next dollar is going to come [from] for—to support anything—salaries, never mind exhibitions and publications. So those were golden years, in that sense.

I should also mention the Hans Hofmann collection. Hans Hofmann had left this body of work for the museum, so that also gave a certain credibility institutionally—probably more in terms of the university than it did in terms of the wider public, in some sense. But that the Hofmanns were there was one of the primary arguments, initially, for this committee to decide that there should be a museum.

The committee was unbelievably naïve in terms of the art market, so the notion that the museum could create a collection, in retrospect, was just ludicrous. But nonetheless, it said that yes, the museum could. [Laughs.] Because money for acquisitions was never part of the mix in terms of the university's funding.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see. So if you wanted to collect work or acquire work, you could either invite donations or invite people to give you the money to use to acquire—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Or beg the dean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: For more money.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —of arts and letters for more money for acquisitions, yes, for a specific—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you—how did the—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I didn't do that, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

MS. RICHARSON: —Peter Selz would have done that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And he was the director of the museum?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay. How did the Hans Hofmann collection come to the Berkeley museum?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There had been a connection between the painters in the practicing art department, the old-time painters, and Hans Hofmann when he was still in Germany. And they had sent him funds and also had helped him get some paintings out of the country at a critical moment. And so because of that very, very crucial history, Hofmann had a warm spot for Berkeley, and that's where the collection ended up.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were any of the people then teaching there former students of his from either the Provincetown school or the Art Students League of New York?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know that. I mean, I don't remember that, but I wouldn't be surprised.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did that environment create opportunities for you to begin to shape your own work, your own point of view, your own vision? You talked about the professor at Ann Arbor weeping when he recalled the lost treasures of Dresden. And was there a moment, one of those "aha" moments, one of those epiphanies, when you're working in the museum and realize that this was sort of a space you could navigate and start to use for your own ambitions?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't think quite in that way, no. And I don't think I had ambitions like that. I had convictions about art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that's what I meant. I mean, to sort of explore your—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Ambition is a [little ?] different issue. And I didn't have much room to do that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, I was—Peter Selz was running that show, and I was his key support. And that went on for a long time. I didn't have very much—I had room to lobby for things I believed in, but it took a long—I mean, I worked a long time before I was able to do exhibitions of my own. And in terms of acquisitions, I had almost no room for decision-making.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But would he—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And Peter and I were really at opposite ends in terms of taste, pretty much. I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sounds like it.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. It was something where, you know, he thought Frank Stella was the devil incarnate, you know. I mean, this was something that—never mind Andy Warhol. This was just way, way beyond what he was willing to have. I mean, I remember him famously saying, "I'll never have Frank Stella in my museum."

And you know, those—so the artists that I was growing up to believe in were artists that were not going to be a focus of that museum for a long time. And I was a worker bee in the best sense of that word. I do not disparage worker bees. They're the most important component of any museum. I did writing. I did all the administration. I did budgeting. I did all the organization of projects, everything. You know, it was like a backbone kind of job.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And for what did you receive credit in a public sense? Your writing, obviously.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. When I started writing a lot, I of course received acknowledgment. But also, I visited studios. I went to openings. I mean, artists—I stayed in touch with artists and increasingly reached out, so I did have that connection. But Peter also did that for different reasons. I mean, he was social; he was—I'm not a social butterfly; he was. He loved being in that situation. So for me, it was more about seeing the art and learning about the artists, and some of that growing awareness of what was going on in the community.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he would countenance your opinions. He would hear what you had to say.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, generally speaking. There came a time when that didn't work very well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he wasn't completely a "my way or the highway" kind of leader?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, not entirely. But he was the decision-maker, so it wasn't a partnership. It was, I worked for Peter Selz.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So just trying to understand: The backing he had, the authority he had, came with the position. It was not—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that there were collectors behind him, and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There were collectors behind him.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, there were?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There were collectors behind him, but they were in New York—I mean, people he had known at MoMA, when he was at MoMA.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So he had a lot of connections in New York. Now, were they connections that served the museum as best they might? That's debatable, I suppose, by history. But a lot of those things resulted in exhibition commitments, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I guess when I was asking about the relationship between Berkeley museum and the community, I was also sort of curious whether the museum became sort of a gathering point for patrons, for people who were interested in art, for people who were attracted to Peter's cachet as a New York-tested arts professional with his connections, I mean, as a way to get further connected, people in the Bay Area—let's say collectors in the Bay Area, or people interested in collecting New York art, which I'm sure there were.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Nobody?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I would say nobody. I mean, I would say nobody. I think it's fair to say nobody. Now, that just—you're just in a different universe now. [Laughs.] You're so many decades ago, when there wasn't cachet to being a collector or a museum trustee—that was a different planet. You know, we're talking different times, really. This was a historical moment when that hadn't happened yet, certainly not in the Bay Area.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not in the Bay Area.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And not very much in New York City, even. I mean, it wasn't—there was no social cachet attached to being a museum trustee, even in New York, in the '60s. So I think that we have to look back on that time in a very different way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, illuminate that, because I think that a lot of people who are looking at the history of contemporary art—I mean, especially if you think about young students, scholars, people who are working in museums now, having been educated in the last 10, 20, 30 years—make the assumption that there is a kind of social-climbing aspect, or kind of status-building aspect to, you know, the collecting world. It's not purely aesthetic.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, there is now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's not purely the delectation of a fine object or an interesting idea. And it's not just purely the crassness of investing for its own sake. But it's, you know, it's different now than it was then, I guess, is what you're saying.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's right. You're talking about something that's current, not—that has relevance to that period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, just to give a person today an idea of what that period was like, what that world was like—I mean, I've spoken with a lot of dealers, and one of the things that they say is that if they were around and working in the 1960s, or the '50s even, all say the art world was tiny compared to the proportions that it has assumed now.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how would you contrast the world of the art museum, of which the Berkeley museum was a part, in 1965, '68, '69, to, let's say, the same institution today, or a comparable institution today?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Like I said, different planets.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Totally different planets.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Totally different planets. There's just no relationship. I mean, like, I've said this. [Laughs.] I mean—it wasn't—there was no social cachet attached to it. Our museum didn't even have trustees. It was part of the university, so it was very different.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It had an educational function.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art had trustees, but they were trustees, you know, maybe seven or eight from the old families who had collected Matisse. And that's it. That was it. That was the foundation. And, yes, there were—I mean, I bet I couldn't name three collectors that came to any gallery opening—quote, "collectors" that came to gallery openings. So, I mean, it didn't happen but—not in that period.

By the time you get to the '70s and the '80s, it expands a bit in San Francisco. I mean, you then could maybe count 10 collectors who would maybe buy a watercolor by Bill Wiley. You know, I mean, very, very conservative. These artists weren't looking to sell. I mean, they assumed they'd never sell. They were all teaching—were all teaching. You know, they had to teach. They were teaching at Berkeley, they were teaching at Davis or they were teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute. All of those three institutions maintained those artists. They allowed them to buy groceries. And that's what it amounted to. They didn't sell art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And when they did, the prices were not a fraction of what they would be today?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Of course not. But that's true of everything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—well, I wanted to talk about the contrast between when you started your career and now—a little bit later on in terms of, you know, other things as well. But just try to create a sense of the environment in which you launched your career as—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, by the early '70s I was doing exhibitions, and I was doing publications. So in the early '70s I did the Wiley Retrospective with a catalogue, I did a Terry Fox show with a catalogue, I did [a] Joan Brown show with a catalogue. I also did small gallery shows of many other artists—I mean, younger artists—Elyn Zimmerman who's now well-known but wasn't—that was her first show; [Richard] Serra's little brother [Rudy Serra] who was a very interesting artist; Steve Kaltenbach—many artists that I have to go look at my CV myself to remember.

But we did—Deborah Butterfield. I mean, a ton of shows of artists who were really promising. And they were all coming out of—almost all were coming out of Davis—UC Davis which was this hotbed of great teaching—and to lesser extent Berkeley. But—San Francisco Art Institute—we had a lot of feeder organizations sending younger artists out into that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, UC Davis was Wayne Thiebaud, right? Was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Thiebaud was there, but Wiley was the driving force behind Davis. And then Nauman was there for a time as well—Nauman was Wiley's student. So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then you have people like Hudson, right and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Bob Hudson was at Davis teaching.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At Davis and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Peter—Pete Voulkos was at Berkeley, and it was a powerhouse in terms of the ceramic field and influenced a lot of—a lot, a handful, but an important handful including some like Steve Kaltenbach. So there were prominent figures there, not so much in the painting department—not so much there. But these people were really—Wiley and Hudson in particular were really important. So was Arneson—Robert Arneson.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, some major figures. They were all teaching. I mean, that's how they made their living. Joan Brown was teaching, Manuel Neri was, and they were all teaching—wonderful, wonderful artists who were scraping by on their teaching.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there was no sense of commerce about it at all—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: None.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This assumption that we have today really was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Commerce was a nonexistent factor.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was it almost a kind of taboo subject you didn't even want to talk about money?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: To a certain extent.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think so. Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, to a certain extent. That commercialism was thought as being very East Coast and therefore, you know, they might wish that they had money but they didn't want to admit it. They were teaching and they had families and they were working in their studios. I mean, looking back on it it's—I can't state enough that it—I mean, it was a different planet. But there was a certain quaintness to it from our perspective today. I mean, it's downright quaint when you think about how that art world existed.

They all supported each other. They were all friends. It was—you know, we'd get called out to go play softball on the weekend out in the country where they lived in ramshackle places sometimes. It was a different time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you miss it at all?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: We can say that. But I'm happy I had it. It was a foundational component of who I am.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's a lot of conversation about, you know, the deleterious effect of lucre on genius. You know, some people I know have even said—there is a critic in New York who said that the avant-garde was killed by the marketplace. That the—you know—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't believe that either.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it's a facile comment.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Artists don't work for money. There's not enough money in the world to do what an artist does—the great ones. I mean, it's ridiculous. That's what people used to say, you know, in my Baltimore years—get—jumping ahead—you know, when we did all these tours and talks. And people would always say, you know, this artist is just doing this because they're going to make money. And I said, you know, you really have to rethink that. [Laughs.] This is a very tough job.

An artist is—still, these artists are not rich. I mean, a handful are today but most are not. The majority of these artists are working at the studio day in and day out because they believe it. They believe in it. They're crazy enough to believe in this, you know, whatever you think about it. They're not doing it for the money. And people really don't understand that. They think that every artist gets rich because they read about the handful that are on the front page of the newspaper. It's crazy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were at the Berkeley Museum until—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: 1975.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: 1975.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And then I was recruited to Baltimore by Tom Freudenheim who had been the assistant director under Peter Selz and then came to be director at the Baltimore Museum of Art and, as he's laughingly said, called me twice a day for weeks asking me to come to Baltimore. And I was also interviewed at the same time—recruited by the Corcoran, which had an opening. Jane Livingston, Barbara Haskell and I all came east in the same year. They were all recruited by the Corcoran, I think, as well as the Whitney at some point.

And we all landed back east at the same time and I came to Baltimore and worked very, very happily with Tom for a number of years until he left, and then with Arnold Lehman who came. And I worked until Arnold Lehman left, and then I myself left.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Before we leave California in this chronology, what would you say was the most important exhibition that you put together—the most important thing that you worked on, the one task that—of which you're the most proud?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I couldn't do that. I really couldn't do that. I'm proud of everything that I've done. I mean—and I don't mean that to say that I haven't make mistakes. But I haven't made mistakes in terms of the exhibitions or publications that I've organized. I don't feel that way about it. I feel very proud of all of them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well then, let me ask it a different way. During your years in California, rising from research assistant to exhibition assistant—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —to whatever?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —gopher, coffee maker, mail driver, label typer—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Writer. Very important. I did a lot of writing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I was getting to that, right? [They laugh.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. No, but what I wanted to say is that writing—I wrote all the policies for the museum as well. You know, I was a museum professional by adaptation. So all the policies—deaccession policy, ethical policies, how the committees worked—I wrote all of them—all of them—as well as writing catalogues so, you know, there's a part of that aspect of my museum history that I'm also very proud of. I mean, that was all part of the mix for me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you've an organizational brain that you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. I'm a good organizer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —you enjoy the sort of the craft of putting these things together.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. Yes, I do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: These entities just kind of—kind of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think they're important. Yes. I hate bureaucracy but I like organization. I'm—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We might craft an aphorism out of that somewhere that the best organizers are people who hate bureaucracy or something like that.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: We might, yes. Yes. Right. But in general, the—you asking me to pinpoint, I think probably the most important contribution of those years in Berkeley was doing exhibitions with catalogues—with important catalogues—for artists of the Bay Area who had not ever had that experience before. So doing a Wiley retrospective or a Joan Brown catalogue or a Terry Fox catalogue, those were really important things to have done. We also did enormous number of exhibitions from outside the area. I mean, Richard Lindner, Romare Bearden, I mean, a huge long list of exhibitions that were wonderful to work on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That raises another question, just sort of consciousness streaming, from those two artists. People like H.C. Westermann and—is a charming object maker, sculptor, however you want to describe him—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Westermann was Wiley's hero. It's true. And through Wiley I met Westermann. He was a wonderful guy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I met him once too when I was in art school. He's a—he like struck me like some old salt or something.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But very unimpressed with himself and very kind of open. But there—which is the aesthetic of the Bay Area. I think a lot of people think about the Bay Area in terms of artists like Diebenkorn or Joan Brown or David Park, people who—painters working more traditional—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In the '50s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In the '50s.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who were sort of straddling the sort of American representational tradition and sort of the abstract expressionist—you know, action painting with big gesture, a lot of paint, all that stuff. But—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That was before I got there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But it was major. I mean, Frank Lobdell was Wiley's hero too. I mean, Frank Lobdell was a great painter and wildly underestimated even to the present day. So those people were part of the inheritance that I took on for these other—this other generation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But those artists seemed to be looking at European art and other things in sort of a painting tradition whereas people like—well, like Wiley, Arneson, and others—perhaps you could throw in, like, Roy De Forest and Lindner and Westermann—so for—had a really eccentric kind of aesthetic that it had to do with an almost folk art aesthetic.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I wouldn't say folk art, but handmade.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Handmade, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Handmade is closer, I think. And a certain playfulness which was allowed by Bay Area artists and of course forbidden by East Coast artists—playfulness was never a piece of the puzzle in New York.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And an unlikely combination of materials, like wood, paint, ceramic—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Any material—found materials.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Any materials. Yes. Right, right, right. So that sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And you—I mean, I think it's very significant to note that one of the most important artists in the universe, Bruce Nauman, came out of that sensibility. That's where he got it from, the Bay Area. It was, you know, crazy materials and you can make—anything can be made—art can be made of anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So does that come from eating a lot of sourdough bread or something or—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Comes from William T. Wiley and UC Davis.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. So that was really—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Which Nauman says outright. It's Wiley.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's Wiley.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Wiley is the one who said you can make art out of anything. You can dance; you stand on your head. You can do absolutely anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why do you suppose he's not more highly regarded today or more highly studied today—more closely studied today?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, he's had a lot of attention. I mean, he had a retrospective in Washington just this last year with a very wonderful catalogue.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But I think he's seen as a niche—a niche figure rather than mainstream—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like a graphic painter—the guys doing these big drawings and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, he does—he does works in all mediums. He is funny. He makes jokes. You know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Humor is okay in art.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not so much if you're in the East Coast, though. That's my point.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's why he's the, quote, "outsider," because humor isn't really part of the issue. You know, East Coast art is really dead serious—really dead serious.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The key word being dead.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, not today. But—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] I didn't mean to lead you.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think—well, I'd like to ask you if you think that if—that this—that the track record of creating, organizing exhibitions with catalogues gave these artists sort of a mirror in which they could ponder their own sort of activities, and sort of having this kind of—kind of exhibition environment where they can see the work on the wall, they can see the work in the book, years before the Internet where everybody's got a website and a blog and all of that? That somehow doing that gave them—held a mirror up to their practice and let them see it in a different way and if that might have influenced them and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't think that. I think that, you know, nothing we do changes the direction of a good artist. A good artist knows where they're going and they keep going there, making changes as they go along. They don't need us; we need them. I think what those exhibitions and catalogues did for those artists is show them that somebody respected them and thought that their work was worthy of that serious attention and that kind of a commitment, and no one had ever done that before in the Bay Area. They had never had that before.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it was validation.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Total validation and respect. And, you know, that's really a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's more important than food some days.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: More important than food. It's really major. And I don't think anyone out there in the world really understands that, that, you know, all artists are insecure like bawling babies, you know? And there you have a statement that you believe in them enough to put your money and your time and your space into this project. And it's really something. It's really important.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were any of the shows that you organized met with disapproval from the community or the university?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: All kinds of them. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: All kinds of them. Sure, I mean, I think, you know, anything that is not conservative and traditional is probably looked askance at. But probably the most difficult for people to swallow was the Terry Fox exhibition. And I understand that. You know, Terry Fox is cutting edge. And kinds of performance space that he creates are not easy to take. My favorite museum story—actually my very favorite museum story is during the Terry Fox show at Berkeley. I came out one day and overheard that—there's a booth where people arrive and there's volunteer students, mostly from the art department, who sat at the desk.

And I heard this young woman say to the visitor—the visitor asked what was on view and she said, "Oh, it's a show by this Terry Fox, but you will hate it. It's really an awful show." [Laughs.] I completely cracked up. I just thought, oh this is wonderful. The person at our desk—we had so few visitors that you could count them on one hand in the course of day, right. And the bottom line is that we're telling them not to go in because this is an awful show. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That could actually work in their favor because if you have—I mean, it's—I guess it all depends upon who's saying it's bad.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's true. But it was very funny. I mean, bless her heart, the girl was not fired. But, I mean, I went up and talked to her and explained why she shouldn't be saying that. But it was really, really—it is my favorite museum story. I thought, you know, this is good. You're doing a show that is so outrageous that even your own staff can't tolerate it and is turning people away. So that happens.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Will—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: People loved the Wiley show, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Old master of the Bay Area from most people's—I mean, people who were coming to the museum.

I want to add before I forget it that the museum was also inclusive of the Pacific Film Archive. So we had—the first film archive program in the Bay Area was in that museum. And it was really, really important because we did a lot of artists who were also filmmakers—I mean, I and Michael Snow—did a Michael Snow project. Filmmakers, traditional and otherwise, from old movies to the most current movies, were being done in that theater.

And it drew a lot of audience—certainly a lot of students. A lot of people came to the movie section even when they didn't come to the museum section. So—but it was really an important part of our overall picture because there were a lot of artists who were working in multimedia at that time, and we were able to get right into that—hook right into that notion—including a lot of Bay Area filmmakers who had their first major shows there or music. I mean, I was the first—we brought Steve Reich out to the theater to perform. So that's an important element of it too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it became a venue for all the arts except perhaps the theater.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. Absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that you had music; you had film. I think there's a lot work being done—a lot more people talking about film in relationship to museum art. Of course, the MoMA has had—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, today, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, today.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Again, this goes back to the '60s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: '60s.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But MoMA had an archive early on.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, for sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think one of the first, I guess.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: For sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then—so was that the first in California? Was there nothing in Los Angeles?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know that. I can't say that but I wouldn't be surprised—attached to a museum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Attached to a museum.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know. I really don't know. I don't know that history. But we had—Sheldon Renan and Tom Luddy were both running that film archive and it was very, very influential.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where were they collecting material?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They weren't collecting. We never collected film.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, you never—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, no. We were showing. We were presenting. We were a film presenter, not a collector.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not an archive. Not an archive.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No. It was called an archive. It was called the Pacific Film Archive but it was never an archive per se.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see. It was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And that would have been a tough thing because we would have had to set up an entirely different kind of storage facility.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay. So it was a cinema tech, as it were.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yeah. That's more like it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, sort of a Kunsthalle for movies.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—and was the response—I guess it must have been very positive?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Totally positive. And of course Pauline Kael was a Berkeley woman. So, you know, one of the great film reviewers sat in our midst. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was she a student at that time?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, no. She wasn't. She was already—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She would have been—yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: She was probably in her 50s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Out of there, yes—at that time.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Probably. I don't know when—I don't know when she was born.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have no idea how old—is she among us still?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

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JAMES MCELHINNEY: [In progress]—things because you could at least share with a preparer or an installer, a photographer, a crate builder, a—whatever—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: This is true.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that a knowledgeable—you were not just simply sort of ordaining these tasks from the

big house and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I never take anyone's skills for granted.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No. You knew what—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But I'm tough. I'm a tough boss. I'm demanding, so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You knew what they had to do and you knew how to do what they had to do, and so that gave—that made it easier for them to work for you, I'm sure.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think it made it more pleasant. I don't know about easier, but certainly more pleasant.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They'd like to—everyone wants to [be respected], don't they?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was—it would have been a good thing for morale, I'd say, so—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. We were—we were a happy staff. I think we really were. We're very happy to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that's important, don't you think?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, yes. It's unbelievably important, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, the idea the organization that eschews bureaucracy and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Definitely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were wooed away from Berkeley.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what convinced you to come to Baltimore?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Tom convinced me to come to Baltimore. And, you know, he basically said, "You know, Baltimore, this museum has no meaningful track record with contemporary art and it's time that it had it, and we need you to come and do a contemporary art program." And that sounded really good to me to come and do that. So, in the end, I did.

It was very hard to leave Berkeley, very hard to leave the Bay Area—very hard to leave the Bay Area.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: One—I can imagine. It's a gorgeous place.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's a great place to live.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course, crab cakes are not as plentiful, but there is much else.

Before we leave the Bay Area entirely, when you first went to work at the Berkeley museum, what were the other venues in the Bay Area? There was the de Young; there was the Legion of Honor—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The Achenbach—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the Achenbach—

BRENDA RICHARDSON:—Foundation for Graphic Arts, which is very important.

Most important, of course, was the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—big established museum of, you know, historical modernism to the present, and the only place in the Bay Area that had an incipient support group for contemporary art. It was called SECA, the something for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art].

And they were a small—as in maybe five to 10 people—quote, "collectors group" that did tours and things. This was a very early manifestation of what would, 20 years later, blossom into what we know today as, you know, collectors groups. But they were important because they would, once a year, through their dues monies, purchase one work of art by a Bay Area artist, and we're talking about, you know, a \$800 purchase or a \$1,500 purchase.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To donate to a museum—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: To—no, for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: For the San Francisco—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it was a kind of a "friends" organization—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Correct.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or predecessor to these collector circles in the various museums.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly. Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it was S-E-C-A?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Still exists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And there's still—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I would suspect their budget is substantially larger—[laughs]—than it used to be. But that annual purchase was, you know, much anticipated by the local [artists], and everyone was very proud when it was their work that was put into the museum, understandably.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were there any local artists in San Francisco or in the East Bay or anywhere in the Bay Area whose career you directly affected in a very important way?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't think that's possible. I don't think that's possible. I mean, I think that, you know, larger issues are at play here. I mean, if any artist would fit that general description, I suppose it would be Terry Fox, because Terry Fox—I mean, as far as I know, the catalogue that I did in '74 or whenever it was is probably the—there are a handful of others from Europe because he relocated to Germany, but I think it's probably the only one in English. And, you know, he had shows with Ronald Feldman in New York City. He's no longer alive, sadly, but a major figure, historically speaking—not a common name.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right. I interviewed Ron a couple of years ago. He's a wonderful guy.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yes, he is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Really nice man.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

I—Wiley would credit the retrospect of the '72 show that I did for advancing him; I mean, it went to the Art Institute of Chicago. This was no small thing. It was a fairly substantial project.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, it was—it was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And he would certainly credit that for expanding the base of knowledge of his work.

But I don't think of it that way. I mean, Wiley was already such a major figure in the Bay Area. It didn't take much in the way of brainpower to do a Wiley retrospective.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it gave—it certainly gave him a national audience.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, in a way he had never had before.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because the Art Institute is also the first venue where Kiefer was exhibited in this country, too. So it's a sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Great museum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —great museum, a great launching point for all sorts of discussions.

So how did you find Baltimore when you first arrived? It must have been hard, as you said, to leave the Bay Area after—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It was shocking. I can't even begin to describe. I am not lying or exaggerating when I say that I would cry every day. And sometimes, I would leave my office and go upstairs to the Cone wing and sit in the Matisse gallery, and just sit there and weep and try to make myself feel better that I was in the midst of these Matisses because there was—maybe it was the only redeeming feature of Baltimore.

I was shocked. I was completely shocked. It was a ghettoized city—Jew-gentile, black-white, total separation. I was dumbfounded. I mean, it was a city in awful decline.

I loved Tom. And, you know, the museum needed a lot.

It was tough. It was really tough. I missed Berkeley desperately. And I missed the politics of Berkeley—by which I don't mean politics literally, but the aura that exists in a place like that as opposed to the aura that exists in a place like Baltimore was. It was horrifying. And I thought I'd made a terrible, terrible mistake. It was really tough.

And I adapted slowly but surely, but it wasn't easy. It was really not easy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what were the venues in place at that time? The Walters, the Baltimore Museum of Art—were there any museums exhibiting art by living artists?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Baltimore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Art museum. But—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: BMA—[inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. But was that program—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, they had done contemporary art for decades.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. But what was that program like when you were hired? I would assume that you were—you were recruited to sort of liven it up, straighten it up, try to put it on—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, I was recruited to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A better footing, in some way.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —introduce contemporary art to Baltimore. That's what my mission was, specifically. And that's what I set out to do.

The first show I did was called *Fourteen Artists* and they were 14 contemporary artists that I had a very powerful conviction about. And it was, you know, a revelation, because nothing like that had been seen in Baltimore. So Barry Le Va, Richard Tuttle, Dorothea Rockburne, Mel Bochner, you know, Sol LeWitt—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Marden—Sol LeWitt, yes—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Brice Marden—it was pretty shocking to people. And it didn't get very good reviews, needless to say. That's all right. I didn't—wasn't fazed by that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So were the majority of the contemporary artists exhibited by the Baltimore Museum of Art at that point in time, in the mid-'70s, people like the sort of—you know, the Maryland Institute crowd—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —a Hartigan posse—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Hartigan—that would be shown in the Baltimore Museum and—had several shows at the museum, but not the students.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Nor her colleagues at the institute?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: She didn't have any colleagues when I came here in '75. She was the faculty, so to speak.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Hoffberger—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Eventually, there were—eventually, there were others, but—I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, it was a sort of regional painting scene that was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In Baltimore?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, like a minor—like landscape painters, people like—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Eugene Leake?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Bud Leake, Raoul Middleman—these guys.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's the—you're talking—you're talking Maryland Institute again, or its faculty.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. That's what I meant. Yes. That's all—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's all—you know, there were no galleries. You know, MICA did show these artists in their own gallery, but—I mean, Raoul did one show at the Baltimore Museum; Bud Leake showed at the Baltimore Museum; Grace Hartigan showed at the Baltimore Museum; the people you're naming—but you're not talking about a program of contemporary art—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —beyond the Maryland Institute. That was it, you know. So they didn't know that there was a universe of minimalism that had exploded—[laughs]—on the scene.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. But there were no, like—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But they also didn't know that there was a universe of realist painters. You know, I set out to do—I have a gallery—the perfect gallery—perfect gallery created to show—one—to do one show after another of contemporary art. And each one was a different approach, so that introducing contemporary art to Baltimore, I took very literally. So the first show I did, *Fourteen Artists*, were the artists I most believed in personally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But then I also did a show of superrealism. I hate superrealism. I completely hate superrealism—which isn't to say that superrealism doesn't count among its numbers some very, very high-quality painters. It's just not my thing.

I did the show anyway. I did a show of Don Judd and Joe Zucker and Chuck Close. I did one show after another in this space. Did Andy Warhol in that gallery—a mini-retrospective—just to continue a stream of, this is the range of contemporary art. This is the range you have to choose from if you want to look at contemporary art today.

And I—they were quite successful. I mean, it did absolutely grow the audience for modern art at the Baltimore Museum of Art. And it was because it wasn't exclusively regional.

Regional artists were included—I mean, if you count Anne Truitt as a regional artist. We had three different shows of Anne Truitt in my history. Hartigan—I did a show of Hartigan, of course, of collages, right away.

So you cover the territory, but you don't just do exclusively Baltimore. And we—and we never did. To the present day, while there's been a reversal, I mean, they're now headed back to do more regional exclusively, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is that because the regional scene has evolved in a more interesting way? Or just to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's grown larger. I wouldn't say—because, in my opinion, I don't think it's evolved, but the new director believes in regionalism, so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And as, I would presume, a number of collectors and other patrons who are interested in that as well.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know about that. I can't—I really don't.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—

Well, when you came to Baltimore in 1975, what other venues were there other than the Baltimore Museum and the galleries at MICA?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The Walters Art Gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the Walters—I mean, for contemporary art.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The Walters didn't do contemporary art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, not at all.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There wasn't any. There was Baltimore Museum and there was MICA. For contemporary art, that's it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there weren't places like School 33 or alternative spaces that sprouted up in the '80s—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No. No. The contemporary art museum opened within the last—what—10 or 15 years at the most.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. Right. Right. Right. Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, there wasn't—there was nothing else.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what kind of support—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And I'm not sure—I'm not sure when Constantine Grimaldis—Constantine Grimaldis Gallery is the—was, when I came here, the only art gallery that I know of in Baltimore. And he showed Hartigan and he showed people like—and he showed Bud Leake and Middleman, and then he showed Elaine de Kooning. So you get the drift. I mean, that was his thing, basically.

And he's still in business. It's amazing that he's managed to survive in Baltimore all these years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Still down on Charles Street in the same place?

Well, that's durability for you.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. Yes. Definitely. I mean, I think that's a real contribution. In fact, my friend John Waters is—started making visual art, and he was going to do a show in Baltimore. And he's a big attraction, of course, so by then, he could have named—there were maybe three galleries that he could have shown wherever he wanted to.

And he asked me, you know, "Where should I show?" And I said, "Are you crazy? You should show at Grimaldis because you have to make a statement about this guy. He's been here since the '60s. I mean, he's hung on. So that's where you go." And he did. And it was a big success.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course. Well, he's the man who put Baltimore on the map in many ways, in many ways.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's true. That's true.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—makes me wonder if, once you got through with all of the weeping and homesickness for the Bay Area, if you didn't begin to discover some backbeats that connected both places, sort of funky seaports with sort of alternative lifestyle hipsters running—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You can keep trying, but there's nothing that connects Berkeley with Baltimore. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I'm not thinking so much Berkeley as perhaps the Yerba Buena and, like, what it became across the water, but—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't think so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But of course I adapted. Of course. I mean, one adapts—one has to. But it was not an easy adaptation. It was months, not weeks, I would say.

And gradually, things evolved. I did meet John Waters fairly early in my time in Baltimore. And we became very good friends and are today still very close. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what year would that have been?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I met him—well, I came to Baltimore in January '75. I'm certain I met him—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, so you immediately met him.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'd say, within the first six months, if not the first six weeks, but certainly the first six months.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Between *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* or—no, that would have been later.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think after. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: *Female Trouble* was '80.

I remember going to a screening of that on a—as a VHS on a television at the home of a painter named Joe Hilton [ph].

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's a familiar name.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Should be. He's a Baltimore artist.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He is one of the—sort of, you know, the "bad art" people. And he was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. I met him once. But I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. As I—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think he's dead now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, as I recall, he was married with kids and gay and had a big *Playboy* collection—had all the issues, including the annuals and the anthologies.

And a colleague of mine, a former friend from Yale, John Hull, who had ran—who had been running the School 33 Art Center in the '80s down on South Light Street was friends with Hilton [ph]. And so he and his wife, John and Shelley, who I was staying with that weekend, brought me over to Joe Hilton [ph] and we watched a mint, brand-new, pre-premiere edition of *Female Trouble*, of course, which is a classic.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes it is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And he knew already of all of the punchlines and would—before Dawn Davenport was able to say, "I better get them cha-cha heels," he said it and fell on the floor laughing, and it was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There are a lot of people like that

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it was a formstone paradise we were watching this in. So it was an interesting—it was my introduction to someone's Baltimore.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, no, that's a good introduction to Baltimore. John is—John is Baltimore for sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: He's beloved.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it is the hairdo capital of the world, and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And I'm lucky to have gotten to know him right away. And I did his first retrospective—actually, of his films—I did at the Baltimore Museum. So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And was that in the '80s? '90s?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, god. '80s, I guess, but I'd have to look it up on my CV. I'm—I think I forewarned you, I'm terrible with dates, so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, there was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And also with words together for me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —a moment when John Waters became recognized as something more than just sort of an

art house movie maker, that he sort of came—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, certainly for the last 15 years, certainly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Certainly—maybe 20 years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But then, all of a sudden, there was a revival of—like, in New York, they had—at the Quad, they had a Russ Meyer festival and sort of old Russ Meyer movies were shown with a lot of commentary and panel discussions and so forth and so on. And it was an interesting moment, sort of high and low—high art, low art, you know, or top drawer, lowbrow, like, however you want to put it.

But I'm just seeing a bit of a connection between, you know, the film archive of which you spoke in Berkeley, and sort of this art and film nexus here. And would you like to talk about that a little bit? You're interested in film?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, because I don't—I'm interested in film, yes, but only like anyone's interested in film, I think.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But as art? As art?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, I consider film art, absolutely, yes.

We had an active film program here in Baltimore after I came, and that was an important thing that we did because films—good films, any kind of films—were not easy to see in Baltimore—I mean, really not easy to see. [Laughs.] So the film program made a major contribution. We had someone from Hopkins whose name I—actually, it was Mark Hawkins [ph]—guest-curated it for us because he was a film specialist. And it was very successful. And that one of the things that I suggested to Tom when I came here that we should be doing now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, did you get support from people like—well, obviously, John Waters, but people like Barry Levinson and other, you know, Baltimore—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Barry Levinson is from Baltimore, but he doesn't live here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Huh?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: He doesn't live here. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, but might he be—might he be helpful in some way—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't think so, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —with trying to promote the film culture in Baltimore? He uses it as a location, or did with —

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, of course he does. No, I've never met Barry Levinson and I don't think that we ever approached him for support of any kind.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—

If we could just pause a moment—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I just want to make—I'm becoming a little bit nervous about the—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's been not quite two hours.

UNKNOWN SPEAKER: Is it working?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. I think—

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JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're resuming the interview with Brenda Richardson at her home in Baltimore on July 29, 2011. This is James McElhinney. Hello again.

When you came to Baltimore, what tasks awaited you? You would walk into work, you'd go to work, and what did you behold as your future for the next few years—challenges, opportunities? What was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, you know, the assignment was crystal clear: introduce Baltimore to contemporary art. So as I mentioned, I immediately suggested to Tom that—we have this one particular gallery called the [Saidie A.] May Gallery—because it was the right size to do these sort of minishows. And it was 30 feet long by 15 feet wide. It was just ideal. And it was set up as a[n] education center at that point. And it was just rehabbed as a plain white cube, as they say, a box, so that we could do a series of quick exhibitions in there. And that's what I did, and one after another.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was the duration of each exhibition?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Eight weeks, I suppose—the usual.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was there an accompanying catalogue or—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Often a checklist. Almost never a catalogue because given the time frame—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or a brochure or anything like that?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Usually a checklist brochure, yes—[inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So with illustrations, or perhaps some explanatory text?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The first of those exhibitions was the *Fourteen Artists* I mentioned. And that wasn't in that space because I hadn't rehabbed yet. So that was a bigger space up front. And it was a spectacular show, and there was an exhibition brochure for it, again with a—primarily a checklist and a statement—introduction. And then—I see from this CV in front of me—[laughs]—because otherwise I wouldn't remember—after that Andy Warhol. And it was a mini retrospective, paintings from '62 to '75. And that had a brochure. And then came Joe Zucker and Chuck Close; after that Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. Then I did a big exhibition, Mel Bochner, *Number and Shape*, which was that artist's first retrospective, focused on number and shape in particular in his work. And that had a full catalogue. After that came Frank Stella with the black paintings. That had a full catalogue.

And then from there we were off to the races. [Laughs.] I did Barnett Newman, *The Complete Drawings*, after that; Hartigan; Rauschenberg; Mondrian; another Hartigan; Bruce Nauman neons with a big exhibition catalogue; Gilbert and George; Schlemmer; John Waters film retrospective; Scott Burton; Anne Truitt; Brice Marden prints; group show with Nayland Blake, General Idea, Ronald Jones, Cindy Sherman; a May Wilson show; a modernist American show; and then I worked on the art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was a big—huge exhibition that we did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A few of those exhibitions like Mondrian, Schlemmer—these are historical modernists.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I can see just from the objects in this room that you—that you have an interest also in the decorative arts and saw also from the bio that you did some work on art deco and—[inaudible] gallery.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Inaudible], Mm-hm.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, and so there's a kind of, like, a bifurcation of interests here. And I mean, I'm kind of curious. The—obviously, the contemporary artists must have been fairly easy to work with. You could contact them or their dealers and obtain the work.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They're not easy to work with. They're easy to contact.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, the dead are easy to work with.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The dead are much easier to work with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But hard to get your hands on their work at times, right? Or no?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not usually. Not if you're the Baltimore Museum and you have the Cone collection.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there you go. So—which travels a lot, I—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It travels a lot more now than it did in my era.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And I'll have to remember to ask you about that a little bit later on. But I guess with Mondrian you would have gone to somebody like the Janis Gallery for those, or—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, we did—that was a collaboration. We did The Hague's Gemeentemuseum and Robert [ph]—in The Hague and the Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, and Baltimore. The three of us together did Mondrian's show. And it was really wonderful, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, it was a major exhibition.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Major exhibition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, I believe I saw that exhibition.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, it was terrific.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then, you know, the V&A Museum, which of course—South Kensington Museum goes to, you know, this whole other approach to art, which is this—which is, again, sort of the high-low thing and sort of exposing the public to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: V&A is really high to really low.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Really high, really low, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They go really high or really low. It's really an amazing collection, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But how did that connect to your thinking about contemporary art?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm interested in all art. I'm not just interested in contemporary art. In fact, I say about myself, and other people have commented, that I'm curious about almost everything. I mean, there's nothing that doesn't interest me—[inaudible]—on some level.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Except hairdos.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm interested in hairdos too. Why did you think except hairdos?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, of course, this is Baltimore. I'm just—I'm just kidding. I'm being provocative. [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Ah, I see. Hairdos I'm interested in because of John Waters.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I thought so.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And also in the—in the V&A exhibition—I'm interested in my own hairdo, of course, which is—I'm famous for my own hairdo. But—or infamous, one of the two.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I also had a funny exposure to hairdos in the V&A show. There was an artist whose name now escapes me, an artist who had done a pattern of hairdos, which was just spectacular. It was so beautiful. So we had it featured in an exhibition. It was really fun—hundreds of objects. But you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You imagine these Ancien Regime ladies with their big wigs that would put Dolly Parton to shame with bird's nests and, you know, other things.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Unthinkable to me personally, but you know, I've had this hairdo for a long time. [They laugh.] Anyway—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No bird's nests in it, though, no.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. So you know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But how do you—how do you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You don't have to blend these things. They're all art. I mean, that's all there is to it. It's art, and I like—I mean, I have an interest in art. And anything that's not just good art but great art is going to get me going. One of the joys of coming to Baltimore, as opposed to the negatives that started out, was that I

was absolutely dazzled to be in an encyclopedic museum because here I could learn about Asian art, decorative arts, everything from colleagues who specialized in that. And that was really one of the great joys of my life.

And much more than that—I mean, when I worked on Brice Marden and all of the Asian components of that work that I was writing about, my colleague curator of Asian art was right there beside me, you know, providing me with information, loaning me books. You know, it was just great. And of course in Berkeley, that wasn't an option. We had a handful of historical material, of course, but it was just happenstance. I mean, there weren't decades and decades of collecting history there. So working in an encyclopedic museum—it's like becoming a student all over again. It's just great.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did that influence you in your capacity as the curator of modern and contemporary art?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I just think that you see more broadly. I mean, you don't—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You begin looking for the connections between art?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There don't even have to be connections. But there may be. But there don't have to be connections. It's just about having your eyes and your brain expanded in a way. You're not—it's not a narrow focus. So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the hand and the brain are links enough, like, the—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. I mean, yes, I collect decorative arts myself. I mean, I always have. And they're really important to my life. Just—I mean, those forms are as interesting to me as the forms in the paintings. They're the same forms. [Laughs.] I mean, they're the same forms we're looking at here. If it's minimal enough, it's going to get my attention, that's for sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, a bit later on I'd love to discuss sort of your own aesthetic ideas and—but just sort of to try to catch up to the conversation where it is now—and there are a few questions about your work back in California. When you were working on your M.A., what was your thesis subject?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Paul Klee.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Paul Klee. And that—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Mm-hm. With Herschel.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: With Herschel. Had you picked it yourself?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there was—you had hinted that that sort of—Hundertwasser was not of enormous interest to you personally.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But Paul Klee was.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I didn't find Hundertwasser a challenge. I mean, I thought it was essentially—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Whoops. [Mic noise.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's all right.

So I was saying I didn't find Hundertwasser's work to be much of a challenge. I thought it was eccentric and outsider in a way, which isn't art that's ever particularly interested me when it's sort of that for its own sake. And I wasn't very respectful of the personality. I mean, I was to his face. I wasn't rude. [Laughs.] But I didn't—I didn't have, frankly, a lot of respect for him as an individual. And that maybe shouldn't count, but honestly, it does. I mean, if you're working on an artist, you really want to be with someone that you can admire for human qualities.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As a person, not only for their artistic achievement, yeah.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: As a person, not just for art, preferably. If the two come together, you're a lot better off. [Laughs.] So I mean, all things being equal, I was doing my job. I was a support staff in a critical way and had to do a lot of writing, initially for Herschel's signature, as it turned out. I mean, that was what was the routine that

was in place at the time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what attracted you to Klee?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It was about Klee's theories relating to biomorphism and other aspects that interested me. And so it was more a conceptual approach to Klee's work—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was not—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —though I certainly love the work itself. But it was a conceptual approach. I haven't looked at that thesis in a really long time, and I suspect I wouldn't be very proud of it. But maybe—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But sort of his—an interest in his process?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not process so much. Process doesn't ever interest me terribly much, and I'm not very good at technical process. But—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I didn't mean that. I meant, like, his—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: How he thinks?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —numbering each piece in the sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Doesn't interest me—that specifically.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —sketchbook-like aesthetic and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's how an artist thinks that I want to get to the heart of. So that was what I was interested in with Klee. Now, with an artist who's no longer alive, there's a limit to how much—how close you can get to the way they think.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, he's not going to contradict you or say, well, last week I just did something that blows that all out of the water; that no longer makes it, like—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.] That's true. That's a plus. Right, that's a definite plus.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —like Hokusai, when he said at the age of 72, everything changed, and everything up to that point was of no value; forget about it now moving forward. But—so that would be—that would be an annoyance to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I should have done my work on Hokusai.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He's really dead. He's not going to come back here.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: He's really good, though—really, really good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, really, really, really good. Well, interesting that, you know, the book on his sketchbooks was written by James Michener.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it's actually a nice piece of work.

So you did your M.A. on Paul Klee, and that must have had some kind of vague similarity or connection with the Hundertwasser in a way, just in the most—in the most superficial way, a sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I expect you're right, though I have to confess I don't remember that I ever thought that or made that connection. I may have, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. No, I think that there's much more to Klee, obviously. He's much more a thinking—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. By the way, I should add that I actually find Hundertwasser's work more interesting today than I ever did then. I mean, then I really thought it was pretty much just decorative commercial. And I'm not sure that it wasn't. I'm not saying that I was wrong then. I may have been, but I'm not sure. But today when I look at it, I think, well, there's something going on here that maybe I missed then.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you feel about, you know, the resurrection of artists like Egon Schiele and Gustav—and Klimt?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Shiele's a great artist. Great artists, both. And of course, you know, Hundertwasser is their grandchild, so to speak. But I just saw—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not their equal, perhaps. Not vaguely.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not their equal. Not even close. Hundertwasser couldn't draw. And that's a fundamental failing for any artist, as far as I'm concerned.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting, because I—a few years ago I interviewed Ray Allen at MICA for an article I wrote. And it was talking about the impact of drawing on the digital arts and that a lot of art schools and colleges mistook computer for the death of drawing, and that actually, MICA, being strong in that, was able to continue to place its students in jobs. But—the importance of knowing how to see and how to think. So what attracted you to Klee was his visual thinking.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And would you say that that's what attracts you to any artist?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: How they think, for sure, is important to me. If I'm not drawn to their work visually, I probably won't get so far as to consider how they think. But if the combination is there, yes, that's certainly important to me. I mean, I don't think that I've ever worked in any depth with any artist who was really dumb. Let me put it that way. I mean, they're—artists I've been close to are important thinkers in their own right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But all of this suggests to me that you're not—you're a person who's not really polemical in any way at it. And you were working at a time when there were a lot of people who were, who were sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I'm really not polemical, and I'm not intellectual. I'm seriously not. I'm biographical. I really like to write biography, and I like to tell stories. And when I approach an artist's work, it's like storytelling for me. And that may not even be right from their perspective, although it's always turned out to be right in the end. [Laughs.] I mean, the artists I've worked with have been pleased with the result. I don't—I can't think offhand of an artist who wasn't. But that's honestly the approach that I take. I mean, you have to know the artist, and you have to know who they are on some really important level before you can know what their art is. And that's where I go. That's the territory I carve out.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So then with a person like Chuck Close, what's interesting is that these are all his buddies and friends, and it's not all of the theory and spin that was attached to his work and process and so forth.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or was it just the visual thing, too?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, I mean, it has to be visually strong. I mean, the work has to hold up, or you shouldn't be working on this artist. I mean, so what Chuck Close did was significant on many levels. But he wouldn't have done what he did if he wasn't who he was. That's what it always comes back to for me. And the artists that I've worked closely with—eventually you find in that person, in their brain, in their spirit, what it was that made the work happen the way it did. And that's where I head.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you take up your position here—Baltimore Museum of Art—and you soak a lot of hankies. [They laugh].

BRENDA RICHARDSON: For a while.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—homesickness for the Bay Area.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Mm-hm—[affirmative]. Homesickness, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you decide that you're going to put together these exhibitions that are going to present every possible aspect of contemporary art.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, not every, but several.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A reasonable sample, right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: A reasonable range, right, including the ones that I personally, as a curator, am not a hundred percent committed to, as in superrealism, because it was such an important component of what was going on in 1975. But I thought, okay, we'd better show this because this is going on, plus people love it. So you have to show something that they're really going to love. You build up, you know, some tolerance here for what

you're bringing to Baltimore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the image is very accessible to people, and so it's a way to get them to respond and maybe—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, right. Well, make no mistake: It was also a major aspect of art-making in 1975. In the '70s it was—it was big, and it was big in the galleries in New York. It wasn't just a—I mean, there were great—I mean, Robert Bechtle and Richard McLean were out there in Berkeley. I mean, I knew their work, obviously, and they were in my show, but so were Cunningham and all of these others who were working in New York at the time. I mean, this was big business.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Estes, John De Andrea.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, Estes above all. Yes. They were all in the show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hanson, all these people.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Mm-hm—[affirmative]—all in the show. And it was a big hit. I mean, the public loves it. They love it. I don't—I don't have a problem with that. I didn't buy the work for the collection.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not your taste.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not my taste. But that's all right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—but you were able to shape the taste of the collection, though, while you were the curator?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And how did that work?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think it's really important from—my philosophy was that you can do a lot of exhibitions, and you should do a lot of exhibitions, and you should do exhibitions of work that maybe you're not personally invested in as an individual. But as a curator, you have an obligation to show—if you're supposed to introduce contemporary art, you don't just introduce contemporary art you love. You introduce contemporary art, what's happening. That doesn't mean you buy it for the permanent collection if you have limited funds. If you had unlimited funds, then you buy something of everything because—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, one of these, one of those.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Absolutely. And I wish that had been the case because I think that for Baltimore's posterity, I wish they could have something of everything. As it was, we had really limited acquisition funds, so we set out a policy, which lasted through two directors, which was focus on American, focus on post-pop art—you can't afford pop art; you can't even come close to getting that. Abstract expressionism was pretty good, so you go for this aspect, this one controlled aspect of American art, basically minimalism, and build it, and build it to strength. The price you're paying, which is heartbreaking, is that the permanent collection won't have, for history, all of these other elements. But you can only do so much.

So we had a very specific acquisition policy. At the same time, we're doing as much range as possible in terms of our exhibitions. And of course, gifts come that add to the collection that you haven't purchased, so your purchase money can go a little further.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you would be—you would be—you would have been open to accepting gifts perhaps outside of your taste that would—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Absolutely. Oh, of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that would—that would offer some context around the core aesthetic of the minimalism?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Absolutely. If it's quality art, it doesn't matter where—what—whose taste it is. Quality art will come into the collection by gift happily from any source, for sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did the acquisitions occur? Was there a committee? Was there—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, acquisitions committee. And if the director and I both agreed on it, it was presented to the acquisitions committee. And at least in my history, I never had a[n] acquisition turned down by the committee. It often took education and presentation, serious presentation. But that's half the fun. You know,

that's half your job is making people see what you see.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So was there also a friends organization like SECA that came up with annual sums to acquire art?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. No. Friends of Modern Art was there as an educational outreach effort, and the Friends of Modern Art had a handful of people in it that we could also get to collect things, which is important because you're seeding the community's collections for future gifts to the—to the museum. I mean, that's the purpose of the curators being paid to convince people to buy certain things, to educate them to buy certain things for their own collections because if you only have limited money, you'd better seed the community with things that come forward.

Now, a lot of that was in prints and drawings. One of the things we did was introduce a contemporary print fair once a year and had major dealers come with prints. And we would spend—we being myself and the two curators of the prints and drawings—spend the entire weekend on the floor talking to people about what they should buy. And we always would persuade them—try to persuade them to buy things that the museum did not already have. In other words, if you have late Marden yourself, get them to get an early Marden that you hope will come to the museum someday. The tragedy, of course, is that probably 90 percent of that never ends up coming to the museum. But that's part of the job.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you develop any close relationships with dealers?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Close in—how would you define "close?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In a collegial way—I mean, the people whom you trusted and whom—who were—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't trust any dealer—[laughs]—period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: May I quote you?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: End of—you may. Dealers are there to make money, and therefore whatever dealers have to say is going to be colored by that motivation. So I respect a number of dealers very much. Do I trust them? No. [Laughs.] I mean, a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were any of them useful to you? Were any of them generous in their—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Very much so. Totally, very much so. I have really, really good relationships with a lot of dealers, but really good professional relationships, which is to say they give me enormous support when I'm working on an artist that's represented by their gallery. And that's what you want. I mean, the best dealers, and there are any number of them, have unbelievable archives. They put their staff at your disposal. I love working for galleries now that I'm a freelancer. I mean, that's my dream come true. They're fabulous employers. They pay well. They're totally supportive of everything I write. You know, what's not to like here? [They laugh.] But do I trust dealers? No, of course not.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do they trust each other? Probably not.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, of course they don't. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, there's a kind of understanding—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They're often in business together secretly but don't trust each other.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, you mean—you mean the syndicates, the sort of shares—ownership in shares and so forth? There's a lot of that.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The point is, is that when collectors in this community would say I want to buy X because dealer Y says it's a really good painting, I said, "Yes, the dealer represents that work. They get a percentage of it. Duh." [They laugh.] You know, of course you don't trust a dealer's opinion. You trust a curator's opinion because they have no vested interest in it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so when you came here in 1975, the museum world was different than it is today?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.] Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Less, perhaps, linked to commerce? Less, perhaps, linked to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You know, commerce wasn't even a factor. Commerce was just not a factor.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the mission that you had when you came here was to bring contemporary art in as many manifestations as you deemed appropriate, and the institution, to the Baltimore community?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. But—yes, and it went way beyond that because it was an educational mission. It wasn't just to put the art up, and you hope people drop in and look at it. I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was to teach.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's to teach. It's giving constant gallery talks. It's reaching out to the community in every way, meeting with the press—you know, the press such as they are—one reviewer when I came, two when I left. It's really, like I said, a tremendous amount of social activity, you know, going to collectors' homes for parties, talking to people, educating them, talking about the galleries as you go to—taking them to New York to look at galleries, to look at art, taking them to—you know, the collectors' groups that you take on trips all the time for private collection tours. It's a lot of that kind of work, which, believe me, I don't know a single curator in the universe who thinks that's fun.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were you a—were a consultant on the movie *Pecker*, where they—where they take the collectors to New York?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: To a degree. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just a very sort of interesting film about their—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: A wonderful film. I love *Pecker*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I love it when they come to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: John calls me his "art maven." But that's—that—now he's more my maven than I was ever his—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —than I was his maven. Now he's my—he knows much more contemporary art than I do now. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I love it when they all come—when the collectors come to Baltimore.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's great, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They say, oh, like, "Look at the formstone. It's just like in the photographs."

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, that's a great scene. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: All of *Pecker* is really entertaining. [They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you spoke earlier about outreach. What were you doing in terms of outreach? What were you doing outside of the walls of the museum, outside of your—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know if I used the word "outreach." I'm not sure I did, but—I'm not sure what outreach means. Like I said, we did constant activities in terms of gallery talks. I mean, you can't do outreach out there unless they're in front of the art. And you know, there are things that happen in Baltimore that maybe wouldn't happen in other cities. It's a very small town. And when we bought Andy Warhol's *Last Supper* for the museum, it was an absolute scandal. I mean, we did set an auction record for Warhol by buying it at that time. And it was really big news. And in Baltimore, it was really big news that was really bad news. People hated Warhol—not misusing the word—hated Warhol.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he's a good Catholic boy.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Hated Warhol—thought he was a major scam artist, thought that this was sacrilegious art, that—and it's also a very religious town.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, and Catholic, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Catholic. This was not good news. This was really not good news. We were besieged with hate mail, phone calls, cancelled memberships. It was really amazing. We had cancelled memberships when I did the first Warhol show in '75, which was way before we bought *The Last Supper*. And we had the giant Mao

painting in there from the Art Institute of Chicago as a centerpiece of the show. We had people cancel the memberships because they thought we were communists. They said this in letters. I mean, it wasn't just one or two. It was a lot.

So you're talking about outreach in a very special way here. I mean, you're talking about an effort that you can make. But mostly, you're not going to make a dent. You know, a community is what a community is. But when this happened with *The Last Supper*, every single phone call we got, we took people's names and addresses. Every letter we got, we wrote—we made lists. And then we sent letters to them, and we asked them to come to the—we invited them to come to the museum on a Sunday afternoon for a talk about Warhol's *Last Supper*. So I was pretty nervous.

But we had a huge turnout. And I don't think there was—this will sound really vain—there was not a single person there that at the end did not come up and say, you've changed my whole attitude about this; this is a fabulous painting; we now understand why you bought it. They were completely supportive; my point being that—that doesn't always work, by the way. I'm not suggesting that it always works.

John Waters's favorite museum story ever of mine is when I said to him, "In all my history—" this is really true—"I can persuade any visitor to any work of art in this entire museum—I really can, because I'm so passionate and I'm relatively informed, so I can do that—until it comes to Cy Twombly." I have never changed anybody's mind about Cy Twombly. They all hate it, and they all think it could have been done by their kid—and they really mean that. And there is no changing them. There is—this is a wall. Cy Twombly is THE wall. And I'm really good—[laughs]—I'm really good at this presentation to the general public, because I'm one of them. I mean, I come from that background. John was hysterical. I mean, he's quoted this so often just in his books and everything, because it's—and it's true. Cy Twombly is the stopping point. But Warhol was an easy sell—a really easy sell—and it changed everything, you know. The same thing happened with Bruce Nauman's neon. When we got the neon, people went completely berserk. And you just have to talk to them about it, explain where it comes from. So that's what—that's what we specialized in, is trying to talk to everybody that would listen.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So during the years when you were at the—at the Baltimore museum, did you build larger—a larger audience? Was it a measurable—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Definitely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you saw an increase in membership?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Definitely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: An increase in visitation?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Definitely. But that wasn't because of the shows I was doing. Modern—you know, this is a—this is a myth. People think that contemporary art, because it's in the news, attracts audience. The smallest numbers in the universe are for—of museums—are for contemporary art. The numbers that we got, the increase that we saw, was because both Tom and later Arnold Lehman—both of whom are really shrewd, smart, sensitive directors—both took a balanced approach to programming: You do a little of this; you do a little of that; you do a little bit of—you know, a show of Deco jukeboxes; you do a show of carousel horses here; you do—you know, you intermix a whole range of exhibitions, and over the course of the year, you're going to build your attendance. And in fact, that's what happened to us.

And that's—that was the approach to the museum's activities from the time I arrived until, essentially, the time I left. And I believe in that. I don't have a problem with popular shows, as long as that's not the complete picture of your exhibition program. You don't buy it for the permanent collection, but that's all right. So that was how that happened after all those years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, so with these exhibitions, you were able—unable to accompany them all with catalogues.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right. And that wasn't the purpose.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Initially, it was really not about documentation or the artists, per se—although, I mean, that was the—Joe Zucker had had a show in the museum, so it—and they had a checklist, which is important because it exists for all time, that this occurred. But that's beside the point. It wasn't about doing monographs here; it was about getting art before the public and making sure that they saw it and had a little something to carry away.

The artists all completely embraced this notion. I mean, Don Judd's first wood boxes were in this show that I did, and it was really an important exhibition for him. No catalogue—checklist; no catalogue. But after you finish that scenario of, you know, getting the public engaged, then you get to the more serious stuff. So after a certain point of those turnover shows and when they go, that's when we started doing the monographic shows—the Bochner, the Stella, the Newman and so on, with major catalogues. And that's, of course, what any curator wants to do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What about, you know, the writers? You said when you arrived there was one art critic—or one art columnist.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. The *Baltimore Sun* had a columnist, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And when you left, there were two.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You think. And were there more local writers who were having articles appear in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, or anything like that?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No. There are a couple of Baltimore writers that appear now in the magazines, but not then. *The Washington Post* was the most important review you could get—not that many Baltimoreans read it, but in terms of posterity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it was a national—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: We got really consistently strong coverage from *The Washington Post* for the—for the shows I was doing. And also, *The New York Times* covered some of our shows in those early days, so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—and what kind of a dialogue were you in with your counterparts at other museums at, say, peer cities, places like Philly or outside of New York, who were—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I was connected to colleagues. I mean, I'm—I think—yes. I mean, I don't know how else to say that. I mean, we of course shared exhibitions. At a certain point, we began traveling exhibitions, of course. So we shared exhibitions with museums. I was—I was connected to my colleagues. I mean, anyone in modern art, I was—I mean, I was closer to Marcia Tucker than many others, but I certainly was close to Anne D'Harnoncourt. I mean, these were people that you work with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So, yes. My same generation—we were all connected.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, which would—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Jane Livingston, Barbara Haskell—all of us, we were connected.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Which exhibits that you organized here traveled to, you know, the New Museum or to Philadelphia or to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, they wouldn't go to—my shows wouldn't go to Philadelphia. That wouldn't make any sense—one hour away.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, too close.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's too close. And even New York isn't really necessary. You know, the shows that I did in the early years—the Barnett Newman, the Frank Stella black paintings, the Bruce Nauman neons—all were really unbelievably important historically. And I would say, without any fear of being incorrect, that way more New Yorkers and Europeans saw all of those shows than Baltimoreans. Those shows were visited—I can—to this day, I can be in Europe or in New York, and someone will come up to me and say, "Oh, my God, I'll never forget that Frank Stella show," or, "Oh, my God, I'll never forget that Bruce Nauman show." People came to see these shows. And it became very clear to us at a certain point that we didn't have to travel a show to get audience for it—to get the right audience for it. And by that, I mean the right audience, critically speaking, would come for these shows. It's a train ride from New York.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's so easy. Now, the audience is a whole different question. You know, could we build audience for Barnett Newman drawings? Not likely. [Laughs.] It's not a Baltimore—it's not the kind of show that's

going to have big attendance. But it has a big critical response. And those things are important for building a museum's reputation, which in turn helps you when it comes to organizing shows that you share with other institutions, or vice-versa, if they have a show that you would like to present in your museum. You need those kinds of connections and mutual respect. And that's what I think we developed, really in a serious way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were any of the exhibitions organized here organized in concert with other institutions?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No—[off mic].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you'd organize an exhibition and maybe be able to travel it to Kansas City or something?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, it would have been nice to—we attempted to travel the Nauman show, for example. And it's now a considerable source of pride to say that everybody turned it down. You know, this is—this is—nobody wanted this show and—which is why I make this point about people telling me that they saw the show. Europeans saw it; New Yorkers saw it; people from LA saw it. Not too many Baltimoreans saw it. But that catalogue, it's—you know, it's everywhere.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It has legs, as they say.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It has legs. And the Barnett Newman drawing show actually traveled, and it traveled to Europe. The Gilbert and George traveled; the Schlemmer traveled. But Frank Stella black paintings didn't travel. And it—it's—I mean, if I had to point to one show that was the most influential, it was surely that one.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How so? How did that—how did that manifest, the impact?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.] Well—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was written about by other people, obviously.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's been written about endlessly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: For the decades since it happened. When I—I mean, I don't—I prefer not to talk about art in terms of money, but when we did the black Stella show, which was in 1975, I guess—wait, I have to see; make sure I'm right—Frank Stella—'77. Okay, 1977. The most expensive painting in the show on loan—well, loaned, of course—was \$90,000. It was a fair bit of money in 1977. But within three to five years, a painting—a black painting sold at auction for in excess of a million dollars.

Now, I'm not exactly saying that the show caused that inflation, but it clearly did. And it's not because of the show, per se. It's because people had the opportunity to reassess a body of work—an entire body of work—that they had no exposure to previously. They might have seen one painting here or there, but they had not understood the impact of the body of work.

So that's the kind of thing that, as a curator, that—that's really significant—I mean, that you can sort of rewrite history in a way and focus on a body of work that is profoundly important in ways that no one understood—including the artist. And when I went to—when I met first with Frank Stella to propose the exhibition, he was completely negative. He said, "No." He thought it was a terrible idea for a show: they had not been created as a series or a body to be seen together; they were individual works; and he thought that I should definitely give up on the idea.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he thought it was a terrible idea to have this show.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because it was a—it was a post-facto contrivance and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, it had nothing to do with the way the paintings had been created.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. So—but it's a—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So I said to him, "Well, I'll think about what you said. I respect you, obviously. I don't agree, but I'll think about it." I thought about it on the way back from New York, and thought, "Well, this is ridiculous. I'm doing the show."

So I went ahead and did it. And Frank came down for the opening—which was very nice of him, actually. It meant

a lot. That sort of thing means a lot to a community like this one, if the artist appears. But he came early and—so I could take him in to see the show. And he went into this gallery, which is this 30-foot by 15-foot gallery, and he looked around. And then he started running—sprinting—from one painting to the other. And he said, "Oh, my God! This is amazing! This is wonderful! I can't believe what I'm seeing!" He was completely stunned by this body of work, in the—in the most heart-rending way I've ever seen. He was like a kid. He was so excited, and so happy and so proud of what he had done.

And I thought, "You know, this is like the best thing that's ever happened to me." [Laughs.] I was just absolutely deliriously gratified by this response.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you helped him make sense of his work.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I did. And I didn't know that's what I was doing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that's what every exhibition's supposed to do, I think—yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And it was more significant, as it turned out, because I had done all the research on the black paintings, one by one, doing this study—you know, the titles, what do these titles mean? And we know that the whole history of Stella's work was: What you see is what you see. There's nothing there—nothing more there. There's no content.

So on about the 7th [painter's title] of 23, I said, "You know, these titles are adding up to something here." These titles are all about really dark, black, dismal subjects. I mean Nazism—we're talking really dark; every single one, including the titles of those he'd never painted. I mean, I did a complete documentation of every title. This took months, of course, of labor. And then I got back to Frank with the draft of all this material, and sat in front of him in New York. And he started reading it; he sat there and read it. And then he looked at me and he said, "How in God's name did you ever find out all this stuff?" He was dumbfounded.

And there were two things I hadn't managed to track, and so I asked him and he told me. You know, he said, "Yes, I'll tell you, of course." And then he also told me something about one of them that was very personal—very personal—and he said, "I don't want you to publish that." And I said, "I won't," and I'll never tell anyone what it was. And this was a very compelling experience. I mean, it was amazing that—it transformed the way people had to think about Frank Stella's work. It wasn't content-less; quite the contrary. It was deeply embedded with extremely personal content. And it was something with emotional resonance that people had entirely discounted about the history of minimalism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, wasn't that true pretty much of all, sort of, the culture, Bergian dicta about form, and it's what you see is what you get?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it's like—and sort of trying to argue that there's no narrative anywhere and it—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —except it's the—purely the visual formal. But remembering 1986, when Kiefer shows up with his very dark pictures about German nationalism and so forth, and the way it was embraced as this breath of fresh air—albeit scented with burned corpses or whatever—was refreshing because it was—it was actually—it was professing content. And yet it behaved in a way that people felt comfortable with because it had all the formal elements to it.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, it was an era of content, however.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was an era of content.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And Stella was working in an era of non-content.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it was a—it was content without too much of the irony that was in a lot of the other stuff, and it was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But the beauty of this project, though, for a curator, is it was an accident. It was a complete accident. The larger issue was a complete accident. In other words, I did the show because I believed these black paintings were really important and had never been seen as a body. And as a curator, that's how you think. You think: All right, this needs to be seen as a body of work; it's not just one painting in isolation. But as I said, it took me research into the first seven titles before it finally went "Boing! These are all about black subjects, for God's sake." And then I started crazily going for the rest of them, to say, "Does this hold up?" And it held up through every one of them.

And so, you know, when you do a show like that, as a curator, it's enough that you've done it for yourself. I mean, it's totally gratifying. That the artist is thrilled with it is really special; and would be devastating if it weren't true—but you'd survive. You know, some artists don't like the projects you do. But, you know, then subsequently, to understand, from letters from Phil Leider and Bill Rubin, who I didn't even know personally, that this had completely altered the history of understanding of not just Frank Stella's work, but that whole formalist movement had to be looked at differently, that alters the course of our history.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When did you first see one of these Stellas that later appeared in this exhibition? When did the—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I had certainly seen MoMA's black painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Okay, so the germ of the idea was there for a long time, percolating away.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But I didn't think of it as content. I thought of it as a formalist black painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I never thought of it as a stripe painting—which many idiots call them stripe paintings. They're not stripe paintings; they're black paintings. But I always thought of them as black paintings.

The idea for the show came about because I acquired one for the Baltimore Museum's collection. And it belonged to Michael Fried, who came to Baltimore to teach at Hopkins. And Michael Fried—Frank Stella was close friends with Michael Fried and had given the painting to him, I believe as a wedding present, maybe—I'm not—[inaudible]—about that; I don't remember exactly now, but I think that was that. And Michael Fried came to Baltimore, and he and his wife wanted to buy a house, and so when I approached them about buying the painting, they were open to that. And we discussed it, and they asked a price and we paid it.

And so it was called *Club Onyx*, and it came into the museum's collection. And I lived with it day in and day out, and I thought, "This is—need to see more of these." And so that was the start of it, that it was part of the collection and that's a good reason to do a show, when the work is not better known—I mean the whole body of work is not well known already. So that's why I say that probably that catalogue—and it wouldn't be anything out of the catalogue, because that's where all of this is unveiled. This is among the most art historically influential of the projects I've done.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it speaks well of Stella that he would be—that he would have the grace to sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Totally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —share—let you share the discovery, and give you credit for it.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Totally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And be grateful to you for it, and actually understand that—I don't know who it was who—to whom the saying is attributed, but some people say Marcel Duchamp, but I'm not sure—but that art is a process that is started by the artist and completed by other people.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's true.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And you're right about Stella. He was completely open—and continues to be. He recently reiterated this in another circumstance, that—you know, that what I did was unbelievably important to him, and how much he appreciates it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, this goes back to the question I asked you a little while ago, in the previous disk, about how your exhibition programs at Berkeley sort of held a mirror up to the creative activities of these artists in the Bay Area who—for whom it validated a lot of effort and time and dedication and emotional investment, creative investment in this work; but also, it gave them sort of a way to be critical about their own work, too—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or to see it in a different way.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think that's true.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is an important process, don't you think; that the function of an exhibition is to really

complete the work—it's like opening the wine and drinking it—and that it's a way of understanding what's happened; but each time you show it, it might be a different revelation.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I'm not sure I feel the same way you feel about that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I don't know that I feel that way. I'm just—I'm just sort of wondering how you feel about it.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, all works of art stand on their own.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They don't need me; they don't need you. They stand on their own.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's right. But you put them in—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And they don't need the museum, either.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When you put them in company with each other, in dialogue with each other, in an exhibition, something else happens.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You hope so. It doesn't always happen. And it doesn't always need to happen, I guess. I mean, this is—this is a real—the Stella is an extraordinary example.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a great story.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's a great—it's a great story.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a great story.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's all true. And it was a remarkable introduction to my career, so to speak. I mean, it was really exceptional. But it doesn't have to happen like that. I mean, you can do exhibitions—all works of art are meant to communicate; they're meant for an audience. But it doesn't really matter who that audience is. I mean, everyone responds differently.

What—as a museum curator, what you have to do is spend a lot of time telling people that they're not wrong in the way they approach art; you know, that everything is right; everything they think is right, everything they say is right. And they don't believe you. It takes a—you know, they really don't believe you. It's hard. That's why they're so alienated from art. And you just have to say—they'll say, "Well, why do you see that, and I don't see that?" And I say, "Because I've spent my entire life looking at art. My eyes are different than your eyes. My eyes see differently in combination with my brain than yours could possibly see. You're 13 years old. You haven't looked at enough art yet."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Or, "You're 50 years old, but you still haven't looked at enough art yet." You know, you really have to be open to people's fears, and kind of talk to them like a human being, and make it clear that they get it just as much as you do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, don't you—don't you feel that a lot of times people are intimidated and want to—want to come away with the right content?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Totally. That's my whole—that's what I said.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. Right, exactly.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, they think they're wrong, or stupid.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or they want to make sure they've got—they're coming away with the right information.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But there isn't any right—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But there isn't any right information.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —and that's what I keep telling them, yes. So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Even a person like Frank Stella can see something in his own work that he hadn't seen before because of an experience like this.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: For sure. That's unusual.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, see, this is a great—this is a great—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's unusual.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is a great story to tell people who lack confidence in their own ability to come away with whatever they have that—at that moment, and build on it with the next visit and so forth.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right. I mean, what Stella saw when he arrived in that gallery—never mind the catalogue issue and the content issue—but what he saw was that the exhibition as a body made the experience of any one painting bigger, so much richer, when you saw that they all spoke to one another in very important ways. And that's what an exhibition can show people, if it's installed properly. And that's why I love to do exhibitions. You know, that's why I loved—in the past tense—doing exhibitions. Now I love to write.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you regard yourself as an artist?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No. No, absolutely not.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you're a maker of things—a maker of experiences. The writer could be an artist.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I set up a situation where an experience may occur.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But I wouldn't say that I make an experience. I mean, you can't really do that for someone else. Mostly—mostly, I'm a thinker, a biographer and a writer. The thing about—the Stella content is all biography—[laughs]—it comes right out of his biography.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Did it all happen to him, or did it happen to other people?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, it didn't—I mean, Auschwitz happened to other people, didn't it?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But Auschwitz happened to him in a very important way. His experience of Auschwitz is what he's really talking about here—the whole Auschwitz experience, in other words, or how he experienced that story, that happening, along with all the others. I mean, some of them are—I mean, all of the titles come from different places, but they're all dark and historic in some way.

So he knew that going in. I mean, it turns out that he and Carl Andre, who shared the studio in those years, spent a lot of time coming up with titles for the black paintings—looking for black subjects to title the black paintings. He didn't remember that until we started talking about it, of course.

So, you know, these are really meaningful experiences in my life. As a curator and as a human being, I come away so much bigger and so much more intellectually stimulated than I was before the encounter with these artists, when I—when I work in depth with an artist like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Curators are all parasites. You know, we're just parasites on the artists. So we have to do honor to them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why—how are you a parasite, though?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't exist except for the artist—I mean, as a professional. I'm completely reliant on the artist's work for my subject matter, and the artist's cooperation for an exhibition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, going back to the bottle of wine, I mean, you can just drink the wine straight out of the bottle, but it tastes better if you pour it in a glass first. So you need some kind of—you know, I mean, I think I—I don't—is it really—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That metaphor eludes me, I must say.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think that—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But I'm not a drinker. [They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean the idea that there is a process through which the raw material of the artist, the art work, becomes improved in a way, becomes focused. I mean, otherwise, people would just—artists would just let people wander around the studio. But I think that—I mean, wouldn't you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think you've gone off on a wrong track, here. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have I?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I mean—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Art doesn't get improved because it's in a museum, or in a gallery—[inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, no, but I think it may—it can become more accessible. It can become—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, that's a different issue.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, perhaps that's what I meant.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I didn't mean improved in the sense that it wasn't whatever it was when it walked in the door.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But that the experience of it, somebody walking into an artist's studio and seeing, like, a painting on the wall or on the easel or wherever—on the floor—is not the same as it—as encountering it in an interpretive space where it's being seen to the best advantage and there is a certain logic that's been studied and worked out, like you did with the—with, you know, the black paintings, to sort of give that body of work a new—a new opening, a new way to be approached by an audience.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, that's my job. That's what I do—that's what I do as a job.

[END OF TRACK AAA_richar11_1228.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [In progress]—the same no matter where you see it, and it stays the same if it's in—if I see it in the studio, it's the same thing if I see it in a museum, because I focus on the work of art and what it does or says to me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But a curator is not a tapeworm, I don't think.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm not being—I'm not putting myself down.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, no.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm saying that, essentially, it's a parasitic relationship, that curators all exist in the world because artists and their artworks exist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Otherwise we'd have no job.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess I'm assuming that the parasite weakens the host in some way.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, well, that's way beyond me. I—[inaudible]—that's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's biology, though, not—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, no, that's—[inaudible]—I don't think I weaken the host in any way. If anything, I think I might—I might—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think, yes—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —give them strength or validation, as you said.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's—I think so. Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So that's not the issue. But I think, fundamentally, you have to recall that the curator exists there because there are works of art in the world to be appreciated.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And that's the job I do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's something about, though, the way that you're presenting it that really, I think, is—I think we've got to try to get this on tape in a really good way because it's a real positive thing, I think, that your approach to it is extremely positive. And I'm just concerned that somebody reading the transcript is going to latch onto the negative, sort of the—the sort of blood-sucking, you know, kind of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.] Well, I'm not too worried about that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, no, no. But I mean, I know what you mean, but I think, you know, it would be nice perhaps when we meet tomorrow to sort of reshape that discussion to sort of make sure that the reader understands that, yes, you wouldn't exist if it were not for the art, but also that you're bringing something to the art that's positive.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't change the art. Let's be clear about this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, but you can change how it's—how it's understood, how it's—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You can—you can—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You can illuminate it in displaying it. Yes, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You can illuminate it, but not change it, though. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no. I'm—we're not talking about the art itself. We're talking about how the art is consumed by the audience for which the museum, when you were working as a curator, is the mediating realm.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But what I—what I want to be very clear about here is that you can influence the audience—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —you can't influence the art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No. No.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The art exists. It's timeless, and it's way beyond anything I can do to it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I can love it, but that doesn't change it. Or I can hate it; that doesn't change it either. So that's all I want to be clear about.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: My only worry is that the word "parasite" is going to send some people off in the wrong direction.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They'll come back to wherever they should be. I said it; I'm—I've said it before.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: All right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I've said in other places. I mean, I really—and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a strong—it's a strong image, though.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, it may be. I mean, maybe there's something about parasites that bother you more than me. I don't like them either as insects.

[END OF TRACK AAA_richar11_1229.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh. Now we're rolling.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm not telling that story again. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, but please, please do. This is James McElhinney—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That would be the third time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is—well, the third time's the charm.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Groans.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Brenda Richardson at her home in Baltimore on Saturday, July 30, 2011, assisted today as yesterday by Dr. Katherine Manthorne.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Who says we don't have to do this over, right?

[Side conversation.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, when you were organizing the Oskar Schlemmer show—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in Stuttgart—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and you met Tut Schlemmer.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: T-U-T, Tut Schlemmer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She was how old at that point in time?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Easily late 80s, maybe 90. I don't recall exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Advanced age. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She was giving you gal tips for dining salubrity.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: She said at lunch to me that I should have sparkling water, fizzy water, and that I should drink it every day, preferably all day, but certainly with meals. It had to be room temperature because your stomach can't take the shock of cold hitting it—the stomach is warm—and she said, "It would keep me healthy for life." She was completely right.

Since that time, it is what I drink exclusively. I don't drink coffee, I don't drink colas, I don't drink anything. I drink fizzy water; so that's it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you make your own?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I make my own.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And how do you do that?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I have a SodaStream. That's a copyrighted name. [Laughs.] A SodaStream machine—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's a branded—yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —with carbon—with carbonated cartridges, and you take tap water and you put it in and you make it fizzy.

MS. MANTHORNE: Oh.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And then I keep it in my fridge and there—that I have my fizzy water.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's what they used to call, in the old days, "the old two-cents plain"?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly right, James.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Seltzer.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly right. And it—and it actually has been good for my health. I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Clearly.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, definitely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this is a wonderful way to begin today's conversation, since it's still warm outside.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you're well-equipped with sparkling water.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just a few sort of housekeeping items from last time. Just a few questions I had, having looked over the notes.

You were raised in rural Michigan?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Small town.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And farming people. And you said your grandfather was a tinker?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: My father's father was a tinker, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. As a—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: A traveling salesman of the era.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he—but he was not an Irish Traveler?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay. Important distinction because—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —some people might think he was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, he was a traveling salesman, patent medicine, you know, household items, so on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He have a medicine show?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not a medicine show, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that's too bad. That would have been entertaining.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And my mother's father was a farmer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was a farmer.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, had a farm, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So let's talk a little about your career in the museum world. And I guess one of the things that would be interesting to know would be what you think of how the museum environment, as a—has changed as a professional venue for women since you began working at Berkeley museum. How did you find it in 1964?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I mean, this is scarcely a news flash. You know, it—the art world certainly, and everything that goes along with that, was a boys' club, and it was—that was the way it was, and there were not very many woman museum directors certainly. That reflected the rest of society. I don't think it was any better or worse than the rest of society.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, how did you personally adapt yourself or accommodate yourself to that environment, and then how did it change over the years?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It gradually changed over the years in this—again, parallel to the society at large, which is to be expected, isn't it? I mean, it's just—it's another institution within the American culture. So it seems to me that all of—all the things that took place in the rest of the culture took place in the museum world or in the art world at large. Maybe the art world in New York, for instance, certainly took a more activist role in this regard, and I think on the West Coast it was slower to come along in an activist way, but it certainly happened.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The feminist revolution was a feminist revolution—[inaudible]—you know. It was kind of nationwide.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this is an interesting thing that you've observed which is that I think there is a popular image of California being in some way more progressive than other parts of the country. I think that some of the localities in California certainly were more progressive; but as a whole, a lot of what you've said, both yesterday and just now, sort of hints that it was in some ways more conservative.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It—that's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I don't mean politically; I just mean, you know—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, I was about to say you can't make a blanket statement about it being more conservative—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't mean politically; I mean just sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. In terms of feminism, I would say that probably only New York and Chicago were at the vanguard of the feminist movement in the art world—not in LA, not in San Francisco. So, in that sense, yes, it was behind politically in terms of feminism. In many other ways, of course, it was ahead of the curve.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, yes, I mean, I would think that you had been attracted in part to Berkeley, as you explained to us yesterday, to get away from Michigan and also to get close to some excitement that was happening there. And one might wonder or imagine that the Berkeley museum was sort of like, you know, the rest of the community there, sort of straining to move ahead of the rest of the country in some ways in terms of, like, politics or lifestyle or whatever. And I'm just wondering how that served as a kind of incubator for your growing skills as a lifelong art professional.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, you know, the radical quality about Berkeley extended to the artists. So, in terms of the art that we were able to present, even at the power plant in the early years, it was—it was radical and that was great. I mean, that was very interesting and made a huge impact.

But make no mistake: This was a sexist universe. And I remember talking in the '60s there—[laughs]—and it was totally sexist. I mean, you don't come more sexist than Peter Selz, for instance. I mean, a—you know, renowned womanizer, but that could be said equally of more than half of the men I encountered in that art world. I mean, sometimes obnoxiously so, you know, the groping kind of sexism, which you get at social situations. That was not uncommon in those years. I would like to think it's unheard of today, but I'm afraid it's not.

KATHY MANTHORNE: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So, you know, it's like the rest of the world. It was no different; it was certainly not ahead of the curve in that regard. It was ahead in the curve only in sociopolitical terms. I mean, the kinds of activities that were going on politically—radical ideas in the art world—they were there for sure, they were there for sure—environmental kinds of art movement that I think were ahead of the curve, but not in terms of feminism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what kinds of experiences did you have in the working environment that you would say contrast against what might be the norm today? In other words, you explained last time how Herschel Chipp had basically used you, used your work, used you as an assistant, and you had to insist on receiving—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Ultimately.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —credit for the work—your original work that—for which he might have taken credit—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —which is—which is not at all unusual, I think, even today—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, not at all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —perhaps and then to—so that showed a certain pluck and a certain—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: "Pluck" is a good word for that, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —willingness to stand up for yourself.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How—in what stead did that put you with your colleagues and superiors?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I stayed on for a long time. I mean, I was in Berkeley until 1975. So that tells you something right there. It wasn't always the most amiable relationship. I mean, there was a lot conflict, and some of that conflict was who I am and because I'm a woman; I'm confident that's the case. I mean, I don't think you can deny it. That's all there was to it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess I'm asking in a delicate way, what allowed you to be selectively insubordinate and kind of strain against certain things that you didn't agree with that were coming down from on high, and what—which, in some cases, in other cases, people who would object to being told what to do would have been invited to pursue—[they laugh]—a different position or a different career. And in your case, you kept moving sort of in a very kind of logical, gradual—sort of expanding your tasks and expanding your area of responsibility at a fairly steady and impressive pace.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And I think that, you know, there isn't any way to say this but to say it: Because of the way I work, I become irreplaceable. The place can't function without me, and the staff becomes very committed to me. So, even if I'm a thorn in the side of the administration, which at Berkeley I certainly became, with Peter, they need me more than they want to get rid of me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you became essential to their operations—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and it was perhaps because what you were doing was not about you, but about the task and about the whole—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I mean, to a significant degree, my work has always been my life.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And you know, I spent endless—I mean, I work seven days a week and 14 hours a day, and that was true in Berkeley and Baltimore. I mean, it's what I do.

So I think that when you do a job very, very well and you respect your staff and they respect you, you become fundamental to the successful operation of the institution, even as you may not be the most beloved person in the place. I think I was beloved to the staff that worked with me. I was, as I said, certainly not beloved to Peter, beyond a certain point. That was a very fraught relationship.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So did you have a mentor?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Was there anyone to whom you could turn for advice, or were you just sort of endowed with a good sense of how to conduct yourself and from—to whom—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Or not, as the case may be. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or not—or not. Well—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I did not have a mentor, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —to misconduct yourself selectively when necessary.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right, yes, right. Or not, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But there's no individual—but would you credit your parents or just an innate sense of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: My sisters and I certainly credit our parents for—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —just basic common sense and hard work. We grew up learning to work hard and certainly to take care of ourselves, you know, to be self-reliant. We grew up with tremendous curiosity about the world, and so, I think, yes, we certainly credit our parents for that.

Beyond that, we were—I was, and my sisters as well—people that, as was said, we put ourselves through school, we got a job, we supported ourselves. None of us are married, of the three of us. So I think that, you know, there's something there where we were self-reliant, and we knew that things are done a certain way. They're done very well—very, very high standards. And you make sure that, to the best of your ability, that your institution reflects those high standards.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The staff knows I have this saying which is, perfect is our goal, and I really mean it because if perfect isn't your goal—[laughs]—God knows what you're going to end up with. So it has to be perfect.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You'd end up with something that happens in Washington. [They laugh.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Probably so. Anything too—anything—but Washington—yes, that's a good example because anything too big is going to go amuck. And I've always preferred to be in a small- to medium-sized museum—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —where you can have your hands on everything. You can know what's going on everywhere and make sure that it's done right to the best of your ability and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —your staff buys into that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you do it without micromanaging?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You don't. You don't do it without micromanaging. I'm definitely a micromanager. But what happens eventually is that the best members of your staff also micromanage, so pretty soon you have less and less micromanaging to do because it's done in certain ways.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And as you gain more influence and power and authority and responsibility, did you endeavor to credit your subordinates with more attention than perhaps had been allowed your—or than had been invited from you by people like Peter Selz? Did you try to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Definitely, from my perspective.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —listen to your subordinates?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I didn't have subordinates. We never have used that word. We work together. We were—I mean, in Baltimore, certainly we were certainly more of a family than anything else, and I really mean that. We knew each other—the kids, the pets, the—it was really a close relationship.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But surely there must have been, as in any kind of management structure, there is—there are teams and sort of team leaders and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, there are now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, there are now. But they weren't—well, let's talk about—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I've been gone for 13 years from the museum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's a different institution now, and there were not team leaders and, you know, management manuals at that point. It just wasn't the way things were done.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So let's talk a little bit about the corporatization of culture since—from the mid-'60s to, let's say, you know, the mid-'90s, late '90s. How did that unfold in your experience? How did you see that work its way into, you know, the museum world? It's obviously—it's worked its way into the academic world in an—in an aggressive way, but—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I think it's definitely worked its way into the museum world too. In my particular case, it's not as applicable because, certainly in the Berkeley years, that wasn't relevant. As we said, we didn't have a board of trustees. It was a—it was essentially an academic department, an extension of the academic departments of the university.

But in Baltimore, it happened really toward the end of my tenure where it became more, I think, obvious that that sort of thing was going on with management specialists being—consultants being brought in and so on and so forth, but, honestly, not so much during our Arnold's—from Tom Freudenheim to Arnold Lehman's tenure. It was more the traditional quote, "family structure," if you will. I mean, that's maybe not the best comparison I could draw, but it was more a cooperative endeavor, and it certainly was not bureaucratic. We fought bureaucracy like crazy—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's what you said yesterday. You said that—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —conscious—consciously, consciously fought bureaucracy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —"a good organization exists in spite of bureaucracy, not because of it." So—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But I have this image of, like, the Berkeley museum being run by Peter Selz and—as sort of, like, this lofty authority and then all of the toiling talent underneath, changing the light bulbs, typing labels—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —hanging pictures—right. And that's how it worked, okay?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's how it works.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And everybody was sort of equal. I mean, it was that time too, nobody wanted to sort of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —say, "I'm the boss, you're the worker, we're all working together and rolling up our sleeves," and—but surely today if one were to walk into a museum, even the Berkeley museum today, you would find registrars, preparators, installation specialists, agreements with unions is it—as who could—who was allowed to change the light bulbs and so forth. I mean, that might be a bit extreme, but I'm sure that that kind of—these protocols, the complexity of protocols exist now that didn't exist then.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I think that's the point, James, is that protocols existed. We had registrars and lighting technicians at Berkeley in the early years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And we had a professional organization even then. And it was to Peter Selz's credit, by the way, that he brought out—when we first started, quote, "the museum" before the museum existed, so to speak, he brought out Teri Varveris, who was a senior registrar for MoMA that he had worked with.

And Teri introduced this teeny little staff of four people to how things were done—properly done: how you have loan agreement forms, how you handle works of art, how you handle packing; I mean, everything we walked through and were trained. And that was—that was really a good thing he did because we learned what it was to be a museum before we became one—essentially. And that was invaluable. Teri was there for maybe six months in that beginning stage.

So that's what I want to be clear about is that it was—from the beginning, it was a professional organization on some level, no matter how tiny and start-up it was. It was still understood that this would be a professional operation. And we certainly didn't have titles in those years—in the early years, I mean—in that sense, but when the building got opened and we had to have a bigger staff, then we had titles and people had job assignments.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Are you talking about the professionalism as a kind of standard of performance, or a standard of quality that—the quality of the work that you would do would be up to the standards of the best museums anywhere?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right. That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So perhaps we could say he was in some way temporarily a mentor to you because you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. I think that's fair, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because you said yesterday that one of the gifts that you've always had has been to be able to sit down and to describe, to organize how a museum works, how all of the functions interact, how they all inform each other and how operations occur.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. I mean, I would say that one of the best talents I have is that approach to organization, number one, backed by the fact that writing is easy for me. I'm a good writer and it's really easy for me. It's not an agony for me to sit down and write anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You like doing it.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And I can type. You know, I could type from the beginning. This is no small thing. Do you know how, you know, compromised you are if you can't sit at a keyboard today? You know, so you can sit there and I can type out an ethics policy—curatorial ethics policy in a day—not at half a year, a day—[laughs]. I mean, and it goes from the brain to the keyboard. I mean, it really—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And enjoy doing it too.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And like doing it, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And there's a pleasure in there for you.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And like doing it. It's not even hard work for me. And feel better that it situates the institution in a professional way that it wasn't before, you know, that it spells out certain things. So those sorts of things I cite only as one component of not just who I am but how I approach the museum world. But, yes, I want to make it very clear—you are correct that in those early years Peter Selz was certainly—be seen as a mentor—until he wasn't. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the person he hired, Teri—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Varveris.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, Varveris?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] V-A-R-V-E-R-I-S.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's very helpful, thanks, if we have any interesting proper names—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And you can always call me later and check if you have a question, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you'll see a transcript that will require some corrections because sometimes proper names, if they're spelled phonetically, are challenging to the transcribers. I've seen Warhol spelled a number of different ways.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So as you built your skills and you built your experience and you're organizing shows and you're expanding your responsibilities at Berkeley, did you begin to see any sort of systemic changes to the way the place was working, or did you become mindful of how this slow process—I think we can agree that this corporatization of culture in America has been a slow process, that in hindsight we can sort of mark milestones in its evolution. But whatever our opinion of it is today, you know, it is something that—about which everyone has opinions. But how did it evolve? And I'm just curious how it evolved in your awareness working inside the museum world.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: As I said, I don't think that the corporatization of museums is applicable to Berkeley—to the Berkeley years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At all?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: At all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At all. Okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I really don't—partly because it was a university art museum and partly because it was too early by the time I left in '75.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then so it didn't have a money board and it didn't have a—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Absolutely not. No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it had sort of a friends organization or that was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That was San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: San Francisco Museum—[inaudible]—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: We did not have a friends group. None of that existed.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it was just purely—you know, the mission was for the university.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. Well, no. I mean, its mission wasn't exclusively for the university because it reached out.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, and yes, the community, right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It did shows that had international interest for it—I mean, major exhibitions. So it wasn't focused exclusively on the university; it was an arm of the university, that's all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, an outreach—an outreach sort of venue.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But it was just too early. I mean, by 1975, there still wasn't this corporate—overriding corporate influence.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So and when—at what point did you note its sort of gestation—this new culture of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't—I don't think you note it that way. It happens without you noticing, actually.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I know, but in hindsight—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So I think that it's—you know, certainly in the '80s when boards of trustees start having more businesspeople rather than the olden days when they were the wives of businesspeople with art interests.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or connoisseurs.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And—exactly. And then all of a sudden you see that it's changing and that—and a lot of that's for the good, by the way. I mean, more sophisticated budgeting techniques and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: More money.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Investment and more money—potentially more money. I always want money, potentially.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The motivation for involving those corporate people is, of course, to get more money—that's the motivation. It's not for their expertise, generally speaking, it's for their money. And that's perfectly okay. But I think the bane of museums, from my perspective, is the phenomenon of consultants—the idea that consultants can come in and fix or improve whatever is already there.

And that's the real corporatization of the institution, when the consultants come in and have to find something. I mean, they're paid to find something wrong and to fix it or recommend how to fix it. That's when you start getting all these artificial structures overlaid on what you do. And those structures are set so that it requires more meetings and more paperwork and more dialogue among the staff and more planning layers. And basically—this is a very subjective opinion—but what you end up with is time-consuming, maddening paperwork, layers and layers of meetings for staff who should be doing their job instead of sitting talking about how to do their job. And I think it becomes a bureaucratic boondoggle before anyone realizes what's happened.

I don't know any museum staff member, by the way, who likes these activities or feels that it's helped them—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So who mandated them?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —helped them in their job. It's just mandated by the administrators. And the administrators are mandating it because that looks good when they report back to their corporate board because that's how corporations work—some of them, not all of them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this is basically an evolution from the culture, and then you see these movies from the

'50s and early '60s of sort of corporate comedies starring somebody like Jack Lemmon where there's somebody who comes in the office who's an efficiency expert—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He's got coke-bottle glasses and a slide rule, right?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And turns the place on its ear.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right. And you pay him a lot of money. So you know, I think that that has had a big impact on museums—as on every other structure. Museums are not alone in this regard. Museums may be uniquely unwelcoming institutions for this kind of thing because the art world is really—I mean, art making is not a corporate—there may be—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No. [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There may be a lot of corporate influence, but it's not corporate. And when you're dealing with artists and art works, it's just not the most sensitive way to approach that work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, like you were saying—like you were saying yesterday, the mindset of the Bay Area artists with whom you worked eventually—people like Wiley and Hudson and that whole posse—did—it didn't occur to them that they were doing this for money. They were doing this because they were artists. They—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They were not doing it for money. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They were not doing it for money. They were doing whatever they could to teach, to earn a living, to pay the bills so that they could also support their studio practice, and that the idea that—it has gained a lot currency today—that art is like—sort of like rock and roll—it's a way to make, you know, a pile of money in a kind of extension of the entertainment world—was not even an idea that occurred to anybody back then.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, and it's not an idea that's occurred to any artist I've ever worked with either, no matter what the era.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now or then? Not now or then.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Now or then, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that's an important point to make. How did accreditation processes at museums contribute to or lead to or aggravate or accelerate this whole, you know, process of corporatization—the growing of bureaucracies inside the museums?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't think accreditation processes have much to do with the corporatization as you're talking about it. I had mixed feelings about accreditation processes because they were a boondoggle in themselves and took up a huge amount of staff time and generated lots of paperwork that was a real drag. However, I think accreditation worked in the sense that it did allow for standards to be set in place that could be, at least in America—American museums—universally acknowledged as significant for loan exhibitions, for instance. So there were certain standards that became uniform—uniformly understood. And that can be helpful.

But the process—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that pests, humidity, light levels, security—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly, technical things—yes, absolutely.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, the condition of the environment, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And having—and having policies, I mean, for instance, that Baltimore had from an early time because I'd done it at Berkeley. So you get here and you do it for your new museum. But the process of it was painful. [Laughs.] I mean, just when you—when you're up for reaccreditation, it's very, very consuming, and in terms of the staff time and effort and so on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you're clearly passionate about art and about what you do working with art, so having to become a bean counter for, like, the sake of a document doesn't seem like it would be too pleasurable a task. So—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's all right. It's something that had to be done.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's okay, I mean, you got to do it. You got to do it. You got to do what you got to do.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's the professional association, and you comply with that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so how about your interaction with colleagues in your field, like other women—I have a list of women who would be perhaps your peers in terms of when they started working and what they're doing now. And somebody—like, a couple of them you spoke of when we were speaking yesterday: Jane Livingston, Barbara Haskell, think about somebody like Linda Ferber or Katherine Lee [ph], or Dianne Vanderlip.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Katherine Lee [ph] was my senior by a fair bit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was your senior? Okay, by a few years.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I met her but I didn't know her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And people like Kathy Halbreich, she's younger than I am, but I was very close to Kathy and we were communicational. I think she probably looked to me as a mentor, the reverse, but I consider her a peer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But somebody like Janet Kardon or Judith Tannenbaum, any of these people?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: All people I knew.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I wasn't close to Judith Tannebaum—more now. I've actually had some encounters with her recently. But—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Dianne Vanderlip?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I knew Dianne. I mean, again, I—it's a small world, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But what—Marcia Tucker, obviously, too.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Marcia and I were very close.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But what was the dialogue like? You're all—you're all in these different venues; somebody like Dianne is working Philadelphia, initially—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Went to Denver.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then Denver, and now she's in LA, and Judith and Janet were also at ICA at Penn and then have since moved on. But and in—a lot of these women, with the exception of Linda while she was outside of—she's in Brooklyn, right, which is its own—its own environment too—you know, what was the dialogue like between you all? Were there—were there strong alliances that were formed, strong—who became close friend, who became, like, a trusted colleague? Like, what kinds of things were you sharing?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I would say—trusted colleague goes a long way. I mean, I thought—none of those women that you named would be excluded from that list for me. They were all trusted colleagues. So if you had collegial questions, you know, I could conceivably have called any one of them and talked with them, or vice versa—they would call me and talk. The person of everyone we've talked about that I was closest to, as I said, was Marcia Tucker. We were in constant communication.

And I worked with Marcia on the whole planning that evolved into the New Museum. I mean, I was one of a handful of people that worked on that project. So it was really—I mean, she was in Berkeley fairly frequently and I would see her around New York, of course. It was—that was a friendship. That was different category than, say, Dianne Vanderlip. Kathy Halbreich I was close to from an early date even though, as I said, she's younger than I am—younger generation.

I mean, you count on all of those—Barbara Haskell, Jane Livingston for sure. We were all California at one point

and we stayed in contact. I don't know how to describe it. I mean, none of them were—except for Marcia—none of them were people who would have slept on my sofa overnight when they came to visit Berkeley. But Marcia would have. [Laughs.] But they were all people that at the drop of a hat, I would have been there for them, and vice versa.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the reason I ask is partly also to inquire if there were things that you shared with them about being a woman in this environment over this period of time from the mid-'60s to the mid-'90s.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, Marcia was obsessed with that, and I say that with admiration, not as a negative in any way. And so from Marcia's perspective, you know, that was the issue. And feminism, or the lack of it within the art world, was specifically relative to positions—directorship positions. It wasn't a constant subject of conversation in general. We had a lot more on our plates to worry about, I suppose. But it became an issue as time went on, I mean, like it did in the universe. We simply are part of society. So as it became more radical, we did too. We evolved with it. Only Marcia could be said to be ahead of that curve, in my opinion.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you feel that because you held position—and I'm not asking you to speak for all of them, but what is your sense of this—that as you all held responsible posts in these—in these institutions that were—that were serving as both sort of temple, kunsthalle, beacons of culture for a community—did you feel that that responsibility within the museum gave you a responsibility to assume a particular role or to voice or express your opinion or, you know, engage in any activism at all? Were you organizing exhibitions around ideas that you felt were important for social reasons and not just for artist ones—aesthetic ones? That the art that you believed in—or were there causes you believed in for which you felt an exhibition was also appropriate?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: For me? I don't think so; for Marcia, yes. I—you know, I can't speak for the others. You know, Marcia pushed all of us, hard. And that was good. I'm not saying that was bad. It was good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She wanted you to do this?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Marcia pushed us in two directions. One, she pushed us to be museum directors—constantly. And, two, she pushed us to show woman artists. And, you know, that was really important. That pushing was really important. I had zero—and I mean zero—interest in being in museum director. I never wanted to be a museum director. I always wanted—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That should qualify you immediately.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.] That it should, shouldn't it? [They laugh.] I always wanted to be the second, and a lot of that has to do with just my entire personal makeup. I'm a private person, I don't want to be out on the public lines. It has nothing to do with making the solicitations and asking for money; I'm really good at that. When it has to be done, I'll go do it. It's just about a personal preference.

And so, for me, it just was not on my agenda. I was approached about directorships with some frequency in the later years, including Berkeley and certainly from Baltimore, but I really honestly did not want it. So—and Marcia knew that. I mean, this wasn't something that we didn't talk about.

But I understood what she was saying, that those of us in a position to be recruited for directorships had a responsibility to follow up on that in order to get into those positions to influence the profession. I think she's right about that; it's just that it wasn't something that I was prepared to do, absolutely never wanted to do it. And I think that Marcia's influence in other women in that—who did want to do it, was huge. It was huge.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who comes to mind?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I mean, I think that everyone comes to mind in the sense that I don't think there's been, you know, any sort of headhunter looking for museum jobs in America in the last 20 years who hasn't had women prominently on the list, just wouldn't happen. It—everything changed.

So Marcia was in the vanguard, and I supported her 100 percent, and she was one of the first on the lines when she did the New Museum. So I think all that was great. But I'm not—what I would not suggest is that the museum—the art museum world was ahead of the curve of society at large. I mean, I don't think that art and artists were out there on the front lines any more than any other female group.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What is your feeling about museums who have organized themselves around issues of gender like the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington, or the Sackler Center at the Brooklyn Museum? Do you think that forming these institutes within a museum is a useful thing? Do you think it distracts from the discussion about aesthetics or the art itself? Does it subordinate the art to a social cause? I mean, how do you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I don't think the Sackler is applicable in this case because the Brooklyn Museum is a big place. The Sackler is one unit within it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. One unit.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So I don't think that that's applicable. The National Museum of American Women in Arts [National Museum of Women in the Arts] certainly is applicable to this discussion. I will say only that I know plenty of women artists who would not show at the National Museum for Women in the Arts.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And for what reason?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Because it's ghettoization.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: We're ghettoized as female. And from the outset that was an attitude of prominent women artists that I have personal encounters with. So I think it's an issue to be reckoned with.

On the other hand, every museum that shows women artists, that's great. I mean, they do good shows, solid shows, good publications; then it just adds to the pool of possible exhibitions. At this point, I think that's true. Once you get—the initial moment where someone like, you know, a Nancy Graves would roll over in her grave before she would have shown at the—at a museum dedicated to women artists. I mean, this is just out of the question because it's a ghettoizing females.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's recognizing something in a way that perpetuates its isolation.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly, exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so that is counterinclusive and therefore problematic. Well, that's clear.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Now, I don't think we're past sexism at this point. I don't mean to suggest that by any means. [Laughs.] But I do think the era is different now than when the museum was founded.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think is it safe to say that, you know, the revival of the women's movement in the 1960s, you know, is absolutely a process that one could trace to Seneca Falls and so forth, and starting and stopping a number of times and rising up and being crushed again, only to rise up again, hopefully now permanently, that this has given encouragement to people who are also feeling like "others" in society.

Obviously the women's movements coincided with civil rights, African American—you know, the marches and, you know, the busing and the, you know, the Klan, the dogs, you know, fire hoses—although I don't think the women encountered that kind of violence.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: If you exclude domestic violence, which I don't really.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Domestic violence is part of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To the "other" others, lifestyle others have sort of begun to form, you know, alternative aesthetics or other conversations about their, you know, the cultural orientation.

Think about a guy with whom I went to school, a guy named Frank Moore—you know, the late Frank Moore—and with whom I was at Yale and Skowhegan and others—I mean a lot of the talk about people like Keith Haring, et cetera and so forth, you know, sort of bringing a discussion about lifestyle into the museum, and how do you regard it as useful or significant in any way to a discussion about the art.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think it's all included and should be. And in Baltimore, for instance, we were the first major public institution to show the AIDS quilts; it's all a part of society—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —and museums are a part of society and should intersect the larger social landscape whenever possible. It was a very controversial thing to do at the time. Now it seems quaint almost—

KATHY MANTHORNE: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —but honestly it was one of those things where I had to—didn't have to, but I welcomed giving talks to our guards who were afraid that they were going to get AIDS from the visitors to the AIDS quilt.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, God—[sighs].

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You know, this—times change, and they change only when people take action that brings it into the public arena where maybe you don't expect to find it. So I think all those things are to the good. I think that museums should be sociopolitical in their orientation at the same time that they show fine art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So just inclusion?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. So, and again, to avoid kind of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Let all things be.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —circling the wagons and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in isolated posses, whether it's a gay posse or—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: All things being equal, I suppose, I would be just as happy if there weren't a women's museum—art museum. I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —but it provides another venue, so it's all right. In other words, as society evolves, it becomes less ghettoization—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —and more just another opportunity—[inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So in places like the Studio Museum of Harlem or El Museo del Barrio in New York or any sort of ethnically focused museums—I mean, El Museo isn't really in the barrio; it's on Fifth Avenue.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—[laughs]—this kind of sort of idea of a lifestyle or cultural "other," you know, having their own specialized venues and agendas.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think there are other issues at stake when you get to ethnicity. I mean, I think that—those museums have a dedication, a purpose beyond all other considerations, which is that, if you're an underserved population by heritage of an American culture, then you damn well better have your own museum to start showing it, so that it can become mainstreamed, so to speak. And it doesn't have to become mainstreamed. That's not to say that mainstream is better; it's just—I think there's a stronger mandate for ethnic-specific museums.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you think perhaps building first on a celebration of exclusion is one way to get sort of into the conversation.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So these are our aesthetics; this is who we are.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think so. I think the evidence is pretty strong that it works to the advantage of the previously underserved population.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: More so than lifestyle or gender?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So who would you regard as a protégé? Have you—have you inspired—who have you inspired to undertake a career like your own? Are there any people—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know. I suppose there are. I, quite often actually, hear from people who interned at our museum in Baltimore, and some of them I remember and some I don't. And I find them in museum situations; I mean, they contact me and say, oh, I remember you from when I interned in so-and-so, and that's lovely. I mean, I'm very happy to hear that they all continued in that direction. But it's not something that I'm—was conscious of at the time, that I was mentoring in that way. I wish I had been more conscious of it, but I wasn't.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you're not, for instance, in contact with people who worked with you, like a younger person who had started their career at the Baltimore museum or perhaps near the end of your stay at Berkeley who've, like, remained in contact, who—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not that I can think of.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No? Okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I hope they exist, but not that I can think of.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I want to still sort of keep on sort of the gender questioning a little bit and move from colleagues to artists.

A number of artists with whom you've worked is impressive, and the names include people like Joan Brown, whom you were speaking earlier; Jennifer Bartlett; Anne Truitt; May Wilson; Hartigan; Nancy Graves. Would you care to share any sort of stories about how these collaborations sort of shaped your practice or illuminated something in a dramatic way or even in a little way? I mean, you shared the story about Stella and the *Black Paintings*, how you were able to decode them near the end of our interview yesterday. So what was, just at this moment, what was the most memorable of these, or what would the top three collaborations have been that felt really—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: With the women that you've named?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, that really sort of challenged you, built you—you know, excited you, made you think about art in a different way or sort of useful interactions, exciting interactions with these people? I'm sure they were all exciting, but—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I wouldn't say that, no. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, stressing the positive—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —who were—who were the three most—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: "Exciting" is a strong word.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the three most positive? Well, let's say stimulating interactions, in a positive sense?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm thinking. I mean, I've known a lot of women artists, of course, not all of whom I've had the opportunity to do exhibitions with, and you know, one of the most extraordinary women artists of course is Elizabeth Murray. And I am really happy that I was able to acquire, for the permanent collection, really significant Elizabeth Murray works. But I never did an exhibition with her and that's too bad. I think she might have been the most stimulating in the way that you're talking about.

Bartlett was interesting. You know, she's a tough cookie, and she's smart, she's well read—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She's—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —[inaudible]—was fun to work with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She's a Californian too.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: She has that California spirit, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That Long Beach—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yep, born and raised there. So that was—that was a terrific project. I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Any anecdotes about that you'd like to share?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, no, if I think of something I'll tell you. I don't think anecdotes about my experience with artists is particularly useful. I mean the one with Frank Stella was extraordinary; I mean, that was really a life-altering experience where—for me and for him in some way. I don't think you could expect that kind of drama to come out of these collaborations as a routine matter. Certainly anecdotes are not something that I would routinely share either.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, ones that you could share, you could share, I suppose. But—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly. I mean, if it was—well, if—like, that's why I said the Frank Stella one was such an extraordinary different level of—it's more than an anecdote, you know; it's a—it's an experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, how about your contact with somebody like Joan Brown? Before we started the interview, you were saying that she was—she was somewhat challenging in terms of trying to get her to—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —articulate her ideas.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I feel disappointed in myself with the Joan Brown project because Joan—I really did admire her work tremendously, and she was very loveable. I mean, she was a fragile kind of person and yet tough as nails—sort of an odd sort of combination.

She didn't approach her work particularly intellectually, so it was very, very difficult. I just feel that I never really got to the soul of Joan Brown's work in some sense. I loved doing the show; I was really happy to have a catalogue for her. She was someone who deserved way more than she'd ever been given and almost certainly because she was female; I mean, that's it. She was a great painter, and she had never gotten the attention she deserved.

I remember coming back from a vacation at some point in recent—relatively recent history, and I am such an addict for my *New York Times* that I don't cancel my subscription when I'm away. So they're stacked up when I come back. And I got the shock of my life because Joan Brown's obituary was in the newspaper when I got back from one of those trips and, you know, with this horrendous thing of her dying in India when she was working on a project, and a piece of the building fell off and, you know, it was like some sort of lightning bolt story. You know, how could this have happened?

And you know, I feel like I didn't do her justice; I didn't do her justice in the catalogue or I certainly didn't in the exhibition. But it wasn't—I just never could really get a handle on her and who she was. She was oddly nonfeminist. It—it's hard—it's—even today, I couldn't say why. It just never really gelled in the way I wanted it to. But I'm proud of having done the show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you—and so she was not accorded the credit that you feel she earned because that whole milieu of painters of which she was a part, or the Bischoff, Weeks, Park, Diebenkorn, her husband—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: She was a lot younger than any of those people you've just named. I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Gordon Cook—but they were also—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —they were also kind of like—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, David Park was dead by the time Joan Brown started painting. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like a macho posse a little bit too, right? Were they like a machismo—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Again, all those people were gone by the time I got to the Bay Area.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right. So you didn't know any—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So, I mean, Elmer Bischoff was still alive, but old.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right, so you don't know—right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, they weren't young people anymore. Joan Brown was a totally younger generation and, you know, I think that feminism wasn't in her blood. As I said, she just didn't have that spirit. She just painted, and she was a wife, and she just happened to paint beautifully. She had a fair bit of attention. I mean, her work was shown in New York; it wasn't that she was unknown, but she had never had a museum

retrospective of a major sort before.

So Joan Brown, like I said, was a disappointment to myself; that is, I disappointed myself in not being able to break through and do a better job for her in terms of the text. But it—I'm glad I knew her. I'm glad I had the chance to do the show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, what about someone like Anne Truitt with whom you've worked a number of times?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I did. I worked with Anne, and Anne Truitt is a special sort too. She's—gosh, you know, she's sort of this puritan—I don't know what—I don't know how to describe Anne. [They laugh.] Intellectual—she's definitely intellectual, great artist, really great artist, fierce. She's difficult to relate to because she's overly intense—was; she's dead of course.

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JAMES MCELHINNEY: [. . .] So you were explaining that—their outsiderness. How would you—how would you characterize their outsiderness? I understand that somebody like Elizabeth Murray or Jennifer Bartlett or Dorothea Rockburne or Lynda Benglis, I mean, they're part of that scene in Manhattan.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, they're mainstream Manhattan artists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And so—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And Anne Truitt was, you know, wife and mother—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —living not even in the part of Washington, D.C., but, you know, really, this is outsider we're talking about.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's making art in your spare time, which is really difficult.

MR. MCELHEINNY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And Joan Brown was the same. I mean, even as we saw her as an artist, I mean, she was a wife and mother. And I think she saw that as her first role. Even this painting was desperately important to her, she was still an outsider—[inaudible]. And that was more about her personality. She was like a split personality between ambition and hiding out, somehow complicating herself. It's difficult to summarize people. You can't just put them in a nutshell.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I mean, with a number of these more mainstream artists you mentioned, it's easier to contextualize them in relationship to the big conversations that are in the newspapers and magazines.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Sure, or course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you've got these sort of eccentric individualists who are not pursuing that kind of lifestyle, not pursuing that kind of glamorous existence or that kind of, you know, high visibility. How did that affect the audience response to their work and the exhibitions that you created? I mean, who made a connection to an insider or an outsider, and in what way, and in what way were those responses different? I guess, how did the reviewers handle them? We know that a lot of reviewers take the catalogue or take the press release and they cherry—you know, they cherry-pick it for ideas and then spin their column. But I mean, how was the response to their work different?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't think it is different. I don't think the kind of response you're talking about is different at all, James.

MR. MCELHINNY: They're responding to the art.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: We put an Anne Truitt exhibition in a museum and, you know, the press response is the press response.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And the public response is, my god, they're painted wood towers that everybody thinks are crazy. You know, the public doesn't love Anne Truitt's work. The public does love—well, Joan Brown's work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But, you know, so you can't really—you can't really relate to how an audience responds to someone based on their personality. That's something I can relate to—[inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, no. I didn't mean that. I meant that somebody who's going to go see a show of, let's say, Jennifer Bartlett is going to be able to do a lot of advanced research and find lots of stuff to sort of crib—you know, go into the show and craft a response.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You're talking about the reviewers as opposed to the public?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yes—well, no—well, who are part of the public.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You know, I don't normally care what reviewers think.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Okay. You don't—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't really care what reviewers think. You know, reviewers are either good or they're not. And if they're smart and good—like Paul Richards of [*The*] *Washington Post* all those years—they do all their homework, they come there unbelievably prepared with sophisticated eyes and they see what you want me—what you love for them to see, plus things that you didn't see, and then they write about it. But beyond that, I don't really care what they say. If they hate it, they can hate it. I don't care what they say. I understand that your public relations department cares what they say, and the artist may even care a little bit. But honestly, I do my job and then I expect them to do theirs.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think that the power of the critic has decreased in the last—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Unless you're in Manhattan, there is no power of the critic. If you're in Manhattan, there's a big power of the critic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: More so than, let's say today, the dealers? Do you think Roberta Smith is more powerful than Larry Gagosian?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It depends on how you define their power—they have different realms of power.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, right. Money.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, Roberta Smith has tremendous power. Thank God she's brilliant and sensitive. She's a great critic, great critic, great writer. You know, I mean, I hope that she writes every day I pick up my *New York Times* because she actually helps me to see, one of the few critics who can do that.

But again, all bets are off when you're in Manhattan.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Everything's different. And I never worked in Manhattan. I mean, I worked in Manhattan, but not in an institution. So here I was in Berkeley, in Baltimore, already outsiders. And it's a different realm. And, you know, it may have mattered what the critics said in the sense that trustees were created, so trustees might think it was a bad show if somebody said it was a bad show in the *Baltimore Sun*, but honestly, let's be honest, it really didn't matter.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a fish-wrapper the next day.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly. It really didn't matter.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So with—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It certainly didn't matter to me as a curator.

MR. MCELHINNEY: With the globalization—so in other words, there wasn't anything you did that was calculated to elicit a response from anybody else. You just wanted to do the best work you could and put the best exhibition up and do the best writing about the art?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And perfection was your goal.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay, good. That's terrific.

MS. RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think that regional scenes like Berkeley and Baltimore have benefited by the decentralization of the art world from places like Paris and then later New York City? Now we've got—you have London, you have Berlin, you have—you know, around the globe you've got these important art centers where important art is being made everywhere, and that even the way art is being sold and exhibited is more and more of these mobile art fairs like Basel Miami, Basel—Basel—FIAC, whatever.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think that this sort of—the disintegration of the idea of an art capital has actually helped places like Berkeley or Baltimore, Chicago, St. Louis, you know, have more vibrant scenes of their own?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm not sure about that. I think it helps the artists who work in those communities, because they're more likely to have their work seen. That is—everybody travels, everybody sees everything out. There's a lot more word that spreads a lot faster than it used to. There's the Internet.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And Internet, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So it's a different universe now. I don't know that it actually changes the city itself in any meaningful way. I'm not sure about that. Again, I will offer the caveat that I've been out of that museum for 13 years, as strange as that seems. I can't believe it's been that long, but it's been 13 years since I've been actively involved in the Baltimore Museum. And that means that I'm also not involved in the art world by choice. I mean, it wasn't that I was doing all that stuff for fun, by the way. You know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was your day job.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It was my life, not my day job, right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you. [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Now I—you know, now it's a whole different—[inaudible]—I don't go to exhibition openings. I don't even see exhibitions sometimes, so—unless I really want to see the exhibition. Before I'd have to see every exhibition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it was obligatory. It was part of your job.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly. It's part of my job. Yes, so it's different.

Now, but in terms of Manhattan women artists, now you're talking a whole different thing. I mean, I was very close to Nancy Graves. I was friendly with Ree Morton; of course knew Jennifer Bartlett—I mean, in the early years we're talking—from the early '70s I knew these people, when I was still in Berkeley, brought them to Berkeley for shows for programming, for all sorts of activities.

They also came out to work at Crown Point Press, which was no small thing. That was a big influence. I met a lot of New York artists when they would come out to do prints at Crown Point Press, and Kathan or other people would have parties for them and we would—and that's where I first met Brice Marden—I mean, all sorts of—among many others.

So those kinds of activities in a community like Berkeley, San Francisco, it was a major thing. I mean, we also had the Hansen-Fuller Gallery showing a lot of artists from the East and John Berggruen showed artists from the East. Rena Bransten did. I mean, there was—it was cosmopolitan, in other words, in a way that Baltimore never was. Baltimore had this one gallery, and he wasn't showing much from outside the area.

So all of those things come to play. So as I said, Nancy Graves I was close to in the early years. Dorothea Rockburne was an important artist in those years to me, because I met her of course through Mel Bochner, where I was doing a Bochner project, and stay in touch with—make studio visits to her when I was in New York. And that was significant.

I met Lynda Benglis I don't know when. I met her in Berkeley, actually. She came out for some—maybe it was for Crown Point. I don't think so. Something else. And I'm still very close to Benglis and still committed to her work.

Now those are powerful women. Those are really powerful women. And they have an enormous influence on who you are when you see them in their studio, when you go out for dinner, when you write about them. You know, that helps to shape who you are in every way. So I say that those women are important to who I am. They

represented models of achievement and hard work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So they inspired confidence. They inspired redoubled effort, the—although it seems to me like you're a pretty—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm pretty focused to start with, but—[laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And pretty dogged and pretty tenacious.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's what I am.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's—[inaudible]. That's who I am—dogged and tenacious.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But I—you know, I learned from all these artists. I mean, that's the joy of my life, is—Pat Steir comes to mind as someone who's really important to me. You know, these are really special women, and they had a tough fight on their hands to get to be who they are, way more than I did. You know, it's a whole different ballgame here when you're in your studio all day, working by yourself. And this is a tough—to make great art, world-class art, I mean, it takes brainpower and it takes all sorts of—talk about tenacious; I mean, this is a really a tough assignment they were given. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How many of these women—and I mean, just observing that there—there's a goodly number of artists of any gender or persuasion who are sort of able to sort of spend more time in their studio because they were raised with a certain amount of privilege. A good number of artists are from rather privileged backgrounds.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm trying to think of one who I've ever worked with—[inaudible]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, no, but you were saying like the Bay Area artists were all struggling to—you know, to pay the rent, but I think—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, I didn't mean just the Bay Area artists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I meant—every New York artist I know was also struggling to pay the rent. In the '70s they all had jobs. Lynda Benglis to this day has—struggles for her income. She teaches at the School of Visual Arts. She never misses a season, because she needs the money and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —you know, I mean, we're not—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But she also has made it very clear to me that she does it not just for the money but she does it because she's inspired by the students. I mean, she likes that interaction.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I guess it's important to shatter the perception that somehow all of this is possible because some people have the ability to pay the rent without hitting the time clock. But the majority of artists with whom you've worked have, in some sense.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't—yes, I'm—I'll be completely honest in saying that I don't believe—I'd have to—I don't think I've ever met an artist who didn't have to earn a living.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, in the '70s—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In any way, whether it was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Teaching.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —waiting tables, teaching—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Teaching, waiting tables, everything they had to do to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, it's mythology that artists are born rich. I don't know anyone who was. I can't think of a single one, really. I mean, all the artists I know, even—I mean, I'm not talking about today. I'm not talking about Brice Marden today—

MR. MCELINNEY: No, no, no, no, no.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —Bruce Nauman today—[laughs]—but when I knew Bruce Nauman, you know, he lived in a hovel, a one-room hovel. You know, we're talking—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

Well, this is important because I think we are in an age of high materialism and high consumerism and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Artists are almost always working-class.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and crazy money. Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Artists are almost always working-class.

MR. MCELHINNEY: In the 20th century, perhaps.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I—we're not talking—[inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mary Cassatt, Degas—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Never mind that. We're not talking—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —you know, rich kids.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —we're not talking artistocracy, from that era.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: We're talking these contemporary artists, working-class, almost all. I mean, really, I can't think of an exception, offhand. I know there are. I just don't know who they are. I mean, every one I've ever known has come from essentially a working-class background, middle-class, at best—I mean, not aristocracy here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's the sort of artisanal tradition of the artist as being a—you know, like a maker of things.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In some sense, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But which—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They all taught.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, they all were teaching for income.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, that's what most of them do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the pay ain't bad, and the schedule's pretty agreeable. You get summers off—[laughs]—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And the pay is—for the artists we're talking about now, the pay isn't bad. But from—for years, the pay was tough to come by.

Another artist I worked closely with, I want—Laurie Simmons was really important to me too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay. Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And I really—Laurie is a very extraordinary woman. I'm crazy about her work and crazy about her. She's—you know, all these women have been important in my life.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What about women collectors?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Women collectors. I don't think they're any different from men collectors.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, are there more today than when you became mindful of who was collecting art and who wasn't, whenever that occurred, when you were a younger person? And presumably your contact with collectors was pretty much immediate—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In Baltimore my contact with collectors was ongoing, immediate, constant.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

MS. RICHARDSON: In Berkeley, not so much contact with collectors—I mean, like I said, nobody was really collecting. We're talking the '60s again. So—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. That's what you were saying before.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. It wasn't a collecting universe. There were people who bought an occasional work of art. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They liked it, they bought it, they hung it on their walls.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right. That was about it. I mean, the famous Rene di Rosa in the Napa Valley was what you'd call a collector, but that's because he amassed art here. He had so much money, and he just bought whatever he wanted.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was like a mini—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: A very fascinating eccentric.

But basically, like I said, for Berkeley years, it's a nonissue. It was a huge issue in Baltimore. And you know, the cultivation of collectors was major, major. I talked about that yesterday. It was just a very, very important thing to do. I mean, it's how you seeded your community, you hoped, for the future growth of a permanent collection with—when you have limited funds. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And future donations.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the question about women collectors is a little segue into talking about the Cone sisters for a moment—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh. All right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —because—and I could only imagine that there—although I'm unaware of any scholarship about postfeminist women art collectors, but we're all mindful—at least anybody who's studied American art and modern art is aware of Etta and Claribel Cone from Greensboro, North Carolina, originally.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And isn't there some kind of interaction between the Baltimore Museum and, you know, the Weatherspoon, or is it an overlapping—because I know they've got part of the Cone collection.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They have things from the Cones.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: From the Cones.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

No, there's no formal relationship.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But just that—the artwork that they have in their permanent collection is from like relatives of these ladies.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Probably.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I can't speak to that definitively.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a big—I think they owned weaving—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, the Cone sisters' collection came intact to the Baltimore museum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. But they came from a weaving—a textile-weaving family in—at Greensboro—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Manufacturer of denim.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not quite as elegant as weaving, but you know—[laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sold a lot of stuff.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —they made a lot of money from denim. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. A lot of it being worn by—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But more to the point, they came to—their money came from sexism because the Cone sisters—when their parents died, the brothers in the family gave all their income, all of their inheritance to the two sisters, on the assumption that the two sisters, who were unmarried at that point, were not going to marry and had no means of supporting themselves. So the brothers gave all of their inheritance to the two sisters, who proceeded to spend it wisely on art—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —[and that's ?] to our advantage

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So they never hurt for money, those girls.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No. No. And you—were you in charge at all of that—of that collection?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was that part of your responsibility?

MS. RICHARDSON: That was part of my job, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And that—when did that collection start—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Fortunately, I loved it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —start traveling so much? It seems like—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In my era, with Arnold, it traveled to Japan as part of a—an exhibition that we helped to organize. And I think that was all, except for, you know, obviously loans for important monographic shows and so on. I think it's been in—certainly since I left that it's been traveling more.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I just had this idea that the Cones were selling, though, like cloth to the Confederate Army at one point. So—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Could be.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, I think so. But it's a wonderful collection—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's a great collection.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Enjoyed it a number of times—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —a very interesting one—and more to the point, I loved writing her biography. It was one of the great joys of my life, was to work on that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was all of the primary source material on hand? Was it part of the bequest or did you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: The archives—yes, there are very excellent archives there. Not all the material—the material has been divided up a bit. Some part of it went back to the family on some point on loan; it was not returned. So it's, you know, gotten separated, but massive archives are there—so a major resource and then doing a lot of other researching of their contemporaries as well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, again, speaking about perhaps more contemporary women art collectors, were there any whom you helped to cultivate that you—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, women collectors were important in the history of Baltimore, not just the Cone sisters.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Janet Wurtzburger was really an important source. She was a collector of sculpture. And her family members or descendants were involved on the board. She was dead by the time I got to Baltimore, but her children were still involved in the museum and, and the Wurtzburger Sculpture Garden is at the museum. So Janet Wurtzburger was a philanthropic inspiration in the community as well as being a major art collector.

And of course, aside from the Cones, one of the greatest collectors that benefited the museum was Saidie A. May, Saidie Adler May. And Saidie May collected in the eras following what the Cone sisters did. So Saidie May was collecting Gorky and Mondrian and figures in the next generation. So the Baltimore Museum's preeminence in some of these areas is explicitly due to female collectors. And I had always hoped that after the Cone sisters, I would eventually write a biography of Saidie May—that never came to pass—but somebody will sometime. She's a fascinating character and very complicated and lovers and all sorts of interesting stories there. So somebody will have a great time writing her biography.

In Baltimore, I work with a lot of collectors, and many of them are women in as much as many of them are couples, married couples, who—there's a husband and there's a wife.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the husband isn't the one who buys the art.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's not true. That's not true. That's not true at all. You'd be surprised how that works out. Sometimes the husband is the most dominant and sometimes it's the wife who's the most dominant. You never can tell. It's very interesting how that works, isn't it?

But the woman who I worked with most closely in my entire career was a widow. And that's not a small point, because when her husband died—Connie Caplan came to me and said that her husband had died—this was when I first got to the museum—her husband had died and that allowed her to do what she'd always wanted to do, which is build an art collection. Her husband didn't think that building an art collection was shrewd financially; it wasn't a good investment. So until his death, she was not in a position to do much about that. But she loved art. She had studied art in Philadelphia—and smart, really smart. And she came to me and said, "Would you help me to collect?" I said I'd love to.

So I spent a lot of time with her. We went to New York. We looked at art everywhere we went. We went to—I introduced her to all the dealers, and advised her of certain things that she should buy. She was a fabulous student. And I remember the first two—the first day we were in New York she ended up that week buying an Agnes Martin and a Donald Judd. Those were her first two purchases. So you get some sense of how—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A quick study.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: She was a quick study. She was just great. And that went on for, you know, 10 years or whatever. It was—and she has a great, great collection. She's always in *Art News*' top—whatever—100 collectors. She has a great collection.

And there came a point, as with all these collectors that you work with, when she didn't need guidance anymore. She knew everybody. She knew more people than I did by that time. She was an international traveler and, you know, she had all her other sources. So she now has a place in New York as well as a place in Baltimore, both of them filled with art. And she's a great collector. So that was one of the most important and ongoing relationships I had.

And another widow collector, Sue Cohen, who was also someone that I worked with closely, she became very passionate about Ellsworth Kelly, one of my favorite artists, of course. And found her a Kelly to buy, which is a great, great painting. But she also became very passionate about Mel Bochner, who I've done a big show of here. And that made—that always makes an impression. I mean, when you do these shows, it tends to influence collectors, the local collectors. You know, they look at it and they hear you talk about it and it tends to move

them in that direction, which is good.

So, yes, women collectors are important. But as I say, there are also important couples in this community. Louie and Alan Hoblitzell are collectors that I worked with early, and they were both equally engaged. Mary and Paul Roberts have a great collection of works on paper. And you know, they were equal partners in building it. So it's not always just the women collectors.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think recently a lot of attention has been paid to art collectors who are primarily investors or primarily people who were using art to enhance their standing in society or—the same way certain people lie to try to get on not-for-profit boards and so forth to sort of improve their standing in the community.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And these people of whom you're speaking, it seems like they are motivated by the art. They're excited by the art. So—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And those are your favorite people to work with of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They love art as much as you do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think it's easier for a person to conduct themselves in this way outside of New York than perhaps if they're in New York making like a pile of money in—on Wall Street and then trying to sort of insert themselves into high society or the equivalent today? Because there's a lot of—as you probably know, there's a lot of conversation about this in relationship to art and money. And a lot of what we've been talking about has been art, not talking about money.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's because in a museum, there's one guideline that I certainly enforce strongly: You never talk about art in terms of money. Every visitor always wants to know: "What's that painting worth?" We don't talk about art in terms of money.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess we could agree that would be good manners.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It is good manners, but it's much more than that. It's that people who are novices and read all the same things that you read about greedy collectors who make money on art come to the museum with that mindset. And it's the wrong mindset. And you really have to make sure that they understand that that's not what art's about. So it's really a very basic and fundamental approach that one needs to take in a museum situation to overcome that.

Now, honestly, there are all kinds of collectors in New York. New York's a big place—

MR. MCELINNEY: Oh, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —unlike Baltimore. So there are collectors there who passionately love art—[inaudible]—great collections. And I know a lot of them. If you want women collectors, someone like Aggie Gund comes to mind, one of the great collectors and great human beings of all time. You know, it's just there are no generalizations to be had.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And then there are people who are investors. That's their primary goal in life, is to invest, to make money. And some of those people invest in art. I can't do anything about that and neither can you.

MR. MCELHINEY: But that's not—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's the way of the world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That doesn't retroactively shape the art or really enter into the discussion about how art occurs in a meaningful way.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not at all, not at all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good.

So what about the trend mostly since you've left the museum world of sort of turning art museums—we could

name specific institutions who have traded in hundreds or thousands of square feet of exhibition space for big party rooms and—or have built, you know, slick condo towers next to their installation in order to augment their or expand their enterprise and have sort of turned their programming into more sort of culture theme park/infotainment-type activities?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I would—I would dispute your language, because—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I'm being provocative, again, so—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. I think that I'm not—I'm not going to criticize any museum that does anything it has to generate income. So building a tower is okay by me. They're going to make a lot of money and support the program with that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Having a big party room's okay?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I call them—I call it shrewd.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Having a big party room is great, okay by me. Don't have the party in the galleries with the art. That's all I care about.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's a good point.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's all I care about. If they have a party room, which we did at Baltimore also, and you can rent it out and generate income, one, and number two, [get] people into the museum who've never been there before, and they get a tour of the galleries before their party in the party room, for which they pay handsomely to rent, great. Smart. What's wrong with that? I mean, you cannot underestimate what a struggle it is to fund a major art institution. It is an ongoing uphill battle.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And it's a tiny, tiny percentage of the population that even goes to the museum. It used to be 10 percent. It's gone down. I mean, it's an unbelievably small percentage of the population that ever goes to a museum.

So—or to—much less to the theater, opera or ballet. I mean, they talk about the graying of the cultural population. This is serious we're talking about. New generations have no interest in these cultural phenomenons—phenomena.

So I think that anyone on the outside cannot possibly understand the pressures, the sheer financial pressures, of keeping these places afloat. So creative use of space that doesn't negatively impact the artworks is okay with me. The not negatively impacting artworks is a big issue, though. I mean, those are—those are easy lines—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that's where you draw your line.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's where I draw my line. And that line isn't drawn in every institution, and I think it should be. But it isn't. I can't help that, you know.

But I think in general the issue you're talking about—you have to be careful, because in fact all of those kinds of exercises are museums struggling to pay their bills and make sure they can keep their doors open and continue to do important exhibitions. When they don't have the money to do important exhibitions, they do shows that you and I would not want to see, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: They start doing local projects that don't cost them any money, or they do art students' work to cultivate their local audience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You know, anything that doesn't cost big bucks is what's going to end up on their walls. Not a good idea. So that's okay.

Now the second category is the kind of activity you're talking about—circus shows or whatever your phrase is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I mean, it's the kind of theme park sort of infotainment aesthetic that is—some

people would say and have said is sort of, you know, the dumbing-down of the message to, I suppose, make it more accessible to a larger audience. Without naming the institutions, there are some major institutions who have been sort of accused of doing this, and—not the Baltimore museum that I ever heard, but, you know, others where perhaps, yes, the people who are walking in the door, they're going to one of a dozen or half a dozen cafes; they're going to concerts, to films, to lounge around in, you know, the party room. They might see the art. They might interact with the art. They might not. You know, it's just a discussion. I don't know. It seems to be something that people—some people are angry about, and other people like it. And—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I don't think there's any getting angry at it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or annoyed. They regard it with disdain. So it's like not really the job of a museum to be Disneyland.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I think it's okay to reconsider the job of a museum. I mean, I don't think we have to stay the same as we've always been. God forbid. If we stayed the same as we—we wouldn't even have a feminist revolution if we stayed the same as we were. [Laughs.] I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You'd be still—like whalebone corsets and, you know—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Really. This is—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —hoopskirts.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: This is closed-minded. I mean, the bottom line here is that I don't think there's anything wrong with expanding the definition of what art museums should do. I mean, when I did the AIDS quilt, I—when I lobbied for that, and succeeded, it wasn't the sort of thing people in museums did. And there were a lot of people who said, you shouldn't be doing this. I think it's, you know, fair to argue that.

On the other hand, we did it, and it was—you know, it reached out in a different way. And I think that anything a museum wants to do in redefining itself is good.

Now when we talk about the Brooklyn Museum, we're talking about my bias here, because I'm, you know, totally beyond respect. I love Arnold Lehman. He and I are like family.

The bottom line here is that Arnold believes that if we are to sustain an audience for art museums in the 21st century, we better create it as a place that people want to go to. They want to go to the museum. In other words, they don't want to go just because there's a Monet show, because if you're only going to go to the museum when there's a Monet show, you're not going to go very often, are you? I mean, you can't do a Monet show every day.

Arnold has this concept that if you make the museum an institution, a cultural institution that's integral to your community; that you can go there to see a movie, go there to dance, you can go there to eat, you can go there to look at art, you can go there to do a whole raft of things, you're going to get more people looking at your museum as absolutely essential to the community. I believe he's right. I believe he's a thousand percent right.

That's a total rethinking of what the art museum is, and I don't—I think there are other people who are doing that, I suppose. I mean, I'm not, again, tuned in to all the universe in this country.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it would seem like that would require more deftness and somewhat of a balancing act to keep like, you know, the message and the mission on track—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's your job.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: If you're a museum director, that's your job. That's exactly what we did in Baltimore. I was talking about that the first day we talked. I mean, balance—you can do the Brice Marden show, you do the Joel Shapiro show, you can do anything if you also have a record for doing, you know, the jukebox show, the kind of fun thing that people have a different motivation to come for—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —hoping against hope that they stumble over something else in the museum that's fine art, but they say, oh, this is interesting, or that you grab them off for a tour and say, come here; look at this—unless it's Cy Twombly. Then you don't have a fighting chance—[laughs]—of course, as I said.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, there is an argument that the way that in 1950 there were very few, like,

restaurants in America, relative to today, and that the thing got people out of the house was McDonald's and that sometimes, you know, like a culinary culture can—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —start with a dollar meal with a burger and fries and a Coke—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and that whatever it takes—so you're saying anything it takes to get people to sort of change—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —their—you know, the way they use, you know, the rat maze they inhabit, they might stumble into a little corner that they haven't explored before, that's all good.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's all good. But I do think this concept—it's a fine—a fine point I'm making—this concept of making the museum itself as a function—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —a place that you want to go in your community, that it's not just that you go there for a specific art show—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —you go there because it's a place to go, you know, like the shopping mall.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You know, studies 20 years ago—we had one of those organizations come in and then did a study of our audience for us, and—at Baltimore, and the bottom line was, they said, your competition isn't the Walters art gallery. It's not the National Gallery in Washington. It's the shopping mall. That's your competition. When you figure that out, you're going to be able to fix this situation of no audience. They're right. They're absolutely right.

And if it means that you have to be a little more entertaining than, quote, "intellectual" or cultural—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: —I don't have a problem with this. In fact, I think it's visionary. I sincerely think it's visionary. Just don't hurt the art. Don't hurt the art. [Laughs.] Let the art have its space and hope that people will find it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But the shopping—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: People don't have to look at art, you know? This is one of my most—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're not going to die of it if you don't see a painting, right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right. This is one of my most important premises is that you don't force people to what they don't want. You know, you don't make people come into an art museum and go look at everything. If they don't like contemporary art, that—I mean, my feelings aren't hurt. You know, I'm a big girl. [Laughs.] Then they can go look at African art, or they can go look at Rembrandt. They can go—in an encyclopedic museum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or have a latte.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Or have a latte. I mean, you don't have to love everything. You find—if you're a human being, you find what your heart, mind needs. And for me, that may be minimal art, but you know, a Jo Baer painting that refreshes me—to somebody else—thinks it's a movie screen. My other favorite museum story—Jo Baer—here's a story for you. You wanted an anecdote.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. We've been waiting an hour and a half. [Laughs.]

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In the first show I did—you're right. In the first—the 14 artists in Baltimore, I had Jo Baer in the exhibition, and it was a two-panel painting—side by side, two panels that looked more or less like that. And they were at the end of a gallery, and there was a bench in the middle of that gallery, which, you know—

important in museums, you put a bench so people can sit down and fight their museum fatigue.

So I was up doing something in the galleries and walking around, and I saw two little old ladies, maybe in their 70s. And they were sitting on the bench looking at the Jo Baer. And I thought, well, this is really interesting that they've—finding this so much to study here. So I walked around, did what I was doing, and then I went back, and they were still sitting there. So I went up, and I said, "Can I—can I help you at all with something?" And they said, "No, no, we're just waiting for the movie to start." [They laugh.] Swear to God—a true story.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ba-dum bum.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: My favorite museum story. And the—you know, then your job is to make sure they don't feel like—you don't make them feel like fools when you explain to them that it's not a movie that's going to start. And I sat down and talked to them about the paintings, and they really did think it was movie screen. I think there's good reason to think it's a movie screen. You know, they weren't crazy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, they knew enough to know that it's something in front of which they might sit and think—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's right, and something might be seen there. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and anticipate something. And indeed, something was there to be seen, just not what they thought.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, not what they thought, exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's a great story.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But—you know, it is. It's really—you know, people are very interesting. And the other thing is how long do you think they would have waited? You know, I just stumbled across them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I don't know. They might have—they have had to have had a conversation. It could have been, like, you know, the Beckett thing. "Do you think it's going to start?" "I don't know." It's like—[laughs]—right. So—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Exactly, waiting for a movie that's—[inaudible]—Godot. Oh, my gosh. Museum life is very rich in experiences like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interactions with the public—that's a great story. Did you have any other sort of wonderfully illuminating encounters with members of the public?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Too many to count probably.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think about the National Park Service tour guide giving a group a kind of—a jaunt around the battlefield at Gettysburg and someone saying, "Why did they fight all the battles on national parks?"

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.] That's a good one. That's a good one.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But there is this kind of—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I love national parks. I spend a lot of time going to national parks.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As you explain it, it is sort of amusing and—in a nice way—that—the idea that the museum could take—so sort of appropriate the paradigm of the shopping mall, which is now being held up to all sorts of ridicule as being this entropic agent of, you know, anti-civic activity, that it's this highly regulated commercial—everybody wants to park as close to the door as they can because they can't bear to walk across the parking lot, that the—people like James Kunstler have spoken about them as landing strips for UFOs, you know, these kind of weird environments. It's sort of satisfying to imagine that the art museum could sort of appropriate, you know, the best aspects of that environment and use it to enhance its ability to connect with an audience.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That'd be good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm not naïve about this. I mean, when I—when I say I really believe in that, I'm aware that you could have crowds coming to your art museum. It'd be great, wouldn't it? And maybe 1 [percent] or 2 percent of those people would ultimately find themselves as art lovers in the art galleries, as opposed to in all the other opportunities. You know, I mean that's a realistic projection of what would really happen. But you

know, you have to count on that 1 [percent] or 2 percent to grow a bit. And even those small numbers would sustain an institution over time, you know, in terms of the art lovers.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So they're going to go to the museum and realize there's more to find there than King Tut.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Let's hope so. King Tut is all right, by the way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—oh, he's great.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Great exhibition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, we love him every time we see him, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Great exhibition, yes. You know, the—amazing, but you know, you're not going to have people coming in droves to look at Jo Baer. I mean, let's be realistic here. This is just not going to happen. I mean, even amongst art specialists, there aren't that many who are in love with Jo Baer. I mean, they really aren't.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It requires a lot of attention.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It requires a lot of attention. It really does. And you know, the kind of art that I love—I'm totally aware that this is a teeny, tiny taste in terms of the larger population. So our expectations have to be moderated to that reality, you know, that you—if you work in a museum long enough, you completely understand what the public will come for and what they won't. And then, you know, you have to do shows of Jo Baer for the very small number of people that will come.

You know, all my life I had these—the fabulous working relationship with Tom Freudenheim and then with Arnold Lehman. And we had, really, partnerships of the best sort. And essentially, I have to say I was allowed to do what I wanted to do in terms of exhibitions. I mean, I worked hard for the institution as the administrator and did my job as a curator. I got to do shows I wanted to do.

I always wanted a Richard Tuttle show. I did some incredibly difficult shows—I mean, incredibly difficult. Arnold drew the line at Richard Tuttle. [Laughs.] He said, "You know, we'll get 13 people to come see that show." I said, "Yes, that's probably true." He said, "We just can't do it." And he knew how much I wanted to do it. And we had a familial relationship, really. I mean, I always tease him about it. And he says, "I still wouldn't have you do the Richard Tuttle show."

And it's true. You know, there is a limit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just not that accessible to most people.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There's just a limit to what—I had Richard Tuttle in my first show, in the 14-artist show, you know. And people still joke about it in Baltimore. They come in and say, "Oh, you did that show with the little piece of wood on the floor." [They laugh.] You know, it's really hysterical. And somebody remembered.

But you know, there are limits in a major urban public museum. We're not talking about a museum of contemporary art now. It's a different context. And I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's an encyclopedic collection, as you said, so—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Absolutely. You know, you've got Asian shows; you've got African shows; you've got decorative art shows. It's a whole different situation. So people have to be realistic about that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What about writing? You're a passionate writer. You must be a big reader as well.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Big reader, big writer—love to write.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what shaped a lot of your thinking as a writer, your rhetoric, your practice?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I was writing when I was 11 years old, writing stories. So you know, I can't—it's genetic. [Laughs.] I just—I've come to this genetically. I can't explain it. I've always loved writing, and it's always been easy for me. I always sympathize with people who are really, really wonderful writers but have a terrible, painful time with it. And it's just not me. I mean, I just sit down and just start writing.

And I'm a reader. This room is all contemporary fiction. The hallway is all biography. I love biography and autobiography. Natural history is in the guest room. My office is filled with walls of art books. I mean, it's—I—if a book is on the shelf, I've read it. It's not that I collect books for the sake of it. I mean, I read a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're not there for decoration.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, they're not there for decoration. I like to look at them, but they're not there for decoration. I've read them all.

And I haven't read all the art books, by the way. Art books are reference sources, so—[laughs]—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, any authors who were extremely influential to you?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, I don't—I mean, yes and no. I've had two dogs in my life. One was named Finnegan, and one was named Moby. So—[they laugh]—that gives you some clue.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean, literature—I was an English major as an undergraduate. I mean, that's important to me. You know, I—but—

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BRENDA RICHARDSON: [In progress]—and those are the works that I buy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Brenda Richardson, resuming our conversation on July 30. We had taken a break because the disk or the card had run out of bytes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I do have an extra card.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Run out of gigabytes. I've got plenty of these.

One never knows how exciting our conversation's going to become. I guess we lost track of time.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Laughs.] Yes, we did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure that the transcriber will just sort of have to end the transcription of the prior SD card with an incomplete sentence of some sort.

Right before I inserted the new disk into the machine, you shared that you wanted to make a few final points about women artists.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, you'd mentioned that women artists—that the issue of curators and women artists was important to the funding source here of this program.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, absolutely.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Okay. So—I didn't know that from the outset. I had no idea what the interviews were.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I thought they were going to be interviews for the Archives of American Art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They are, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I know that. But sort of about the whole history of relationships with artists and so on and so forth. I didn't know about the Elizabeth Murray grant aspect of it.

In any case, what I wanted to say is that I can't say that I have made a special effort to show the art of women or to write about the art of women artists. I have done exhibitions of the artists whose work has attracted me and interested me and challenged me the most, and just in the course of things, in my generation, most of those are men and some of those are women. But what I find disturbing is that in recent years I have been attempting to find someone who would want to publish a major book on Lynda Benglis and have been utterly frustrated in that goal. No one wants to do a book on Lynda Benglis. Now, I am asked to write a lot, so Phaidon approaches me on a pretty regular basis, and Phaidon wants me to do a book on Brice Marden. I've written extensively on Brice Marden, who is a great artist and I've loved writing about him and have learned so much from him and from his work.

But I've said what I have to say. I mean, I've written three or four or five things on Brice Marden, including *Cold Mountain*, a major book. So enough is—and for MoMA, as well. So enough is enough. And so I said to Phaidon, I want to do Lynda Benglis. He said, "We can't sell a Lynda Benglis book. We just can't sell it." I wrote to MIT Press about a Benglis book. I wrote to Yale University Press about a Benglis book. No one wants to do a Benglis book.

Now, Benglis was a major figure, and she even has the whole feminist bent, the dildo picture. I mean, everything about her—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, that *Artforum* ad from—yes, the '70s.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes—would suggest that this could be a sellable property. Apparently not. I mean, I'm not part of the universe of press, publishing, so—I think that there's something about that that sends a powerful message. Phaidon also asked me to write a Robert Ryman book. You know, they can sell Ryman, they can sell Marden, they can't sell Benglis. I don't believe that they're lying to me. I think that they believe that's true. And it may be true. But I think it's about being a woman artist. I think it has to be. What are the other variables here? There aren't any other variables. It's the same generation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Numerically, there should be more women readers. So they want to not read about Lynda Benglis's work?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know if there are studies on the demographics of readers of art subjects, so I can't speak to that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean just on the planet there have been more women than—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I just—I just don't know. I mean, I really don't know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the marketing—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But I've had that personal experience of batting my head against a brick wall attempting to do this work on Benglis. And, you know, you can only sort of arrive at the conclusion that it's not about her and her work, which has a fairly significant profile, I think very significant, but I'm too—[inaudible]—to really understand how narrow our awareness is in the public arena for an artist like Benglis.

So that's all. I really just wanted to say that these are realities in which we live here, is that this is not for lack of wanting to. And by the way, it's not because she's—well, it is because she's a woman. I mean, I have a relationship with Lynda Benglis which is because she's female. I wouldn't have a relationship like that with a male artist, I don't think. I mean, it's more intimate, sisterly, loving and that kind of relationship than I would ever have with a male. So I'm—you know, I'm very close to her. I love her work. And I think that she is someone that deserves a full-blown biography, monographic study. And no one wants to publish that. So that's depressing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's because of her gender, not because of her work.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I believe it's her gender.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: If you were to propose a book on another living woman artist, like, let's say, Jennifer Bartlett, do you think you'd encounter the same resistance?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It would be the same. I think it would be the same. I'm trying to think of the artist it wouldn't be the same. Louise Bourgeois.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, who's—yes. But I mean a living artist.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, Louise was living until recently.

MS. MCELHINNEY: Until just recently, yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But there were a lot of books on her, is my point.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I mean a lot of books. I mean big, heavy, commercial books, not just art catalogues.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But there's another example of a person to whom not much attention was paid until she was well advanced in years.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Who? What are we thinking of?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean her.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You mean Bourgeois.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were saying someone else as well as—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, Louise Bourgeois.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. Well, yes. I mean Eva Hesse has the most publications of anyone in that generation, and it's because she's dead.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not Elizabeth. Not even close. I mean, you can't point to women artists of that era who have the kinds of library-shelf space that—I think you can only reach the conclusion that that's because they're women—and all that goes with that. I mean, it's not just that they're women now. They've been women for their lifetimes.

MR.MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So the whole experience of their penetration of the art world is female, goes back to them being female.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it doesn't have anything to do with our own particular point of view, whether they were feminists, radical—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —conservative, housewives. Didn't matter.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Doesn't matter. Absolutely doesn't matter.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is it because the publishing industry is an old-boys' club still?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know. I don't think so. The publishing industry, like any other commercial enterprise, cares about the bottom line.

MS. MCELHINNEY: It's hide-bound in other ways, too.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's hide-bound, but it cares about the bottom line. It just wants to make money. So, you know, what is their evidence that books by—about Brice Marden and Robert Ryman will sell and a book about Lynda Benglis will not? I don't know. But I know it comes from their marketing division. You know, the person who's talking to me is not a marketing division person. And when they're saying no to me, they're saying we can't sell—our marketing people say they can't sell that book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you can sell another hundred books on Klimt, or Kahlo, for that matter.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Frida Kahlo you can sell.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And Georgia O'Keeffe you can sell.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And Georgia O'Keeffe.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Those are the two. That's where the—that's where the list stops.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So those two artists are the only two who—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Those are the only female artists that come to my mind that will sell books and pack people into a museum. Everybody wants those shows because they can just have—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why is that?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is it because of how the work has been marketed?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I do not know. Well, Frida Kahlo because, you know, it's exotic and marketed, yes. I mean, there's a lot—her story is pretty compelling.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: O'Keeffe because the images are—you know, who doesn't like a flower painting. I love a flower painting. So does everybody else. It's just that I also love a Jo Baer and nobody else does. Georgia O'Keeffe is easy. She's also a great—great artist. I mean, thank god that these people aren't lining around the block for, you know, an artist who's not very good. That could happen also. Instead, we have Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe, who are both great artists. But the list stops there, as far as I am aware. I mean, it's not that there haven't been Eva Hesse shows and Lynda Benglis shows. There are. But when it comes time for a major monograph, it's not going to be there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, we just got a book from Sylvia Plimack Mangold, her little—as a kind of thank-you for something we did. And her husband, of course, is a very well-known abstractionist.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Right. She's well known too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She's very well-known as well, but that was—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: In the art world, I mean. No one beyond the art world, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No. But that was a Hudson Hills book, wasn't it. So it's sort of not a Phaidon or not Yale.

BRENDA RICHARDSON : Right, or an MIT.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or MIT. And—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: There are books being done, and usually it's because they're funded. I mean, I don't know who funded the Sylvia Plimack Mangold, but somebody did. And that's very—often these days that's done in conjunction with an exhibition somewhere. And thank god for that, that , you know, the museums do the exhibition and can guarantee a certain number of catalogues or under—you know, give what's called a subvention to the publisher. The book gets done. And if not for that, we would have nothing. If we were dependent on these big commercial publishers, it would—the book wouldn't exist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think everybody's got, you know, the jitters a bit too because of Kindle, NOOK, Google Books, all these ways to consume public domain—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: For sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —properties that used to be sort of, you know, the bread and butter, you know, reprints like, you know, the Pelican Books and all that stuff. So.

You were also talking, when we were adjusting the equipment, about your own collections, the art work.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Oh, yes, I was talking about the Native American. Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You've got quite an array of pottery and the Santo Domingo jewelry and works of art on the walls.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I don't really think of myself as a collector, of course, but I live with art, that's for sure. And I live with art of every description, from rocks that I've collected on my travels to decorative arts, the furniture that I sit in, eat at and whatever. I mean, I think it's—it's all aesthetic in some way. And if you're going to live your daily life, you might as well look at beautiful things. That's how I feel about it. And I'm lucky enough to, you know, be able to do that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How have you acquired all of these things? Have you—some of them gifts, others acquisitions?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I would say that, well, 90 percent of what I have in my home which is art and decorative —[inaudible]—I bought.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You bought.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I bought. I mean, certainly there are some gifts from artists, but they would represent—maybe even 5 percent of the collection.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: No, I buy my art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you, like, write a check and—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, like everybody else.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —put your money where your mouth is.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes, I do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's good. That's good.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: And, you know, I mean, it's not—the kind of art that I collect is, fortunately, not the kind of art that gets highly inflated in the art market, lest I wouldn't be able to buy it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, a lot of works on paper.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Lot of works on paper, correct.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And a lot of pottery.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You were speaking about—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: My pottery collections are almost all flea market finds from the early years. I mean this is not—you know, pottery—most of my pottery early. So.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where did you go? Did you, like, head up to Adamstown on Sunday morning?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Adamstown is one of the—used to be one of the best places. They're pretty much picked over by now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Shepp's Grove and Renningers—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: [Inaudible]—great places to go, even did Brooking once.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I remember—oh, god, where was it—Italo Scanga, the sculptor, used to religiously go—he and Harry Anderson would go to Schwenksville [PA] and go and climb around old barns hunting for pitchforks to turn into sculpture. So.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's good. Well, flea marketing was great fun. It was a huge entertainment for me. When I came east, of course, doing the flea markets of the East Coast, then it was great. I never did that in my Berkeley years so much.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's not that huge an activity, it seems, in—you know, the Midwest either. It seems like maybe a bit more now, but—California, is it—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's big out in Pasadena. There's a big place in Pasadena. But I never did that California one, so—I don't think I was doing flea marketing in those years. That was a long time ago now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it's interesting just to try to describe to the reader your—you know, how you're living in this apartment with—each room is full of books and objects, and each room has a different category of books and, I gather, a category of objects. In the other room you've got—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Objects are pretty much intermixed, but the books are definitely categorized.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you know, the Pueblo pottery is in the other room.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That's right. Yes, it is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's—it's an extremely orderly environment.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But the Pueblo pottery is intermixed with early American pottery in the other room.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You haven't seen that yet.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not yet. I look forward to that.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: It's wherever it looks best it gets—you know, I'm an art museum installer at heart. I like to do installations where the art talks to one another; you know each work of art has some dialogue with the other.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What are you working on looking forward?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I'm very much looking forward to my next project, which is on the horizon immediately. I'm going to work with Matthew Marks on an Anne Truitt drawings retrospective. And he's—well, he's starting in August and he's asked me to—I look with him at the drawings available and decide what the show should be composed of, and then I'll write the catalogue. So that's going to be a wonderful project, and the first time I've written about Anne Truitt. Even though I've done three shows, none of those shows have ever had publications. So this will be a really good project for me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Kind of like a durable outcome that will outlive the exhibition.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Yes. I'm very happy to do that. Yes. An important artist, one that's not seen as central, even though I think her work should be seen as more central. So that will be a fun project.

JAMES MCELHINNEY : And hopefully a book on Lynda Benglis in the near future.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: That would be very nice.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What advice would you offer to a young woman who is inspired by your example, by your career?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I would be honored if anyone were inspired by me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who looks at you and says, wow, that's quite a life; I wouldn't mind doing something like that. How would you encourage them to commence?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Well, it's a different world now than when I came into it. And I think that, you know, now going into the museum profession requires a different kind of educational base. And, you know, you don't just sort of jump into it and start from scratch because you know how to type. So more and more people are coming on the museum training programs. And I've never participated in one myself, so it's hard for me to say how that would have impacted me. I learned on the job how—what it was to be a museum professional and became one over time. So, I mean, if they love art, that's all that counts. In the end, they have to love art. And if they do, then the museum profession is one path to take.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I would expect that you would probably encourage them to learn all they can about the different tasks that are performed by co-workers, as you learned them all.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: You know, I don't know, James. I think that was certainly the way to do it then. Keep in mind that there would be a staff of maybe four or five people to start with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So you better you know how to do everything, because there aren't enough people to do it. It's a different world now, and, you know, you don't—there are plenty of art galleries that are start-up operations, shoe string, with two people working.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: But there aren't museums that do that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: So I think the path to museum work is completely different than it was in my era. You know, I'm really an old generation by now, so it's not something where I could give much applicable advice that would reflect on what I did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you would say that it wouldn't be a bad—it wouldn't be a bad quality to possess an extraordinary amount of curiosity about—

BRENDA RICHARDSON: I would think that curiosity [is] a good basis for any human being, actually, not just for a job. Yes, I really think curiosity is an under-rated quality. You know, to be interested in everything on some level is good. I mean, it opens you to the world and you discover things that you wouldn't have been learning about in your education, perhaps. So I think curiosity's important.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is there anything you'd like to add to the record today?

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Not that I can think of. If we keep talking, there are probably more things—[laughs]—but I don't think so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure we could keep talking for a very long time.

I'd like to thank you very much for your time.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Thank you very much, James, and Kathy [Manthorne]. It was good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's been a great pleasure spending this time with you.

BRENDA RICHARDSON: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]