



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Rena Bransten,  
2014 May 29-2015 July 10

Funding for this interview was provided by the Artists' Legacy Foundation.

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Rena Bransten on 2014 May 29-2015 July 10. The interview took place in San Francisco, CA, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Viola Frey Oral History Project.

Rena Bransten, Mija Riedel, and the Artists' Legacy Foundation have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations which appear in brackets appended by initials. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Rena Bransten in her home in San Francisco, California on May 29, 2014 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number one. Right, so let's start with some of the preliminary biographical information. We'll take care of that and move on to the gallery. You were born in New York City?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes I was.

MS. RIEDEL: In 1934?

MS. BRANSTEN: 1933.

MS. RIEDEL: 1933. Okay, what was the date?

MS. BRANSTEN: March 8th.

MS. RIEDEL: March 8th. And were you born in the city proper?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes I was.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you grow up there?

MS. BRANSTEN: I grew up there. I went to Dalton School, all the way through.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe your childhood if your parents were interested in art—your dad collected illuminated manuscripts. But were they interested in art, did they encourage you in that direction?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I think that, yes, my father was very interested in illuminated manuscripts. He became a trustee of the Morgan Library.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: He—at the time of his death, one of the leading dealers in illuminated manuscripts said he had the most important private collection at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name, Rena?

MS. BRANSTEN: William Glazier.

MS. RIEDEL: And your mother?

MS. BRANSTEN: Sylvia Glazier.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: My mother, I think, loved the impressionists, but my father thought, you know, anything that came after the 15th century was just nothing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Why is that, do you know?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. I think, you know, it was his way, or what—whoever. They died before I had a gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: What part of the city did you grow up in?

MS. BRANSTEN: I grew up in the Upper East Side.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so did you spend a lifetime at the Met?

MS. BRANSTEN: And my father was in the Army in the south pacific during the war.

MS. RIEDEL: During World War II?

MS. BRANSTEN: Two.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And when he came back we moved to a private house on 80th Street. And he would walk me to school, Dalton, which was on 89th Street. And I would say that the combination of my father and the Dalton School, which was very interested in the arts, probably was the background of my interest. Dalton at the time I went there had—the biggest artist I remember was Tamayo. Tamayo spoke—taught there. I—

MS. RIEDEL: He taught there?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. An artist who I've never heard of since, I think, called Victor Vicachil [ph]. I don't know how—and then—

MS. RIEDEL: Vicachil?

MS. BRANSTEN: I couldn't—

MS. RIEDEL: We could, perhaps, look it up

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —through Dalton.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: He taught art there?

MS. BRANSTEN: He taught art and then there was another—

MS. RIEDEL: That would've been—

MS. BRANSTEN: —way out wonderful woman who—whose name was—who I remember as Ms. Davies [ph]. And she was very expressive and emotive. And I think that combination—there was a lot of art that was taught there, music, I mean it was very much of a so-called progressive school, although I think it was pretty standard.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]. So this was the 40s and the 50s?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. I graduated in 1950 and then I went to Smith College.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Do you have siblings?

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No siblings?

MS. BRANSTEN: I was an only child.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Did you spend a lot of time at art museums? Were you frequently at the Met or the Frick or the Whitney?

MS. BRANSTEN: I would say—well, I don't think I was ever at the Frick as a kid. But I think certainly the Met. And what—like most people might—like I grew up with we all loved the Egyptian part with the mummies.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And the Met at that time, you know, had all the mummies strung out and all that. I mean, I do remember very much. But what I said, when I talked this Saturday, at the Smith College Museum, was in spite of going to—of living in New York and going to more of the Whitney than the Frick, was the fact that Smith, although it was a very small museum at the time, had some really outstanding examples. And when I moved to San Francisco in 1955, I realized that some of the pieces that the Smith College Museum had were better than some of the examples that were here.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: They had a really amazing Picasso from around 1912 or so. They had—I went to see all of the things that I remembered there. There were a lot of paintings from the French 19th century. I mean there was a very nice selection of things. Now, of course, the museum has grown tremendously and they have really a phenomenal collection. And I had—what I was going to say was that probably the teacher there that made the biggest impression on me was a fellow who taught modern architecture named Henry-Russell Hitchcock. Henry-Russell Hitchcock was apparently also connecting with the Yale Museum. And he was quite a character. [... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.].

MS. BRANSTEN: And but he was—I mean I remembered things that he taught that I didn't remember from other [classes -RB] at all. There was another professor named Phyllis Lehmann. And Phyllis Lehmann was married to another archeologist who was quite famous. And she was very strict and very stern and she taught classical art. She was very interesting. My father was very annoyed that they didn't teach anything about medieval manuscripts at all, it was just sort of mentioned in passing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So—

MS. RIEDEL: How did he become interested in that, do you know?

MS. BRANSTEN: He told me once—I think he was interested in printed books or something and that sort of went that way. I mean it's awful that I don't remember exactly, but I'd have to look up and—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And now were you, when you were in high school and then college, were you studying art history? Was that your major?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no. Art history. I got into art history because, actually, I liked painting. And I started off at Smith painting but I didn't like the professors there at all.

RIEDEL: In the studio?

MS. BRANSTEN: And I sort of segued into art history.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I always liked history. I was a major in art history but a minor in, I think, English history.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But don't ask me anything. [they laugh.] But that was a—the other thing I was going to say, the other influence which I mentioned sort of in passing, was that when I did start to buy art or think of what I wanted it was the influence was the Whitney Museum.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: Because I liked the idea of it being American art. And then I realized that being in California it was too hard to collect that material. It wasn't around here. There was other material here, but I wasn't interested in that. And so gradually it just—then everything became so global.

MS. RIEDEL: And your collection certainly is extremely global, and what the gallery shows now. It seems like a real mix of emerging artists and international artists.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Just out of curiosity what was the topic of your talk at Smith?

MS. BRANSTEN: [Laughs.] It was—she asked two of us to talk, one was somebody who I didn't remember at all—

it's always from the same class—named Barbara Jakobson. She apparently is a trustee at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And my closest friend in New York told me, "Oh, I can tell you a lot about her." But I—and she—we were—well Joan Cohen was the one who got me to talk. And she at first told me that she wanted me to—she said it's so important that people support the museum. So I went thinking I'm going to give a pitch for the museum.

MS. RIEDEL: For the Smith Museum?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. And then when I saw her, she said, "No, no, I want you to talk about something that you've given to the museum." And I thought, oh, you know. And Sam, my grandson, who came down to meet us from Saratoga Springs where he had been at school took a video of me. And you can see me going like this.

[They laugh.]

So she talked about, who did she talk about? Some very contemporary guy that does things on shelves, it's very sort of pop but much later. God, what's his name? I can't think but—

MS. RIEDEL: We can add that [later -MR].

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, yes. Anyway but it was the kind of thing that I didn't think anybody was going to be particularly impressed by. You know, here are sneakers and something else on a shelf, you know? You—I mean it's a—he's a guy that's had a lot of attention. Not quite so much now, but certainly the past 10 years. So when I said to Joan, "Well I'm going to talk." She said, "No, no I want you to talk about"—so then we went upstairs to the print—the photography prints and drawings. And I had given, early on, a Sarah Charlesworth but I had also given, very recently, a Marina Abramovic. Because, first of all, I find the artist Marina Abramovic sort of irritating. And it's not that I'm against performance art it's just—I just think—and I saw, actually, an amazing piece she did years ago at the Venice Biennale where she scraped bones like, I guess, cow bones. Scraping and scraping, you know, the smell was terrible, it was terribly hot, and there she was sort of in semi-darkness scraping bones. It was pretty amazing. But after that I thought, hmm. Anyway, I did have a very nice photo of her, which was from a series called *The Lovers*, where she started at one end of the Great Wall [in China -RB] and her lover, Ulay, started at the other end of the Great Wall. And then beneath this photo she had made some sort of drawings, what they meant I don't know, but they were—I've always liked drawings.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: So I thought well, this was something I could give without feeling any sadness of giving it away. And they put it—they actually put it up in the print room and what was nice was that people certainly remembered the whole thing of her sitting in the Museum of Modern Art and people sitting at the table with her [*The Artist is Present*]. And, of course, Barbara Jakobson had to say she didn't like her, but that was neither here nor there.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]. So the topic of the conversation was the piece that you donated and why you donated it and the importance of the collection in general?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. That was why I—I mean, maybe I talked for 25 minutes—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: —or 30 minutes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But basically I wanted to get across that the museum had meant something to me at Smith.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] When you look back on your career and your life is there a particularly significant educational experience? It could be Smith, it could be at travel, it could be a museum exhibition you saw, a gallery. Anything that stands out in relation to everything else?

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Or it's more cumulative?

MS. BRANSTEN: It's cumulative.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I really felt that—I think it's personalities that have made an impression.

MS. RIEDEL: For example, the two teachers you mentioned at Smith?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Phyllis Lehmann. Were there classes that were particularly significant?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. But I do remember that Smith at one time sent some of the teachers out into the country, you know, to raise money. And one of them was Phyllis Lehmann. And they asked me if I would get the equipment for her to give her speech. And, I mean, I got—I just knew it had to be the very best, you know, so I remember that there I was an old lady, so I wasn't that old at the time. But I remembered feeling that she had made such a strong impression on her attitude towards teaching and what we had—I mean, you've got to remember everything was slides in those days.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And what about it—was it in her enthusiasm? Her—

MS. BRANSTEN: No she was very—you know, very—I do remember she—

MS. RIEDEL: Does she have a particular area she focused on?

MS. BRANSTEN: I would say classical. You know, it was really a—she said she remembered being at a dig where they found the hand of the Victory of Samothrace. So she, you know, that stuck in my head. You know her enthusiasm.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes [Laughs.].

MS. BRANSTEN: It was a—the person who taught modern art, I think, was somebody named Vanderpole [ph], but I'm not positive. And there—she wasn't very interesting at all.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] What did you envision yourself doing when you graduated from Smith?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, well you've got to remember that I'm of the generation that—I didn't think I'd ever have a career.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. BRANSTEN: So my father, I think—I knew I didn't want to go into museum work.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Now why's that?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. I just—it just wasn't—it didn't—I guess it just—I didn't think I was qualified. I—when I came out to California I was married because I got married in the middle of my senior year at Smith.

MS. RIEDEL: And you graduated in fifty—

MS. BRANSTEN: Four.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Sixty years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I decided I would get a BA.

MS. RIEDEL: MFA?

MS. BRANSTEN: MFA. Or an MA, not even to teach.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

[... -RB]

MS. BRANSTEN: So I quit because I thought this is just a waste of time, I just—schlepping over to Berkeley, and I think I was the first person to ever be thought of as a dropout because they sent me a letter saying, do you intend to drop out of college? And I know they—at—that word hadn't been used before.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And your husband was John—

MS. BRANSTEN: Bransten.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, okay. And so you—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh and they—he worked for MJB. [M.J. Brandenstein & Co., founded in 1881, was acquired in 2005 by Massimo Zanetti Beverage USA. -ALF]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Which was a family company.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Coffee?

MS. BRANSTEN: Coffee.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Coffee, tea, and rice.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Based in San Francisco, yes?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] How did you meet?

MS. BRANSTEN: He was a relative, actually, and he went to Dartmouth so I met him then.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So the two of you married and came out here and you were thinking at the time, perhaps, to teach art or art history?

MS. BRANSTEN: No I just thought, you know, it was—I didn't think of myself as having a career.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: You know, it was more get married and have children, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right it was the mid-50s.

MS. BRANSTEN: And working, you know, do philanthropic stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I was on various boards. I was on the Oakland Museum Board. I was on the San Francisco Museum Board. I was on—the board that I was on that opened my eyes to a lot of things was Yerba Buena [Center for the Arts -RB].

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Would you talk about that? Why that was significant?

MS. BRANSTEN: Because I never—you have to remember I grew up with all of this in the 50s.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So even my former husband, who was very bright, I mean John was difficult, but he was very bright, said "There are really no good women artists," and could get away with saying things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh dear.

MS. BRANSTEN: Not only that you really didn't study anything but western art. So Yerba Buena opened my eyes to the fact that there were other people who aren't being shown at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. So how did you first, then, get started in the art world to transitioning more to the gallery world from boards?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well because, I think, both—the thing that John and I shared the most interest in was art; was the contemporary art. So we went to a lot of galleries. And more or less liked a lot of the same or similar things. I think he was more attracted to some of the pop artists than I was.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I remember he liked [Roy] Lichtenstein. I couldn't care less about Lichtenstein. You know, it was that kind of thing. But we both bought—when we broke up we both—we split the— what we had collected and I got the [Isamu] Noguchi. Which I think he had sort of suddenly, you know, said, "That's an interesting piece." You know, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So would you—

MS. BRANSTEN: That's what—that's really—but what I was going to say is when I talked about personalities, there were three dealers, all women who were a big influence. One was Virginia Zabriskie. One was Edith Halpert before she got dementia, which was sad. I really think that's very sad. And one was Betty Asher. I loved Betty Asher.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] I'm sorry, what was Virginia's last name?

MS. BRANSTEN: Zabriskie.

MS. RIEDEL: Zabriskie.

MS. BRANSTEN: She's—I think the gallery finally closed.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But it was—she had it up until, I mean, I think she had a 50th anniversary as Zabriskie Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you looking at galleries primarily in the San Francisco area? Were you going back and forth to New York?

MS. BRANSTEN: Every place.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And Los Angeles.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Los Angeles was a big influence too.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And so you would go there specifically to see shows?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you begin to work in the gallery world?

MS. BRANSTEN: I did—I—well I've told this story so many times. I would go to see Ruth's gallery [Ruth Braunstein Gallery]. I think by that time I was divorced.

MS. RIEDEL: And she was in North Beach now. Are we talking early '60s?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well no, no. I—it was—I opened the gallery in '74.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And we were partners in something called Quay Ceramics because she called it the Quay Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Because she started in, I say, Belvedere but it's really Tiburon.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And then when she moved to North Beach, did you not work with her or for her for a while?

MS. BRANSTEN: I never worked with her.

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't?

MS. BRANSTEN: I never worked with her.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. I read—



[Cross talk.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean somebody said that—

MS. RIEDEL: —[inaudible] someplace where, yes—

MS. BRANSTEN: —and—but that's not true.

MS. RIEDEL: That's not true, okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's correct that. So you never worked for her or with her?

MS. BRANSTEN: We shared space.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. Okay. Well this is good to clear up.

MS. BRANSTEN: So we started off in the Elizabeth Arden Building.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: On—

MS. RIEDEL: Sutter Street?

MS. BRANSTEN: Sutter Street. And she had one office or, you know. And I had another one down the hall.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it 550 something?

MS. BRANSTEN: 567.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Okay, and so this was '74?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Or was that one the Geary Street space, when you moved there?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I started in '74.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay. So how did you start—how did you—

MS. BRANSTEN: She said to me, "I asked Mary Keesling if she would like to be a partner in a ceramics gallery, and she said no." And she said, "Can you think of somebody?" And I said, "What about me?" And that's the amount of—

MS. RIEDEL: That's the extent of—

MS. BRANSTEN: —thought I put into it.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did you come to know Ruth? From just simply visiting her gallery?

MS. BRANSTEN: Just going around.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And were you interested particularly in the ceramics she was showing? It was certainly a fascinating time for bay area ceramics.

MS. BRANSTEN: She loved—she was very interested in Peter Voulkos. She also showed Richard Shaw. Those were the two—those were her two best—I don't think she really had other ceramics. She had—

MS. RIEDEL: —didn't do [Robert] Arneson?

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I don't think—I think Diana Fuller took on Arneson. But I don't think Diana Fuller was in business quite at—she must have been. I guess she was.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: I know her gallery went through a few incarnations as well.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So let's talk about the early days of your gallery, who you were exhibiting, how you selected your artists, what it was like.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well we had—so she had a lot of ideas of—we had—we'd have the ceramic gallery. And she had—somebody designed these glass shelves. So it was very much—it was sort of like a craft gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And she had her gallery in one section and you had yours in the other?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then she had somebody named Sylvia Brown [ph] who would go back and forth.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Who would work for you both?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So—

MS. BRANSTEN: And—

MS. RIEDEL: —that's perhaps why I was—it might have been—

MS. BRANSTEN: Confused.

MS. RIEDEL: —confusing is because there was a single space and there was Rena Bransten Gallery in one area, and Braunstein was—

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no it wasn't—

MS. RIEDEL: —Quay —

[Cross talk.]

MS. BRANSTEN: —there wasn't —it was Quay Ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh it was Quay Ceramics? So this is why I'm confused [Laughs.].

MS. BRANSTEN: It's very confusing and I don't even remember all the different names anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I know that then she decided to call herself the Braunstein Gallery and I thought that would —it was a shame to drop the name Quay because it had been around for so long.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I took up the name Quay Gallery, but by that time I wasn't only showing ceramics because the artists that I showed, particularly the better-known artists, did not want to be in a ceramics gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: You know, it was bad enough that they worked in ceramics they didn't want to be—it didn't—it was, you know, again the old craft thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So—and Ruth did not want to share [Peter] Voulkos and Richard Shaw. She wanted a whole different group. So there was Ron Nagle. Who—but I knew Ron from the Dilexi Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know if you saw that article, but there's a very nice article that, you know, Evergold [ph] what's the newspaper the *San Francisco Quarterly* did an interview with Jim Newman and I.

MS. RIEDEL: Recently? I saw one that—

MS. BRANSTEN: Back in—like a year ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the [article that -MR] also included Paul Karlstrom and a number of other dealers, maybe Paule Anglim?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, that came—

MS. RIEDEL: No?

MS. BRANSTEN: —it was only Jim and I.

MS. RIEDEL: Just you and Jim? No, but please say—

MS. BRANSTEN: It was very nice. If I can find it I'll send it to you.

MS. RIEDEL: He was such an instrumental and—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh he was very—

MS. RIEDEL: —seminal—

MS. BRANSTEN: —influential.

MS. RIEDEL: —influence, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And we were very involved with it. We—John and I, I mean—were involved. I mean, with the gallery. I mean we had—

MS. RIEDEL: With the Dilexi Gallery.

MS. BRANSTEN: —dinners after the openings, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And what in particular about—just if you would describe what the atmosphere was like at that gallery at that time. It was very—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well in some ways—

MS. RIEDEL: —formative—

[Cross talk.]

MS. BRANSTEN: —it was very—

MS. RIEDEL: —for San Francisco.

MS. BRANSTEN: —like—it was very like having a storefront gallery. It was on Union Street. He moved the gallery after that, but it was never the same and I wasn't as involved after that. But initially, it was a storefront right on Union Street.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And that's what we have now. It's a storefront right on Market Street.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right. So that's come full circle in a way.

MS. BRANSTEN: But you've seen it. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, brand new and this is the inaugural exhibition, yes?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So you've just moved there.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll get to that. Let's see.

MS. BRANSTEN: Now are we covering what you want to cover?

MS. RIEDEL: We're making our way. [... -MR] Your travels have certainly been significant in your own collecting. Was it significant from the start in terms of the artists that you showed?

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Or did you focus more local? [The gallery -MR] has become more international over time.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was sort of international when they had—I remember there was a period, very small period, in the 80s when there was sort of neo expressionism from Germany.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And we showed a lot of those young artists.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Markus Lupertz was probably the best known. Hermann Albert and then Salome [ph], some of these people are still alive. But the younger ones were mishandled by their dealer unfortunately. And they've never gone anywhere. And German dealers won't touch them. There was Peter Chevalier, Thomas Schindler. I mean these were very, very good painters. But—well I can't think of her name; Tricia will remember. Apparently she bought a—she was—her husband was in the furniture business and I guess she had money, and she went to a lot of art fairs. That was when the art fairs were beginning to start. She had—she was quite attractive. The paintings were very saleable. She was nice to work with. But then I think she closed the gallery but she still had a lot of their work, which she had on a website. [... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MS. BRANSTEN: That's the story I've heard.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] What do you think of as the most powerful influences in your career?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think—

MS. RIEDEL: I'm talking about those three gallery owners early on. Was there something in particular about them, who they represented or the way they did business that was significant?

MS. BRANSTEN: I never thought of, I mean, part of me is inquisitive, so I always wanted to, you know, get something. I think it was really—it was a compounding of people I met and artists I knew. Like Ron Nagle or whoever I worked with.

MS. RIEDEL: What in particular about Nagle was interesting to you?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, he was such a curmudgeon.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: That wouldn't be the first thing I'd think of.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I collected him early from Jim Newman.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I also knew Tony DeLap. Oh yes, he lived here and—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So very minimal work it seems like you were drawn to at the start.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I always have been drawn to minimal work as well. I can't—you know, somebody—John Caldwell once came into the—Trish and I asked him to come and talk with us about the gallery. And he said, you

know, you come into—and I had the—I didn't have the same stuff up, but you know, more or less. And he said "You never know what you're going to see in your gallery."

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] I think that's true.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's too eclectic. And I said "You know what, I'm not in New York I don't have to have one style. And it's not the way I work." I said "Look at what you see around me." But he didn't like that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And so how do you select—how did you select and how do you select your artists? Because it is quite eclectic.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's—I can't—it's a little bit of everything and that's what I've told people who've said well how do you—well how should we buy? I said you should really—even John Berggruen will say that, you know. Buy with your heart.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And that—but it's also with your ears. I mean I bought Donald Judd with my ears. I—and he was in the basement for years. I don't know it's a little bit of everything, and your mood changes.

MS. RIEDEL: Well you said something interesting earlier you said you've always been inquisitive. Is it perhaps—

MS. BRANSTEN: Acquisitive.

MS. RIEDEL: Acquisitive, okay, quite different. So what is it that intrigues you then? Or what is it that draws you to a particular piece or an artist? Is it something that's—

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it's probably somewhat—I mean I actually saw a piece of Wang Keping's in a friend of mine's home. And it was a piece—they went to China when it first opened up, as I did too. And they were taken to this man's studio. And he did—at that time, which is really—it's in the 70s, his work was very political. And so it was a mask or it sort of has something over its mouth. It's out of wood. I mean, his medium is wood. And I guess that sort of started me thinking about what he was about. Most of his work looks very similar to this.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] It sounds like travel has been very—

MS. BRANSTEN: Somewhat.

MS. RIEDEL: —significant. Many of the artists that you represent are from Europe or South America. But if you did—

MS. BRANSTEN: But Vik [Muniz] I didn't get from being in South America.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I went—how did I get Vik? I knew Brent Sikkema I think and Brent's—I said Brent, I'm sort of looking for different artists and you can—I showed a lot of photography.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: So Brent, who was at that time a private dealer, sent me to Vik's studio and at that time Vik was—I think he had shown with another gallery in New York. And he may have even shown a piece at Stephen Wirtz's. But I didn't really know him and I picked him up then.

MS. RIEDEL: How long ago was that?

MS. BRANSTEN: A long time ago.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] So you've seen amazing things happen in his career?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh my God, yes. But he's so bright I mean you just knew it was going to happen. And I'm sure Brent did too.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] When you look back on the various artists that you've represented over the years, do some of them feel particularly successful, or particularly interesting to you? Ones you're particularly proud of?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I think it—being an artist is so difficult. I think that—well let's—looking at the [John] Baldessari, though Baldessari was probably one of the more important artists that came out of L.A. [... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Because they're enormous pieces. They were on a sort of a modular thing where they can be moved around and it was quite interesting. Really. And I did show them once at the gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Were there other exhibitions that you felt really were significant?

MS. BRANSTEN: You mean other artists that were—well I think at one point [William T.] Wiley has always had an agent. Why, I don't know, because—but he did. Or does. And she came to me and said that he hadn't shown in San Francisco for years. I don't think he'd shown many places. But, you know, he had such an enormous start as a young person.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then I showed him for a while and then both of us decided it wasn't—there—I didn't like what he was doing and he was upset that I didn't like it. And so he said let's part while we're still friends and we stayed friends. I mean, I think he's a terrific person. But I don't think—I think what happens to so many people and I don't want to see it happen to Viola's. They have this big thing and then it, you know, it can't sustain itself.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] How so?

MS. BRANSTEN: It just doesn't. Well, I mean to me the art world today is so crazy anyway. I mean, Damien Hirst? Give me a break.

MS. RIEDEL: So we were talking briefly yesterday of your new space about how significantly the art world has changed and what you've seen. And maybe this would be an appropriate time to talk about the early days from '74 and what it was like then, what it—how—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I mean as people—

MS. RIEDEL: —the gallery is received? How frequently—

MS. BRANSTEN: People—

MS. RIEDEL: —people came? How many came? How many people came to the gallery on a given day—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well that I couldn't—I don't remember. But I do remember that it was part of people's life that they came to galleries. I mean, as somebody said to me recently in New York, and I think I said to this—to you yesterday, you know, the wives would come to the galleries in the week and the husbands would come [laughs.] on the weekends, and you really see that today.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] We haven't mentioned yet that you were in that space, 77 Geary from '74 to just this year.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh no, no, I had—was in the—that space—I was in the Geary space for 27 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So just, you know, go backwards from 2014.

MS. RIEDEL: 2014 [Laughs.]. Roughly eighty—mid-late '87, something like that.

MS. BRANSTEN: Then after we left Sutter Street we moved to another space on Sutter Street.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And so then at that time Ruth and I shared the office in the middle of the space. And she had the front with the windows as Tricia said, and we had the back.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And we were there for I don't know how many years. And then it got sort of—it got difficult being together. It—I don't know—Trish was working with me then, and so I think we just wanted to be independent.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: But we were never—I never worked for Ruth.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: But we got on all right. We really did.

MS. RIEDEL: So how—

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean I enjoyed it. I don't think—I think it was an impulsive move but it was the way I worked. And—

MS. RIEDEL: To start to be a partner?

MS. BRANSTEN: To be a partner. I don't think I really knew how Ruth worked.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And it was your first business, correct?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. But I was, you know, I mean I learned a little bit from other galleries. And from Ruth too.

MS. RIEDEL: And who were some of the first artists that you represented?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I did make a list. Now you remember I was looking—so Nancy Selvin.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I'm talking about ceramic, Peter Vandenburg. Sandy [Sandra] Shannonhouse, who was Arneson's wife.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Ann Adair, who was Voulkos' wife. Judy Moonelis. She's still around in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Ken Little. Chris Unterseher. Those were significant people who did ceramics. Ann Agee, I have a piece of Ann Agee's still.

MS. RIEDEL: But it was not exclusively ceramics, correct?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I'm just read you the ceramic people. But then I branched out into other people. I also—Jun Kaneko, who I've shown on and off.

MS. RIEDEL: And still show, correctly?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: —a little bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Correct? [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Judy Fox . Then I wanted to show also video artists, so I showed Dara Birnbaum. I showed—locally I showed Jim Campbell. And I really love Jim Campbell's work but I—working with Jim Campbell was difficult, so I said goodbye, which was a mistake because then his prices went crazy. Let's see who else.

MS. RIEDEL: When did you begin to introduce the video artists to the gallery?

MS. BRANSTEN: I—

MS. RIEDEL: Fairly early?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I would say 80s or 90s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Certainly Dara Birnbaum I showed. Then I showed—I can't remember her name, I was looking for it. That's what I was looking for. Marilyn Levine was another ceramic person—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —I showed. Betty Woodman.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And Viola.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, and certainly Viola. Viola was very important. I mean the important artists I had were really Vik Muniz, Ron Nagle, Viola, and Hung Liu. And Fred Wilson. I mean those are people that meant a lot to me.

MS. RIEDEL: And Hung Liu is still with the gallery.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And so is Ron Nagle?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. No Ron is really—he's being shown by somebody in Brussels. That'll last for a little bit. I mean he's done this before. And I got into ceramics also—do you remember the—a Garth Clark who had a—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well Garth Clark I thought was very interesting. And when I knew him early, early on he really wasn't—he didn't—he only really liked vessels and that kind of thing. But then somehow he got interested in Viola Frey and that's when I decided I'd better look at Viola Frey. And that's how I got into it. It was really somewhat through Garth Clark.

MS. RIEDEL: And what year was that, do you remember Rena, when you got—early 80s? Was it 70s?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember which space you were in?

MS. BRANSTEN: I do know that we—she had a show and Garth did the writing in the catalog.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh the catalog. So was that show maybe, Crocker?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And we decided we'd travel the show.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: So that's what we did we travelled the show.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And that's how Tricia got involved with the gallery and she was trained by someone named Ann Kohs.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Who was sort of an agent for Manuel Neri. I have very early Manuel Neri's in my basement if you'd like to see them.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So that was really when the relationship with the gallery started was around touring that exhibition?

MS. BRANSTEN: That was—it probably was a big step for us.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And I'm trying—I think that was right before or right after the Whitney exhibition, do you remember?

MS. BRANSTEN: Of?

MS. RIEDEL: Viola's?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh no it was way before.



MS. RIEDEL: Way before, so '80 and Whitney [was -MR] '84.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I mean I knew Patterson, Richard Marshall, and Richard Armstrong from—they were, you know, they all started off at the Whitney as interns, whatever they called those people.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So some of them sort of influenced me. I'm still close to Patterson, sort of. I see Richard Armstrong periodically. Richard Marshall I haven't seen in years. Who else? Then I told you about the Germans that we showed. A lot of photographers, because I was also influenced by Van Deren Coke, who was at the museum. And I haven't discussed the museums at all or my—I sort of mentioned Yerba Buena, but I was on some of those boards early on and I knew the people that were involved with them. The staff. So I think I was lucky that way. I mean I sort of played it both ways.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] So it was educational and informative, it helped —

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —educate your eye to what was—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —being exhibited and—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well somewhat yes. I didn't agree with everything but I did—I saw how things worked.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Were there any shows at any [venues -MR] besides Yerba Buena that were instrumental to your way of thinking?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I—

MS. RIEDEL: That—

MS. BRANSTEN: —no shows at Yerba Buena.

MS. RIEDEL: Or any of the—

MS. BRANSTEN: It was more the attitude of some of the other people on the board. There was an artist who is a Latina. Oh God, what is her name? Amalia, is it Amalia Mesa-Bains? I guess so. Who lives in—she went down to U.C. at, I don't know, at some other U.C. campus. But she was the one who opened my eyes to the fact that Yerba Buena was supposed to be, you know, a community museum. And opened my eyes to the idea that there wasn't—it wasn't only white people making art, or white men making art. I mean I—it sounds so corny to say that now but—

MS. RIEDEL: That was—

MS. BRANSTEN: —it was—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was an eye opener.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then I showed Rupert Garcia, that was another person.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. There does seem to be—I was—I've looked back at the artists you've carried over time, there does—I was trying to think of themes or common threads, and there does seem to be a little bit of political underpinning from time to time.

MS. BRANSTEN: From time to time. I think—definitely a figure to bend.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] So it sounds as if the photography aspect of the gallery grew up in parallel—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. I think—

MS. RIEDEL: —just around—

MS. BRANSTEN: —I'm sure part of it—

MS. RIEDEL: —[inaudible] that was the primary focus.

MS. BRANSTEN: —was Van Deren Coke.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Who had a girlfriend at the time, who was Judith Golden. And I said Van, who do you think I should—who would you show? I mean I'm not going to only show ceramics anymore, and he said Judith Golden. You know, I mean talk about, you know.

[They laugh.]

Any rate I did show Judith Golden and she's still around, but not very interesting. And I—there were a lot of—photography was sort of like ceramics, nobody gave it the time of day.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So how did you—

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean the one—if you say, you know, what influenced you was going to London to the ICI and seeing these large photographs. And they—I think that was the beginning of the large scale photographs.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] So travel and art fairs [were two ways -MR] you found your artists.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, yes. But absolutely. Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I think it was also going to other galleries and, you know, I worked with other galleries like I showed Uta Barth through another gallery. There were a lot of people I showed like that. And, of course, you—then you have to do a commission and so you don't—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —but I didn't mind doing that because I didn't live off the gallery, that's the other advantage I had.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were able to show adventurous work that was interesting to you?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I always had, outside of one person, I always had people who worked with me that I liked. And two of the fellows who worked with me opened their own galleries and they're still in business.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about—who are they?

MS. BRANSTEN: James Harris who's in Seattle, and Walter Maciel, who's in Los Angeles.

MS. RIEDEL: Walter—sorry?

MS. BRANSTEN: M-A-C-I-E-L. Maciel.

MS. RIEDEL: Maciel. Another thing that the gallery did that I always thought was interesting is you [produced -MR] quite a number of publications.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes because I liked that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It was so wonderful—

MS. BRANSTEN: But then that changed.

MS. RIEDEL: —the way you document—how so?

MS. BRANSTEN: Because it got so expensive—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: —then and then the, you know, the Internet came out.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So, you know, that changed a lot too.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] But early on there were quite a number of catalogs.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, we did.

MS. RIEDEL: Dozens, yes?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes. No I enjoyed that.

MS. RIEDEL: So there is a level of scholarship and information and documentation that—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I wouldn't say—documentation I would say more than scholarship. And I tried to get some writers that were decent writers.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Were there particular writers, or critics, that you've read over time that you respect that have been—you feel are significant?

MS. BRANSTEN: No I saw that, but I don't think so, really. I thought—I like Roberta Smith. I like her husband where he writes for—what does he write for? *New York Magazine* I think. No I like a lot of—Ed Kimmelman although I think he [... -RB] writes well. What's his name? Holland [Cotter] I think—I think the *New York Times* has some very good writers.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I don't go out of my way. I think there's certain people that I meant to write down but I think I wrote it on something else.

MS. BRANSTEN: Other writers. I mean that I liked.

MS. RIEDEL: We can come back to that tomorrow.

MS. BRANSTEN: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's circle back around to Viola [... -MR]. How her work was received over time.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh it was terrific.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? From the start?

MS. BRANSTEN: Because she hadn't—she—Viola was quite—is diffident and she hadn't really pushed herself. I mean she wasn't that kind of person. And she—I really think that the fact that we were—she was sort of a star in the gallery. That it gave her a certain kind of attention that she thrived on.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] What attracted you to her and her work in the first place?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think, frankly, I was attracted, because I knew she was having a big show.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I thought I better go look at it. Because it, frankly, wasn't the kind of work that I had been attracted to.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. What about it did or didn't attract you?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: It was figurative, it's monumental.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. Well it wasn't monumental then.

MS. RIEDEL: Well —okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Or as monumental.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Certainly fits in that general funk category, but I don't necessarily think—

MS. BRANSTEN: That wasn't—

MS. RIEDEL: —of that with your—

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: —gallery either.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Very different than Nagle or—

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. I think because she wasn't—I mean part of it again, is, you know, is the influences around you.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And she didn't have the influence that a lot of the other artists had. I once interviewed Joan Brown who said, well she had no problem at all. Well that she—Joan Brown, A, was very pretty at the time. And she had been married to Manuel and she had people, you know, she had a lot of self-confidence or whatever. And so she never had—Viola didn't have that kind of charisma or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And yet when I look at old, old pictures of Viola she was a pretty woman. I don't know what—I don't know what—I don't know what—I don't know—she was a very unusual person.

MS. RIEDEL: She was.

MS. BRANSTEN: Her brothers, she had two brothers. She was the only person in her family that went to college. Her brothers did a lot for her, but she felt that they just took up too much of her time and she didn't—wasn't interested in being a sister. I mean it's a little strange. She took care of an artist who was really a critic or a historian, Charles—

MS. RIEDEL: Fiske.

MS. BRANSTEN: —Fiske. She took him on because a friend of hers, who was gay, said you have to take care of him he's, you know, he's drinking too much and he can move in with you and whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this—

MS. BRANSTEN: They got on.

MS. RIEDEL: —Vernon—

MS. BRANSTEN: What?

MS. RIEDEL: Was this Vernon Coykendall? Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Now it's also been suggested—

MS. BRANSTEN: She also—she—I don't know she was a complicated person but I never got into it.

MS. RIEDEL: Many people referred to Charles Fiske as her partner. Were they presented to you that way?

MS. BRANSTEN: [No. -RB] I knew Charles was gay. And Viola had a lot of gay friends. I don't think she was—I don't—she never—she didn't seem to have a sexual side. She was very devoted to being an artist. She felt that was—you couldn't, you know, distract yourself. And she—oh, she and Charles used to have these humongous fights and one time I sent—Mary Frank was out here having a show, and I sent her over there to have lunch with Viola. And Viola and Charles got into such a terrible fight and Mary called me up and said, "Please get me out of here, I can't stand this." But two more different people than Viola and Mary Frank are hard to imagine. As you—I don't know if you've ever met Mary.

MS. RIEDEL: No I haven't.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I think Mary was very beautiful and she was married to, you know, what's his name and — [Robert Frank -RB]

[END OF branst14\_1of2\_sd\_track01\_r]

MS. BRANSTEN: He was very difficult, and I think they had a daughter that died in a crash, and they had a son who was like schizophrenic and—the husband would put him in apartments that he burned down. I mean Mary was beside herself.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. How was Viola's work received in the gallery? It sounds like from the beginning it was—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh yes, it was received very well.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Because, I mean it was—it was very well received. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: She had that major exhibition, and so it sold fairly well.

MS. BRANSTEN: It sold a lot. I mean, if I—when I was looking at all these old ledgers, I mean we sold a lot of Viola Frey. A lot.

MS. RIEDEL: How did her work change over the years that you represented her?

MS. BRANSTEN: It just got bolder and bigger.

MS. RIEDEL: [affirmative.] Bolder and bigger. Did she begin to do the cluster pieces then when she was representing—

MS. BRANSTEN: She was always doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: She was always doing those, okay. Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And they had, you know, like—there was one that—I think she felt she was overweight and eating too much and she had one where, you know, it was something to do with greed and—things like that. I—

MS. RIEDEL: Would you go to her studio and curate the shows? How did that work?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I've never curated a show.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean I—I mean with Wiley at times I would go over there with Walter, he was working with me then. And we'd go to the studio and I'd think—you know. But mostly I've—with the—the thing that art fairs do, is that the artists don't have that much work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean if they're going to be in an art fair, and then have an art gallery, it's tough.

MS. RIEDEL: Did—were there any—are there any stories or anecdotes about working with Viola over time, visiting her studio that are insightful?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well just the one about Mary Frank and the—No, I think that—she had a fellow who worked with her who knew Viola very well, and he had—I think he got AIDS and killed himself.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Was that Kevin—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, and Kevin had, you know, stories about Viola and all of that. But—I mean I just—I even traveled with Viola, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Where did you go?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. We went some place in the Midwest. And—I don't know. We went to—I guess it was Philadelphia. It was Philadelphia. And Helen Drutt wanted to put up Viola at her home, and Viola said "No, no, I'll stay with you." So, she did. But I enjoyed Viola, I can't think of anything, you know, that was—I think Viola

liked me in as much as she liked anybody. I think she was fonder of Tricia, because—whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, Tricia had helped with that whole exhibition for [inaudible]—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, but that was years before with—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, that was at the beginning of a thing with Viola. At the very end, she—Viola trusted Tricia with a lot. And she felt—I mean I think she was—I think she—you know, Squeak was a student of Viola's, but I think Viola at the end had reservations, but it was too late.

MS. RIEDEL: Reservations about—

[... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: She seems—

MS. BRANSTEN: But I don't know. I think Trish was more involved than I was at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: And at that point, the—she was no longer affiliated with your gallery, she—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh no, she was affiliated with us until she died.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. But at that point, the foundation took over her estate, and so they [inaudible]—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, sort of. And they would just—I don't know. I don't know it well enough to go into it, and I don't want to say something that's not accurate. But it was just not handled well. We had pieces in the gallery, and they said we could buy them from the estate. And at that point they had another person who was head of the estate [... -RB].

MS. RIEDEL: Well it seems like that transitional point when an artist passes away and to [inaudible]—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, I think—but see, with Viola was not—I mean she'd had a variety of strokes—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —and a fall, and then—and Trish took very good care, she went down to see her in the hospital, all over the place, and she—I think that was where they really bonded.

MS. RIEDEL: I know. [I spoke with Sam Perry a couple of weeks ago, and he talked about working closely with Viola for so many years and how, even when she was ill, she was completely focused on her work. The work was what mattered to her. -MR]

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh my God, and he would say, Viola, you're doing the wrong hand with the, you know, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no, he was lovely with her. And so was Cameron [ph]. They were both very devoted to her. And she was very devoted to them. [... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Viola was not a very generous person. But she said "Viola, you have to do this."

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So, would you say that the interest in her work was consistent over time? You say it started out fairly enthusiastic on the whole. You showed her from say '80 until her death in 2004?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so that's 24 years.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It's quite a long time. Was it a fairly consistent interest all the way through?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, I would say. I would say.

MS. RIEDEL: That's substantial.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I think it was—it was unique.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean—and I don't think that it's ever been what Pauline is upset about. It's never been interpreted well.

MS. RIEDEL: Could you say some more about that?

MS. BRANSTEN: I can't, because I'm not a—I'm not his—you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Certainly Garth Clark has written about it, and [inaudible]—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, but not—I mean, when you think about some people that have written about artists. I mean some of it's wonderful, and some of it's—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's very hard to write about an artist from—I think.

MS. RIEDEL: And do you think that would help her career and her work?

MS. BRANSTEN: I would think it—having—yes, I would think so. I would think so. It would be—but the same thing for Mary Frank. Where—what's happened to her? You know. And these were very fine artists. I think that it's just today it's—so much is—I don't know. Names, Gagosian, I mean it's just—

MS. RIEDEL: Does it feel like—

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean even think about [Claes] Oldenburg. What—where is—what's happened—He should get more attention than Damien Hirst for God's sake. And—

MS. RIEDEL: How would you describe the change in the art world over the past 30 years?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it was really the art fairs. I think it was the auction houses getting very aggressive about contemporary art. I think that's the two things.

MS. RIEDEL: And how would you describe the change in the art world as a result of that?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it's—I think—I don't know. I don't have that kind of vision, but I think that some of the collections that were made early on were very serious collections. You're not—you don't really see that anymore. There's a lot of big collections, but—they have advisors. I mean I—it's somewhat meaningless.

MS. RIEDEL: An investment thing?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: More like business.

MS. BRANSTEN: Or accumulations. I could say the same thing about me.

[They laugh.]

MS. BRANSTEN: But I know it's, you know, accumulating a lot of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: And what would be the difference in one of the other—

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, it—when you think about everybody having their own museum, and you think, oh my God. Who's going to support these places?

MS. RIEDEL: Does it seem like—it sounds like what you're saying is there's less of a public spirit behind it?

MS. BRANSTEN: [... -RB] It's just—I think a lot of it is the art fairs just pulled it all into another direction.

MS. RIEDEL: And the direction being more global, more expensive?

MS. BRANSTEN: More commercial. I mean I think part of what I guess I liked about being a dealer or being a collector was talking to the dealer or collector that came to the gallery or that I went to. You just—you can't do that at an art fair, you're busy looking around to seeing who you're missing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right. So, that seems as if there was more engaged reflection and contemplation on the work, more serious conversation?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: More focus on the work?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Less as an object and more perhaps the ideas behind those?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well—

MS. RIEDEL: Unless it's a commodity?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, I think it—I think art, frankly, has always been commodified, but not like it is now. Where you get people do. I mean I guess Warhol started it.

[They laugh.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I did know Andy Warhol.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you meet him here or back in New York?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I met him in New York. In fact, we were married, and we thought it would be—he had done the soup cans, and my brother-in-law was in charge of the can of the coffee, so this MJB coffee, and I've got—and he was in charge of a factory that made the cans. So, we thought it would be good if Warhol did a can for MJB for my brother-in-law's birthday, which may have been his twenty-fifth birthday, anyway, he was a very young man. And Warhol was just starting off, but he had done the soup cans.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I said to him, well would he do that. I mean I'm—I remember going to his apartment, his home, which he lived with his mother on actually opposite door from school. Well anyway, he said "Send me a can," and so we sent him a coffee can, he said, "Yes he would do it, and he would show us drawings the next time we were in New York, and we could pick out which we wanted to develop." But in that period, the price went up. So in the end, we bought a drawing that said MJB coffee, but of course neither of us cared about it, and John sold it to a museum in Switzerland. So, a museum in Switzerland made a postcard of the MJB coffee can.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that's a great story.

[They laugh.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You've done a number of—are there any art fairs that have been especially significant? Which ones have you done? When did you start?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I used to go to all of them. I mean I would—went to the first ones were all in Chicago, and at that time, it was a Navy pier, and there were maybe 60 people or galleries at the most. And—

MS. RIEDEL: This is going way back to the Chicago International New Art Forms Expo, that sort of thing, or?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. It's really way back, because Trish—Ruth and I shared a booth, and I should say that Ruth and I also had a space in New York that was over Phyllis Kind's—that they were three dealers in the space in New York. And it was—it was right in Soho. Okay. It was on the second floor. And so that you'd—each gallery would have the space for like a month or two months, and I remember that Ruth had a very nice Manuel Neri show and nobody bought anything. And I said to Ruth, "I'm going to see if the Whitney will accession one. I'll give it." And they didn't want it.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.



MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What—when was that, roughly?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, it was earlier, early on—you know, I don't even remember—

MS. RIEDEL: So late seventies?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. I mean this has nothing to do with the art fairs.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was probably around the same time as the Chicago Art Fair, which was early, early on.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then I went to—then I decided we'd—I didn't get into Frieze, so I decided I'd go to ARCO. And I enjoyed ARCO, although that's an enormous fair. And it's—it's right by the airport, so you have to take, you know, a 40 minute ride out to the airport from downtown Madrid, and—I showed an artist there who subsequently became quite famous named Joana Vasconcelos, and she is Portuguese. And she's had a show at, oh God, where—she's had big—she makes enormous pieces. They were—and I had a show of hers, and it was so nice. I think I sold one piece, maybe to my son, I don't know. And she made this tremendous ceramic crab. She worked in ceramics, but she also worked in knitting [tattooing –RB]. She had like groups of ladies that would knit according to what she wanted, and that they would hang from the ceiling. They were great stuff, but I took her to Miami, and the piece was not handled well and it broke.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh dear.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I paid her for it, but that was the end of it. I mean I just didn't want to deal with it anymore. At that time, she didn't sell well at all. Now she's a big deal, but—and she's a medium big deal. So, I'm glad I showed her, but.

MS. RIEDEL: And does the gallery still continue to do art fairs?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh yes, we do about four or five a year. Four I would say.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, quite a lot.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And—

MS. BRANSTEN: But it's very political, so it's hard to get into some of them, and you have to say what you're going to show, and it has to be interesting, and I think people are getting fair fatigue as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Which fairs have you done, or which do you feel happiest with?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't particularly like any of them, but you know. We don't do ARCO anymore; it costs too much money to ship stuff over there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: We do Miami. A fair in Miami, a fair in New York, a fair in Chicago, a fair here, a fair in Houston I think. But I don't think we'll do that anymore. So that's five.

MS. RIEDEL: New York, is that *The Armory Show* in New York?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then in Chicago, which one?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, it's this—it's just the one in Chicago. You know, it's at—they went back to Navy pier.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's—it used to be owned by—

MS. RIEDEL: Let's look at the—

MS. BRANSTEN: The Kennedy family. But I don't—and I think it still is, actually. I think the merchandise part of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have ongoing relationships with other galleries and dealers?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes and no.

MS. RIEDEL: Does it feel like a community? Did it feel—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh yes. I think all the galleries—and then sort of the midrange galleries all feel the same way. It's a different world. And they—everybody. I mean my favorite story is that we were in Cologne and we went into a gallery in the afternoon, and this woman came running out and said, "What did you want?" And we said, "We just came to visit the gallery." She said "Well nobody does it anymore." And that is a big gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was like—I don't know. In Cologne, but it was a big name.

MS. RIEDEL: Have many of your sales and collector's shifted to online?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh well we always had stuff online, because people go to an art fair and they see a piece, and then they think about it, and then they look online, see where they show, and then they survey—yes, there's stuff online, a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: But it's—

MS. BRANSTEN: Particularly with Vik Muniz.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And is it primarily follow up, however, to people who've actually been in the gallery or fairs?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh yes, yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So, that's still essential.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes it is.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you show any artists that really focus on technology or that use a fair amount of technology? I mean certainly we've looked at photographers.

MS. BRANSTEN: Right, right. Doug Hall does a video.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Amparo Sard does video. Dawoud Bey did a video for this last show. What else?

MS. RIEDEL: But those weren't even necessarily—they didn't need video—or they didn't need technology to do those. They could've done those 20 years ago, yes?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I think you still—to set it up you still need that, or you need a certain amount of that. I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. It does seem that the gallery is showing work that does have an increasingly technological bench. Does it feel that way to you?

MS. BRANSTEN: John Waters we also showed.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: But he doesn't do anything to—I mean there what technologically he—well, and with Burtynsky, who's somewhat—he's done this terrific movie.

MS. RIEDEL: That's *Watermark*?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And he does large-scale photos as well.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: We had a show this fall. And then when *Watermark* showed in San Francisco, we did—that was really the first show we did in that—in the new space.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And we get a fair amount of attention because of that.

MS. RIEDEL: I would think.

MS. BRANSTEN: Although I never particularly wanted to show Edward Burtynsky wasn't what—but he's—somebody came to us and asked us if we would do the show [... -RB]. And so we said yes, because we had a big space. And we were glad we did it. But many years ago he asked me to show him, and I just didn't—I wasn't that keen. But I did show a lot of photographers. Some of whom aren't even alive anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back on that group of photographers, are there any in particular that you felt—

MS. BRANSTEN: Was sad that they died?

MS. RIEDEL: Well—

MS. BRANSTEN: There was a young man that was named Bruce Handelsman, who we showed who died. I thought he was very promising. Sort of conceptual photography.

MS. RIEDEL: It does seem that there is an increasingly conceptual bend to the gallery.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. I think that's very interesting. I think that's sort of the route that Tricia is moving in.

MS. RIEDEL: And just to be clear, Tricia is your daughter.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have two sons?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And they are?

MS. BRANSTEN: One is a lawyer, and the other is my youngest who is a video—he started off doing video about food, in fact he got a prize of doing a video about food, and then he sort of segued into various things he did a lot of video for us. He's done video for Berkeley Rep, ACT, and then now he's decided to go into catering, because he's an amazing cook. So, he's doing a little bit of everything.

MS. RIEDEL: And what are their names, your sons?

MS. BRANSTEN: My oldest son is Peter, and he has gotten interested because he—his wife is half Indian, so he's—because when they go to India, they—she has a million [people in her] family, so he decided he'd go out and look at some of the galleries, and he's gotten interested in buying Indian art.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I would say he was interested in photography, and because he took pictures, I showed you a picture he—but he got—wasn't—and I used to buy photographs for him, and—

MS. RIEDEL: This is the older son, or the younger?

MS. BRANSTEN: The older one.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Peter.

[phone rings]

MS. BRANSTEN: Peter. My younger son is I would say has an interesting eye, sort of more quirky, like mine.

MS. RIEDEL: His name is Dave?

MS. BRANSTEN: David.

MS. RIEDEL: David, okay. So, three children.

MS. BRANSTEN: Three children.

[phone rings]

MS. RIEDEL: Do you need to get that?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, it will—it's probably a Democrat.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Probably a Democrat?

MS. BRANSTEN: I must get five emails a day, at least, from somebody running for office.

MS. RIEDEL: Which fairs or shows have you felt were most successful or most interesting?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't think that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean I never did. So, I don't—

MS. RIEDEL: How do you choose which—

MS. BRANSTEN: And when the show is over, it's over. You know, I mean, I love Dawoud Bey's show, because that was a wonderful show, and the pieces were so, so alive. We went to see [his show at -RB] Mary Boone in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: So we went, and she had—she has two galleries in—one was—is on Fifth Avenue, and she had a lot of the pieces there, and they looked wonderful. And she came out and talked with us, and I said, "Mary, I remember when you first opened the gallery on West Broadway, and it was like the gallery was maybe half the size of this room. I remember that it was 420 Broadway and all the galleries were there," and she had a little sort of adjunct thing of it—anyway, it was even underground, I don't know. But she's come a long way.

MS. RIEDEL: And the Bey show, that's interesting to me because it's very American.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: But clearly figurative. It's political. It's—what else in particular about that show was moving for you?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well I liked Dawoud Bey. I mean I saw when the museum in Minneapolis first opened—

MS. RIEDEL: This is the *Birmingham Project* we're talking about.

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no, this is Dawoud. He had a show at the opening of the museum. What's the museum in Minneapolis? The—

MS. RIEDEL: The Walker.

MS. BRANSTEN: Walker. And I had never seen his work before.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I really reacted to—it's a very large photographs, again, of people, and he showed with—I think Rhona Hoffman in Chicago. And I did show his work then, and we stayed very friendly, although I couldn't sell a thing of his. And then he did this—he talked to Tricia, you know, on and off over the years, and talked about the *Birmingham Project*, and she said well when you get them together, we'd love to show it, and that's how we did. But I hadn't shown them in maybe 15 years.

MS. RIEDEL: And what about this show was so successful to you?

MS. BRANSTEN: It was a beautiful show. It's just the pieces of faces are so wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you say beautiful, can you say what you mean by that?

MS. BRANSTEN: It was just the way he put—it was just—he's a very good portraitist.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And he did them in black and white because he said it was the period. You know, it wasn't color photography.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Which would've diminished it somehow.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. It's powerful subject matter.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It's the opposite of commercial art.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That we were talking about earlier. And it really speaks of profoundly at a profound period in American history.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's hopeful envisioning what people might've looked like—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes, that's a pattern—the odd thing is I—Smith College bought one of the pieces. You know, they're a pair, and they bought a piece in which they had hanging, and so I referred to it. And someone who I—as I said, there were four or five women that I had been in the same dorm with me. One of them is a writer, and she had written about an aspect of this Birmingham bombing. Particularly from the point of view of one of the children who was killed I think, and they wanted to move her body into a—the family wanted to rebury her, and a lot of money was raised. And when they opened the coffin, it was empty. So, she sold—said we have to tell Dawoud about that story.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. But it was funny that there I was talking, and then she said—I've just done this piece about it. Weird, isn't it?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that is very odd. There does seem to be a sense of social activism in a number of the artists you show. I think about Burtynsky and [his -MR] commentary on water, I think certainly about this *Birmingham Project*.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh I think absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I do. I do have a—I—you do have a feeling that—it's like this piece, I mean, you know, it's—his name. He came from here, and I wanted to show him, but Jack Shainman is not very receptive. I'm looking at the wrong thing. Hank Willis Thomas. And he got the idea from an old ad for something or other, and it's not necessarily black and white people, he—but he is African-American, and he—that's how he interpreted the old ad. I liked his work a lot. He also does photography. I would show him in a minute, but Jack was not enthusiastic.

MS. RIEDEL: Has that been an experience for you that's repeated frequently through your career, an interest in showing somebody that was difficult together, not that often?

MS. BRANSTEN: Sometimes. I mean, you forget about the ones that are difficult.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.] Has the gallery had a very direct relationship with many museums?

MS. BRANSTEN: At times, at times. I think—because I think of straddling both things, of having been on the board or having known curators as they went along, there have been times when we were close, and other times—I mean even still today there's some people I'm close to.

MS. RIEDEL: Anyone that you care to mention?

MS. BRANSTEN: I can't think of a single name at the moment.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Did that—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, Gary Garrels I'm fairly close to, I mean—close to people, some of them are no longer with us. Lowery Sims I'm close to. I like Lowery a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: So I'm really—this is the thirtieth year, the thirtieth anniversary of [inaudible] Gallery, yes? From '74?

MS. BRANSTEN: I guess it's—I thought it was longer.

MS. RIEDEL: No, 40 years.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: '74, '80.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: 40—yes. And you've just moved into a new space. Do you have any thoughts about where things are going from here?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, because the scene changed and because I'm old and Patricia's taking on and so much of the gallery was financed by me. That has a different—there's more of an emphasis on selling, and it's not the same—it's not the same for galleries anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So when we had to move, and we were thinking of moving all along, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Why, may I ask?

MS. BRANSTEN: Because Tricia thought it was time. She just thought it was, you know, Todd Hofelt had moved away and, you know, the galleries were sort of moving around. And we looked at that space or spaces that around there—

MS. RIEDEL: On Market Street?

MS. BRANSTEN: In fact we looked at Catherine—

MS. RIEDEL: Clark?

MS. BRANSTEN: Katie Clark's place. I didn't like the space, Tricia didn't like the space. The parking is horrendous around there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it is.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I didn't—we never pursued it. There is a movement by a couple in San Francisco, who I won't name, because I can't think of their names, but anyway, they want to sort of finance an art development, because they also were worried that so much is leaving the city. Artists are leaving. Galleries are leaving.

MS. RIEDEL: And so is that something that—

MS. BRANSTEN: They've asked—

MS. RIEDEL: You would consider?

MS. BRANSTEN: If we would move with them when they developed something, but I don't know if they, you know, who knows.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Well the city is—

MS. BRANSTEN: And they wouldn't make it sort of an art thing where they'd have galleries and storage and even an art school maybe, you know, a—

MS. RIEDEL: Well like the Bergamont station little complex down in—

MS. BRANSTEN: Sort of, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. Okay. That would be nice because the city is changing so drastically.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And this would be in the city proper?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: But no idea if it's actually going to move forward or not. Because right now, the space you're in is just for a year lease, correct?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Well when we knew we had to move, and we had been looking, and we hadn't found anything, and this and that. I said—so originally we were going to look for an office so that we could maintain ourselves in a certain [inaudible] about, but with business. And—but we didn't find that either. And so, I think Tricia found this on Craigslist.

MS. RIEDEL: Amazing.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Talk about a changing gallery role through technology. And it is a great space.

MS. BRANSTEN: It is. It is.

MS. RIEDEL: Bright, ground floor, front and center of things.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean the whole thing, it's just the problem is there's no storage.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And they can't pull something out of the racks, even though we were hardly doing that anymore anyway. I have to go to the bathroom to get—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Can I get you some more water or anything?

MS. RIEDEL: I—

[END OF branst14\_1of2\_sd\_track02\_r]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Rena Bransten at her home in San Francisco, CA on May 30, 2014 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art this is card number two. We were just starting to talk about some follow up thoughts that you'd had from the conversation yesterday and you were saying—if you'd start again.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, you asked me about how I acquired things. I mean, part of its greed—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: —of course, but part of it was that—part of it was sort of something that catches your eye that's a little bit different, or maybe it reminds you of something else. And it's both intellectual and somewhat commercial. You want it to have value. But it's—and sometimes historical that it has meaning and sometimes truly I bought things because I wanted to help people out, so that either it was a dealer or an artist. An artist came up to Tricia at the recent art fair in San Francisco and said, "I loved Rena because when I was hard up, she always bought something of mine." I don't even remember this artist. And Jenny, who works with me, said, "Yes, and we have them all in storage care costing money."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] So it was a kind of philanthropy in some ways.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That was what I—

MS. BRANSTEN: In a way—

MS. RIEDEL: —expected of you.

MS. BRANSTEN: —in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean it was give and take.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And you said right before I turned on the [recorder -MR], too, that part of your drive or goal or inspiration was that you felt you've been lucky and you wanted to share some of that—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and in some way leave the world slightly better.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. No, no. I had sort of a—I would say basically an upbeat type of mind.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I was reflecting on the work in the gallery and your collection last night and I was thinking there really is a [consistent spirit of philanthropy -MR] and also some degree of social activism or cultural activism.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: [Very -MR] obvious.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think part of that was truly—I went to Dalton, I was in Dalton in the—you know, all the way through from the time I was in second grade through high school, and Dalton was a very liberal type school. And we studied things that other people didn't. I mean, certainly race relations. That wasn't done at Smith or—I mean, not Smith. Well, I don't think it was done at Smith either, but at any other, like, Brearley or Spence. And when—so that together with what I sort of learned from being on the board at Yerba Buena sort of made me feel that I wanted to represent everybody that I could that I felt that was important.

MS. RIEDEL: I [also -MR] was thinking about your collection, which we're surrounded by and how we have a David Smith and we have a Noguchi and then we have work from artists from Creative Growth all displayed here [together -MR].

MS. BRANSTEN: That, I definitely feel and I read something by somebody who said that I think it's really an impulse of what I see that seems to make a difference. It seems to put something a little—add a—you know, in perspective that is a little different than somebody else.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] I'm trying to remember. I am confusing Emily Dickinson here, I think, but there's—maybe it's Emily Dickinson who used to say, "Tell it slant."

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And so there's just—there's that slight tweak, there's that slight difference, there's that idea of bending notes. There's something that's just slightly different.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Then that was really—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —what drew your eye.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, that's sort of what Hank Wessel was saying. You know, that you catch something and it like speaks to you, and I think he said it says, "Yes."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: Now, that is fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. It says, "That's nice." And you were just listening to this talk—

MS. BRANSTEN: I—

MS. RIEDEL: —a clip from his show at the—

MS. BRANSTEN: —at the Tate.



MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it's been there for quite a while. And he, you know, I mean, I've known Hank for a long time even before we represented him.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] I just want to stay with these follow up thoughts. So anything else that sort of has—you've been thinking—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I was trying to think about Viola. I mean, I've—you know, certain things—well, the one thing that's stuck in my mind was that, at some point, I think they have a little museum in Katonah now, which is in upper Westchester—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: But at that time, they had a library, and the library decided, I think, to show ceramics and they must've contacted me and I decided we would get a Viola lady there. No matter what. I mean I would pay for it to get there. And then, I was just getting friendly with Patterson Sims, so I arranged that he come to this opening or show or whatever, and then I was very sneaky and had him go down back to Manhattan with Viola on the train. I said, "Oh, I have to visit somebody else and I can't go with you," and he got to know Viola there. And he had very, very definite ideas about Viola. He had sort of an idea that maybe she had been abused as a young girl. I don't think that was true. I think Viola was quirky but I—she never said that, although her brothers who lamented that she never kept up with them, apparently—I mean, they were rough farmers and, you know, would take the tractor or whatever and drive it over her feet. So I mean, yes, that's sort of an abuse, I would say.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Yes. It was a difficult childhood.

MS. BRANSTEN: But she felt—

MS. RIEDEL: It was rough.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it was probably.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I remember she had a large painting that was very meticulous. It wasn't realistic but it was—the strokes were very small and it was sort of a pile of junk. And she said her father collected junk.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So she had made this, but it was a big painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes, I—

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know what happened to any of that stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: There's that wonderful story [about him just collecting things and trees growing up around them - MR] in the yard—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: They just sound like installations—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —that he was—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —or a process art happening or out there at the time.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't think—I think Viola was a very dedicated teacher. She had, you know, devoted friends that she cared about. But I don't—but I think she was also very shy and not—I mean, Hank is very articulate.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Viola wasn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: She got across what she wanted to say and you'd sort of follow this in stream but Paul Karlstrom didn't get it at all. He was not the right person for me—

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] She—in everything that I've seen, I never met her personally, she did seem reticent and—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and so unless there was somebody who knew her well or perhaps over time or could really—

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know what it was.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think she certainly felt—I didn't say also she went to *Sevres*. They invited her to go there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, Betty Woodman could—if you were interested, I'm sure Betty would talk about it because they were there together.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That would probably be wonderful.

MS. BRANSTEN: And they even made things together. I can just sort of show you. And then I thought this is the kind of thing I thought about—I thought I had a little pot that Charles Fiske made at some place on this shelf. I'll show it to you.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I would like to see that.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I was very fond of Viola, but it wasn't a huggy kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, now, everybody hugs everybody. But I don't think she wanted to be touched particularly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, so far, everybody that I've spoken with has said something similar, that she was—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, certainly—

MS. RIEDEL: —very generous in the way that she could be. But that she wasn't forthcoming with words and that she was extremely focused on art.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And so if you could interact with her about [art -MR], then there would be more of a connection than if you couldn't.

MS. BRANSTEN: She also didn't drive for a long time and she didn't live in a bad part of Oakland, but to get from one place to another, there were sort of shady parts. So she would dress sort of like somebody homeless, until she decided maybe it would be a good idea to drive.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I do remember that. And I remember also, it wasn't that she wasn't feminine. I mean, she liked jewelry and things like that and Kevin said, you know, when he first knew her, she had nail polish and all of that. By the time I knew her, she was sort of getting a little shrepply [ph].

MS. RIEDEL: A little what? [Laughs] Not quite as engaged with appearance.

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Right?

MS. BRANSTEN: Not at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you ever—

MS. BRANSTEN: She pulled her hair back and you know didn't—that's why I was sort of surprised when I'd see pictures of her young. Because Viola and I were exactly the same age. And Mary Frank as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's sort of interesting that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So you met her—if it was '80, then you would've been roughly 40 or around 40 years old.

MS. BRANSTEN: I would say so.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: It was like I could look and see when she had the show at Crocker because that was about the time—

MS. RIEDEL: I think that was '80. I think that's right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I should've looked it up when I went to the gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. We can add that in.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's easy enough. Did she ever talk to you about her work in terms of any kind of gender issues or any kind of political—

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: —commentary—

MS. BRANSTEN: Not at all.

MS. RIEDEL: —social commentary?

MS. BRANSTEN: It was more—she always had this thing about women had their strength by being naked and men have their strength by wearing a blue suit. That was the—

MS. RIEDEL: That is interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: —yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: Although in the end then, she had these men that were naked lying down, but I think that was partly because of the AIDS thing that came out.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: And Tricia has one that's very much was dedicated to the [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: But I also remember that we had a show of hers, which must've been around the time of *the Ladies* or maybe a little bit before, and there was a naked man lying on the ground.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: And this guy came who was blind. You know, he was feeling the body and he came to the penis and he said, "This penis isn't the right size for the size of this body," which was true.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: That's cute. But I remember things like that. I don't think we ever talked about art ever.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting. Did you talk much about her work?

MS. BRANSTEN: To other people?

MS. RIEDEL: No, with her.

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I don't remember doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: But it's quite a while. And then, you know, then she was sick for a while so, no, I don't—I remember saying I like this or I didn't like that and I don't remember ever saying why did you do this or—it's not my way at all.

MS. RIEDEL: She'd had the Crocker show—was that her introduction?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, but then I'll tell you that. We went to the Crocker show for the opening and she would say, "Stand in front of me. I don't want to talk to that person."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: But we were the same height so it was—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] So were you responsible for introducing her to Patterson Sims?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then Patterson, who has also never been very self-assured, you know, decided to do this show at the Whitney.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And so we were in Boston at some luncheon and he said within Tricia's hearing, "Well, the staff is indulging me by having this show" because he was a little embarrassed that he was—and Tricia, I remember, went—looked down the table at him and then of course—that's Patterson. Do you know him at all?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. No, he's a very sweet man.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

[... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] But from that—from—so in many ways, you played a very big role in that Whitney exhibition happening.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, no question. No, I don't—I mean, absolutely. We worked hard at it.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it—yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: But we took the show at the Crocker and travelled it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. I do remember you saying that yesterday.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that something that you did for Viola—

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: —or you tried to do multiple times for Viola with museum exhibitions or you would do for artists in general?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think that was the first time we did it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And there was a girl, as I said, at this and I can't remember her last name. Anyway, she trained Tricia to—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Anne Kohs.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, Anne Kohns.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: —to you know, document it and do the right things and, in those days, it wasn't as crazy as it became. The insurance wasn't as crazy and—and the show, you know, went—poked around. I mean, the other person who I would say promoted herself as much as we promoted her is Hung Liu.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

[... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: Are there artists or exhibitions in the history of the gallery that you feel were especially successful?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I looked over. Some of them, you know, some like Dough Hall, we did very well with. We did very well with Viola. We've done amazingly well with [coughs] Vik Muniz—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —but he's a, you know, he's a star.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I will tell you that the museum—SFMOMA [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art] called me and said could I get Vik Muniz to come out and give a talk, and I said, "Well, I'll ask him. You know, what will you pay him" and all that kind of thing, we went through that, and Vik gave the talk and he was introduced by—I think it was Neal Benezra. And Neal Benezra left before his talk and Vik saw him and told me that he was very insulted. So I said I'll talk to—to Neal and I did. And Neal wrote him a letter. So I feel that, you know, I have a big mouth and I did use it at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: That was stupid.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's, you know, sort of—

MS. BRANSTEN: Unnecessary.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes and very fundamental.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And when was this?

MS. BRANSTEN: I'm going to say 10 years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Have you taken on—

MS. BRANSTEN: And then you'll see—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: —we did several videos with my son and he has Vik moving around the gallery talking and he's very articulate, but articulate in a, you know, he's very smart.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And we mentioned yesterday the number of catalogs you've done and now with the videos—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, we did at that time— did catalogs because A, it was cheaper.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: B, I felt it was the way of getting the gallery and the artist on the map and we don't do it anymore. It's too expensive. But at that time, I tried to get good writers and the artists liked it and—

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. It was a great service—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and I don't think many galleries did or could afford to do it.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well—

MS. RIEDEL: Rarely.

MS. BRANSTEN: —the wealthy ones—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —still do it, but I don't see a lot. I mean the ones that are doing them are like Christie's and Sotheby's. I mean, these enormous catalogs with—I threw out one today. I thought, why? I mean, artists that you've never heard of getting a whole thing, you know. I mean, I don't know. It's a different time. And Tricia was interesting because she wants to do people who—you know, let's say they go—they get born in the 1900. By 1990 or '50, do they realize everything's changed? What does that make them? How does that make them feel? And I said, I don't know. I never—I just always expected things to change. I didn't expect the art business to change this much.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] In terms of? Can you say a little bit more about that?

MS. BRANSTEN: Much.

MS. RIEDEL: Change much by—

MS. BRANSTEN: Because of the art fairs and the aggressive—the aggressive auction houses—the fact that some of these galleries are 20,000 square feet. I mean, it doesn't mean that they're full of great art either.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Yes. When you started to do the art fairs, and it sounds as if you started to do them very early—

MS. BRANSTEN: Very early.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember which ones you started with and when?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. There was only one.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was the Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Chicago, right. Okay. And then pretty much as they were all introduced Frieze or ARCO, you would do—

MS. BRANSTEN: Forever, I never got in Frieze.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, you never got into Frieze.

MS. BRANSTEN: I didn't get into some of them. And they—the ADAA [Art Dealers Association of America] which I am a member of but John Berggruen apparently kept me out of the ADAA for five years.

MS. RIEDEL: Why is that?

MS. BRANSTEN: Because he wanted to be the only one in San Francisco in the ADAA. I mean at that time, the ADAA was a big deal. It's not a big deal anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't think it means anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. What about the San Francisco Art Dealers Association? Do you really think—

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it's very nice. Tricia at one time was the head of it. And I think it's a nice—they always seem to have some kind of deal.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Well, was it helpful in any way? Was it beneficial? Do you think it helps the city, helps the artists? Help the gallery?

MS. BRANSTEN: Not particularly.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. But first—

MS. BRANSTEN: But I think it's a nice—it's a PR sort of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Didn't the First Thursday grow out of that?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think possibly, possibly.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] I sort of vaguely remember when that was introduced.

MS. BRANSTEN: Dorothy Goldeen, I think, was very instrumental. I know she was instrumental in Los Angeles in having that—first something or second something when she moved down there.

MS. RIEDEL: There're so many different ways we could go right now, but I'm going to stay—since I'm looking at all these art, I'm going to stay on this track of your own collection, and it would be helpful if you would say a little bit about Creative Growth and how you got involved with that group? Defined it even?

MS. BRANSTEN: All right. I got involved with it was somebody called me and said, "Rena, we're having a dinner." It was sort of like a fundraiser. Would I come to the dinner and would I bring some guests and I never frankly had ever heard of Creative Growth. But I liked the idea and I did go and actually, they had a little adjunct show of the artists that worked there. Now, it's very complicated because the artists that work with the people there don't really tell them what to do. They just are sort of there to, I don't know, sort of encourage them or whatever. And the one that I've been involved with really is the one on Oakland.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I don't know if you know anything about Creative Growth. It started when, as I told you, Reagan froze the institutions and these two psychiatrists who were married said, "Well, we'll have a little—we'll do an art program in our garage." And I think then, Creative Growth, something in San Francisco on 16th Street, it's maybe near you, told—Creativity Explored, I think, something like that. But they do some very nice shows and it's very similar. They're all—they're not connected but they're all—they have a similar philosophy.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then I think this woman, I believe, in Alameda, and I just like what I saw and I took on one of the artists who was the so-called teaching mayor. The problem with Oakland is that with the recession, Oakland didn't fund Creative Growth as much as they had, and they—a lot of the teachers couldn't work there anymore. So I think it fell off a little bit, but—

MS. RIEDEL: So this is a program for adults, correct?

MS. BRANSTEN: It's—I think they have to be 21.

MS. RIEDEL: And is it open to anyone who is interested?

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's open to people that are handicapped, either mentally or physically.

MS. RIEDEL: But anyone who is mentally or physically handicapped—

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know how they get in but—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then are there annual, bi-annual—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I think they—

MS. RIEDEL: —exhibitions?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, and there're exhibitions. Sometimes—a lot of times they're—and some of the artists become famous.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: There was this one woman that bound things with cords and what, and she—I mean, she, at auctions, will, you know, get a lot of money for her pieces, \$10,000 and \$20,000 and \$30,000.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: It is very interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Very interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: And that—I don't know where I was. I think possibly that show in Venice this summer that had, you know, that enormous show. I don't know what they called it. They had like hundreds of artists and it was in this—it was in the Arsenale, I think. And it was put—it was curated by the curator at the New Museum in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right, right, right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And it had—it wasn't—I thought—I didn't really like the show, but I think it also had—it was sort of what they call untrained artists now.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't think they say the—

MS. RIEDEL: Outsider or?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. They don't say that anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: But there used to be an outsider art fair in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I guess I felt that there shouldn't be a difference between how you respond to something. Or to me, there isn't a difference, although I respond on a lot of different levels.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's like something's saying yes to you.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I love that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: So that's how I got involved because I gave them a little money and then we did two shows.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, at the Gallery.

MS. BRANSTEN: And at the Gallery and then I was pissed off because then they did a show with Paule Anglim. And I thought, you know, if we've done two shows then—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —you know, anyways, that's sort of typical.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you also [participate in the annual -MR] *Introductions*? Did you participate in that?

MS. BRANSTEN: That was something that Ruth Braunstein was very focused on.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.



MS. BRANSTEN: And she worked very hard to get other people to do it. And I think for a while—excuse me, it was very worthwhile. But then it was—

MS. RIEDEL: Wasn't it a project of the San Francisco Art Dealers Association and galleries would, each July—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —give a solo show—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, of somebody who's never shown before.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was fair.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't think anything really came out of it ever.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So you didn't discover anybody new?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I don't think so. I mean we have gotten people going to MFA shows and things like that. I think you sort of have to.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And would that be—that's actually another question everyone's asking—

MS. BRANSTEN: I didn't go to any this year but Trish went to a couple.

MS. RIEDEL: So how would you normally find new artists? Was there a normal way to find anyone?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, that's one way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Then another way is what you said, you'd go into art fairs and see something. Another way is having so many of the artists that we show will suggest people, either that they're teaching or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So that's three ways. And then sometimes you go to another place and you—I mean, I—when looking over these ledgers, I mean I showed a lot of artists who really were showing someplace else, but that means that you're paying a commission.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So it's costly. But I did it a lot, okay. And I don't think it's something to avoid but my daughter is very conscious of not doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. BRANSTEN: Hopefully, that's a fly and not a bee.

MS. RIEDEL: I think so. It sounds like a fly. Did you tend to take on a fair number of new artists? Did you prefer to keep a fairly small stable and have long-term relationships?

MS. BRANSTEN: I would say yes.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that work?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think mostly fairly stable.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But a lot of them dropped off.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And a lot of times, I showed somebody once or twice and then—and Bill Wiley was the only one

that was sort of formal where he said, "Rena, I don't think we should continue this." And he did it in such a nice way. And I really didn't want to show him anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back, who are the artists that you've had the most long-term relationships with? I certainly think of Viola. I think of Hung Liu. Who else is decades long?

MS. BRANSTEN: Doug Hall. I mean I started out with a lot of people that I never finished up with, that I showed for quite a while. I showed Uta Barth for quite a while. I told Jim Campbell I didn't want to show him anymore, and at that point, his pieces were like \$5,000 and all of a sudden they were \$50—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Then I thought, "Why did I get so pissed off?" But there were people that I showed that sort of just dropped off and that I didn't miss and I don't think they missed me either.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds as if the relationships were a significant part of the gallery for you.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think so. I think that's, you know, I think when you talked about, you know, did I—it was really—it was the people that I met and was involved with and got something out of.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So a lot of them were professionals and I enjoyed that, too.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Now, you're talking about the collectors as well?

MS. BRANSTEN: Or the curators. Or directors.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you work with a lot of curators in museums [planning -MR] exhibitions for the artists that you carry?

MS. BRANSTEN: A little bit. I would say a little bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Who comes to mind besides Viola and Vik and this SFMOMA talk?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, Vik never had a show with the museum.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Just the talk. -MR]

MS. BRANSTEN: And I had nothing to do with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I'm trying to think. Doug Hall, I remembered getting quite involved with, the show that sort of traveled. It was a person that we hired who did travel shows that we know, somebody in New York. I don't think she does that anymore. I can't really put my finger on anything that I know we worked with a lot of museums, and so forth, but I can't—

MS. RIEDEL: Was that in terms of introducing them to work or trying to get them interested in acquiring a piece or both? Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Both. Mostly acquiring.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Was that—

MS. BRANSTEN: And some of it, you know, I would—I gave a lot of pieces of Viola's. I had a lot, but I did give some.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] That is quite philanthropic.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I felt that was the way she'd get there. And I think Paule Anglim did the same thing.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] I just wanted to go back for a minute and talk about that New York space that you had briefly—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, I can just—

MS. RIEDEL: —when that was and for how long.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was very early on and it was—I can't think of what—it could've been on Greene Street. I just can't remember where. I can picture it and it was a very nice space and I basically shared it. It was basically Ruth who had—I mean I hadn't been in business that long.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I think Ruth used me to help pay for it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I don't think I had—I don't remember having a show there.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. BRANSTEN: Maybe I was part of the group show, maybe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But she—it was her space—

Okay. And this was the space that also Phyllis Kind—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, Phyllis Kind.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Then Phyllis Kind took it over—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Ruth was very pissed off.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Phil—it was Phil and Ed Thorpe, I think, was the third person. I'm not sure but I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you ever interested in having a New York space? It seems—

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: —something—

MS. BRANSTEN: —because I thought—well first of all, I don't think you can really run a gallery in two spaces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Some—I mean, Gagosian does, but it's a different time. I thought that Jim Newman going down to Los Angeles was sort of a disaster. You really can't be in two places at once.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I think that's true.

MS. BRANSTEN: I didn't think so. And Walter Maciel, when he left the gallery—hoped we would be part of his gallery, but—and he took some of our artists without a commission kind of thing, and he's done—he's done very nicely for—he's gotten Hung Liu commissions so I don't have any bad feeling that way. I'm thrilled that both he and Jim have been successful because I feel I got them on their way.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. And that is another question is we talked about both of them. How many people have started working for you when you first opened? Were you out working by yourself?

MS. BRANSTEN: Pretty much. Then somebody floated between—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Ruth's and my space.

MS. RIEDEL: Sylvia Browne, right?

MS. BRANSTEN: Sylvia Browne. And then Calvert came in. So Calvert who was about to have—who is retired—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —and who is Hank Wessel's partner.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Now, Hank retired from the Art Institute and said to Calvert, "It's time for you to retire."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs]

MS. BRANSTEN: So she did. And I was sad because she'd been with me so long. She'd been with me for 37 years.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. And she's a very good friend of Tricia's so—and then—

MS. RIEDEL: And she did most of your catalogs, didn't she?

MS. BRANSTEN: She did a lot of them and she did a lot of writing. She's a very good writer. But she, like me, is a complete [pfft sound] on the computer.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: And also when the business began to get bad, I had to have her—I laid her off for several days so she would—she worked for me, I think, three days instead of four or five.

MS. RIEDEL: And when was that?

MS. BRANSTEN: Fairly recently.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's the past, I don't know, six years, eight years, or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: So despite earlier recessions—you could trace a real decline in business—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, yes. There was.

MS. RIEDEL: —six or eight years ago.

MS. BRANSTEN: Very definite. And I can't completely blame it all on the art fairs but that was—I think that was a part of it.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Did you—I don't even imagine you—how could you not have—but did you get new clients from the art fairs yourself?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, yes. Oh yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And did your clientele become more global? Did you find people visiting the gallery?

MS. BRANSTEN: The first thing we ever sold online was to somebody in Korea.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: You know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So that's a big change.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, it was.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that—

MS. BRANSTEN: I did. I mean, I didn't mention the Internet and the—because it's so foreign to me, so to speak.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Is it—

MS. BRANSTEN: But it's not to everybody.

MS. RIEDEL: Not at all, no.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, it's very much part of the scene.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that a notable percentage of your sales these days, do you think?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't—I would think in some cases like Vik, where somebody will want a Vik and they'll call over different galleries that show him to see if, you know, what—what we're charging, whether we have the image they want, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And would you—for more—

MS. BRANSTEN: It's for some artists and not for others.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: But the Internet is used a lot. Sometimes people say what is the Viola Frey I have worth and then you have to find out whether they're selling it or just putting it up for insurance. It's that kind of thing is—I don't think people hardly talk on the phone anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Or write letters.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Forget it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And barely email these days. I think its all texts [laughs].

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Except in this case. So has that become an increasing way of doing business that you'll ship things overseas? Sales will be made and you'll ship off to Madrid—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, yes, oh yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —or you ship off to Korea?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And so that's I would think a huge change over time.

MS. BRANSTEN: Definitely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And it was sort of incremental. I mean at a little bit—I mean I think the fact that things became global was sort of fascinating. I mean part of it is the along with all the art fairs, there were all those biennials.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, it was originally just Venice but then there was Istanbul and this place and that. In fact, the media curator is the head of the biennial in Istanbul this June or—June, I guess. And Doug Hall is going to be in it so—

MS. RIEDEL: The media curator from where?

MS. BRANSTEN: SFMOMA.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I forget his name. I think he's German. He has a—I forgot. [Rudolf Frieling -ALF]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: You'll get it from a younger person.

MS. RIEDEL: So then, much as business may have dwindled to the actual space, it sounds like it's picked up in terms of the fairs that you've attended and overseas clients.

MS. BRANSTEN: Somewhat.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, it's not all overseas but it's— I would say national more than local. And Tricia's very concerned that not only locally that the galleries aren't making it. It's also the artists are leaving the area because it's too expensive.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Big change here from being—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —such an art's haven to becoming so much more of a tech haven.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have any kind of particular business arrangements with the artists?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I never signed anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't think many people do.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. What has driven you to continue doing this for close to 40 years?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I think partly because Tricia was in it and Jenny has worked for me a long time, too.

MS. RIEDEL: What's Jenny's last name?

MS. BRANSTEN: Baie, B-A-I-E.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So again—

MS. BRANSTEN: And I got a recommendation from the director of the San José Museum and he said this gal is going to apply for a job in the gallery and she's been fantastic and I hired her almost pretty much on his say so.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I think Jenny has worked for me close to 20 years also.

MS. RIEDEL: That's saying a lot.

MS. BRANSTEN: So when you say that people come through, I had one person I didn't like. Then I had, you know, I had my nieces work for me. I've had other people who I enjoyed work for me and, in fact, a gal who was teaching at CCA [California College of the Arts] worked for me for [... -ALF]. But to leave CCA, she had to get a Green Card. You know, if you worked for an educational institution, you don't have to have quite the same kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I called a lawyer and I said, "Well, what will it cost me and her to get this Green Card?" And he said \$10,000 and that was it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: She went back to CCA.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: But she worked for us for about a year or two. Very pretty, very engaging person, very bright. But in the end, not really what a gallery person needed.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Which is?

MS. BRANSTEN: Or I needed. It's somebody sort of outgoing and it wasn't that she wasn't outgoing. She really wasn't interested in selling.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

[... -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds as if there's been an extraordinary community for you—the artists and family and employees.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. And people I've met or, you know, that I'm boards with or—

MS. RIEDEL: Have you had clients for that long as well?

MS. BRANSTEN: Some. Some.

MS. RIEDEL: But to have employees for 20 years or 37 years—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You don't hear that.

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: [... -MR] Something must be working well.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's wonderful, too, because I'm sure there's a lot of travel, all the art fairs. Did you routinely go to the different—

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't do it so much anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: But did you routinely go to Venice or did you go to Istanbul?

MS. BRANSTEN: I haven't gone—no, I haven't gone—I've never been to Istanbul and Trish wants to go, so I guess I'll go. I hear—have you ever been to Istanbul?

MS. RIEDEL: No, no. It's on my list.

MS. BRANSTEN: I hear it's wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I do too.

MS. BRANSTEN: Is there anything that you think we haven't touched on as far as San Francisco goes? I mean, I can think of—I was associated with the San Francisco Museum. I started on sort of a young women's board and then I moved up to an old women's board, and then I went on the board, and I always felt, outside of David Ross, the museum always had—always got—went from one director and sort of upgraded it. And I think—I'm not as close as I was partly because several friends I had on the board, one left the board and the other one got dementia, so I wasn't quite aware of everything that was happening. But I feel the—and I sort of got distant, but I'm pretty friendly with Gary Garrels.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Well, so then you must've seen significant changes from the old space to the new buildings now—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —the brand new building.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Any thought's you'd like to share about that or any back and forth between the gallery and museum?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I don't. I know Gary pretty well. I'm not particularly—I'm not—and Sandy Phillips. Sandy Phillips has been there a long time and, of course, photography is something that I've been very involved with.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I liked helping them out, but I think it doesn't interest me the same way it once did. I'd rather help out something—I'll tell you what had folded or is going through a crisis is Intersection for the Arts.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And the curator emailed me when I was away and I was just so dismayed. Now, their director went to Yerba Buena, so maybe that was the end of that. I mean, I think she saved them several times.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Yes, that is tragic. That's been around a long time and a really interesting space.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have any plans for your collection?

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I've periodically given away some. And I guess I felt that, you know, it was sort of somewhat of an inheritance for my children.

MS. RIEDEL: [It's -MR] an extraordinary collection. It seems that there are a number of pieces by many, many different artists. Have you collected anybody in depth?

MS. BRANSTEN: I'm sure you're going to ask me that. Just—not really. Not really.

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't get that feeling. There seemed to be many relationships between the objects—between the pieces—

MS. BRANSTEN: I think that that's sort of an accident.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Or the sign of your eye and your interest at the time.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It's certainly predominantly figurative but, sitting in this room, there's nobody [who is -MR] represented twice.

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think Vik probably I've gotten several pieces of. but I have a lot in storage though I can't even remember. But no, I never Tony DeLap, maybe, because he was an old friend.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Those are new Tony DeLap's but over the years I've collected Tony DeLap.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: I also had a home in Chappaqua that I inherited.

MS. RIEDEL: In New York.

MS. BRANSTEN: In New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And Peter Saul lived there, so to pay rent, he would give me work on paper.

MS. RIEDEL: How great.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I did have at one time several Peter Sauls. But no. I mean I knew you were going to ask me that and there are—that is a way of collecting, but I just didn't do that.

MS. RIEDEL: And you weren't interested then in tracing the trajectory of an artist's career and how it changed



over time. You—

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I was just aware of it.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] How did you choose one and where to buy or when to buy an artist's piece?

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean I can tell you I bought the David Smith at the Aldrich Museum. They had four pieces like those. I went and I—David McKee at that time was at Marlborough, I think. Was it Marlborough? I think so. Anyway, I bought it at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And that—

MS. BRANSTEN: And it was very—I think it was \$12,000 and I paid in two years because he had just died and they wanted to keep the prices very low for—because he hadn't sold that much, so there were all these pieces and it would've just wiped out the family.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. How fortunate for you.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. So it was a little bit—I think when I first started, it was as I told you, I had this vision of the Whitney Museum collecting American art—not yet, but I have a Winslow on my drawing, I have a Burchfield. I'm trying to sell a—what am I trying to sell? I can't think what that might need—anyway, a little bit here and there. I have sold some pieces. To—you know, frankly when things were bad at the gallery, so I sold a very nice [Phillip] Guston I had. But I don't think I had the wherewithal to follow, you know, an artist's trajectory.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] It seems as if you had a broader—

MS. BRANSTEN: It was more I guess more like I was influenced by the museums. I had one here and one here and one, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And unfortunately that's what I feel Smith has done.

MS. RIEDEL: Is—

MS. BRANSTEN: One here—

MS. RIEDEL: Follow you.

MS. BRANSTEN: —and one here—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I see.

MS. BRANSTEN: —and it's too much of—it's not attractive. Or the gallery's not attractive. I don't know which it is.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And so there's a lack of cohesion, is that what it is?

MS. BRANSTEN: It's a little—

MS. RIEDEL: Or a lack of a trajectory? A lack of a vision?

MS. BRANSTEN: It's a little bit. I mean, I'm—one of the guards heard me say, "I'm looking for the—where are the old French pieces?" because they had a wonderful [Gustave] Courbet. The Courbet was about the size of this wall. And he said, "Oh, that's on the third floor or the fourth floor" I don't know. And then, so you go up there and there were only—a lot of them I recognized. There was the wonderful Picasso I told you about but they were [cerrrk sounds] you know, it wasn't—it to me, it wasn't—it didn't look good.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] No kind of thoughtful installation or no relationships.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think maybe that's because the galleries aren't pretty. The gal who's the head of the prints and drawings and photographs has a little room. It's about the size of this room and it has a nice view and then there're, you know, shelves and God knows what that she can prop things up on. It's very small and I guess all her files were there. I don't know where everything's stored but, it's all there. And I guess her office is next door and that was—that was very nice because it was—there was something congenial about it. I mean, it wasn't just a big room with a lot of—I can't explain it. It was a little disappointing. The Courbet, however, was interesting because from the time I had first seen it had been—they had sort of reinvestigated it.

And what had—they had the original title was this woman being prepared for her wedding. But apparently, that

wasn't—when Courbet died, there was no painting that said—that was left in the studio saying prepared for the wedding. There was a woman who was being prepared for her burial. So somebody repainted her. They changed the painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. BRANSTEN: And all of this was written by the side of the painting. It was very interesting. They had a—they made another hand which is holding a mirror and people have— isn't that wild?

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. It's still a wonderful painting.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's a wonderful story.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [inaudible] Oh, I see. Because they couldn't identify the provenance clearly.

MS. BRANSTEN: They couldn't because there was nothing in his—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —there was no painting—

MS. RIEDEL: With that title.

MS. BRANSTEN: —with that title. And I don't know who gave it. I mean they had several big donors who gave this. I think even Peggy [inaudible] might have but I can't remember now.

MS. RIEDEL: I wanted to ask about, for example, someone like Ron Nagle and how his work has been received over time. Has there ever been a big shift?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think today, there're many more artists that are attracted to ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's come full circle.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's pretty much—ceramics are sort of picked up where photography left off, if you know what I mean? But I think that Ron's pieces and Ron's quiriness and the fact that they're so small has never gotten him where he should be. To me, he's really—to me, he's really better than Kenny Price. I love Kenny Price and I wanted to buy Kenny Price. I once finally found an egg and I bought the egg and I had it for many years and then I thought I'd sell it. And I sold it to somebody who was a crook and I had to sue him. I had to sue him through the ADAA and that was—and he's so crazy I think he's on drugs that he called me and he said, "I really admire you, Rena." This was after paying me, finally. And his family is like [inaudible] in New York. I mean, owns real estate up the wazoo. His name is—I can't think of his name. Anyway, it's over but I felt that Ron—I mean the fact that Kenny Price is making pieces as big as the two sofas put together to me is meaningless. Truly, I don't think that they're looking at it. I—

MS. RIEDEL: And so, have you—have you seen more interest in his career over time? Or has it been fairly constant?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, Ron would get cranky with us and say, "Well, now I'm going to go with Garth and you—Garth will be my main dealer and you'll be my auxiliary dealer" and he did that recently with some guy in Belgium and I thought fine. I know, you know, I'll always be a friend of Ron's and he'll always—he's such a nut and—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't care, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: What about Don Ed Hardy?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, I love Don Ed Hardy but I—and we did actually a show with Don Ed. Don Ed is also a friend of both Hung [Liu]'s and Ron's.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And he's a lovely person, but he travels so much there's no way he can develop his career, because it's on the go constantly. And I think he's fabulous. I mean, he told Tricia that he had given up doing tattoos but he said, "If your mother wants a tattoo."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] He'll come out of retirement for a day or two.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's great.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I think he's terrific. I don't see it. I mean, truly he's on the road all the time. He has a home in Hawaii. He has a home here. He goes—they can get it there on the road all the time but they're lovely people. I wish I knew them better.

MS. RIEDEL: His career has had an interesting trajectory.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. He, I think, had some big show in Texas someplace and that was—it's never quite moved along because he's not there making things. I mean, like going to a studio, which is very nice. It's in Fisherman's Warf. It's a beautiful studio. And some of his work is wonderful but not quite, you know, I mean it's now you see it, now he sees it, now he's off someplace. I mean it's a little bit of—I think he's very serious about his work but it's—he's not at it enough. And I think he knows that, too.

MS. RIEDEL: You also represent Ruth Asawa.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, that's a different story. Ruth Asawa decided she wanted to have a gallery, but by this time, she was already not well.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So this was, what, 15 years ago?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, it's not that long ago. I'm going to say six or seven.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: So we had a wonderful show of hers—I don't think—there was a piece that was \$100,000. The Christie's moved in and did an enormous—I mean, we would—we pleaded with her not to do it. I said, "You know, Jack Shainman wants to take you on. That would be a great place for you to be." Nope. They wanted to go with Christie's and we—I mean, we were very, very strong about not doing it but they wanted it and she was still alive and she had nurses around the clock and what are you going to do?

MS. RIEDEL: They needed—

MS. BRANSTEN: We said it a hundred times, don't do it, and she—they did. And I don't think—I mean, now we have a very nice little piece I think you saw, but it's not like having a wonderful big piece because they go to auction. Now, she has tons of drawings but—

MS. RIEDEL: Were you involved in getting the work at the De Young [Museum]?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, no. No, no. She came to us after that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Harry Parker got—did that show.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And they promised at the time to travel it but they didn't. They gave her the wonderful catalog. The place it was going to go to—

[END OF branst14\_2of2\_sd\_track01\_r]

MS. BRANSTEN: Which was the Japan Society in New York. The director was fired because she did a [Takashi] Murakami show that cost hundreds of millions of dollars. And so she was out, so they didn't take on the Ruth Asawa show. However, I saw the show at the Japan Society in Los Angeles. You know where that is? It's near MoCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] downtown.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's near—in Japan Town.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: So, I went down to see the show and while I was there—it wasn't as extensive as the one at the De Young, but while I was there, there was a group of Japanese ladies and they were talking, and I don't usually do this, but I said—I introduced myself and I said, "You know, we show Ruth Asawa in San Francisco" and it turned out they were all relatives of Ruth's. So, it was really fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And they—I mean—I think it was either one of them, or her daughter who said if she hadn't been interred, she would've ended up being a farmer. It's very interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I've read several things on Black Mountain College and the most recent book I had, had a picture of her's and it said that she was one of the most respected artists there.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have anything to do with Pond Farm when it was out here?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, but Brandenstein did. [Brandenstein was the original Bransten spelling. -RB]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And apparently it was not a very good—I don't know—my mother-in-law told me about it. I mean, it was sort of a mess and Brandenstein or the relative that was connected was sort of a bum, and I think they had a daughter and the daughter must be in her 60s now, but my mother-in-law sort of took her under her wing because it was just a bunch of—they were sort of bums. They weren't even hippies, they were just—I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: This was long after Marguerite had passed away clearly.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, yes

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. The last I heard there was an effort to—

MS. BRANSTEN: In her 40s or 50s, something in there.

MS. RIEDEL: I think there was some effort [recently -MR] to revitalize it and turn it into a state park.

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I did know this young woman apparently ran for some sort of supervisor in the East Bay, but I haven't seen her, I don't know that she's around anymore. My brother-in-law may keep in touch with her. I can't think of her name.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know why that just popped into my mind, but—

MS. BRANSTEN: Because of Black Mountain.

MS. RIEDEL: Black Mountain, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: I remember reading about Summerhill, but that ended up pretty bad too, didn't it?

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative]. Yes, I haven't heard anything about that in a long time.

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I haven't either, but I do remember reading about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Did the artists in your gallery interact with each other at all?

MS. BRANSTEN: A little bit, not Ron, but a little. And some of them are very respectful and come to openings,

but I would say not a lot. And I didn't do a lot of entertaining that way. I didn't, you know, have a yearly—or maybe I did initially, but in the past I haven't done it.

MS. RIEDEL: And their exhibitions rotated once a month?

MS. BRANSTEN: Once a month, and then we'd stretch them out a little bit more, because it was better that way.

MS. RIEDEL: But the artist didn't—about half the time do you think they attended the openings?

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, well, if it was their opening yes—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: —but not so much other people's openings.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And you had a local group to be sure, but then increasingly it does seem there was—

MS. BRANSTEN: Students.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Lots of students, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Lots of students.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. No, people came and then, I mean, you always had a dinner after the opening, but I even remember John Berggruen saying he can barely get anybody at a dinner anymore. It's the only way they'll come to the opening is if you have a dinner.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: No. It's—that's the way things are. And I don't mean to put it all down, it just is what it is.

MS. RIEDEL: Everybody is busy.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that something that you try and continue now? Is that something Trish is doing as well—an opening and a dinner?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, we didn't do a dinner for Nathan Lynch, but yes, but we'll do some—first of all, you can't have a million people in that space.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I'm going to go to the bathroom.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Peel myself out of the—

[END OF branst14\_2of2\_sd\_track02\_r]

MS. BRANSTEN: You know, that was a definite attempt—

MS. RIEDEL: Dara?

MS. BRANSTEN: Dara Birnbaum.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Okay. You have—

MS. BRANSTEN: It was a definite attempt to show video art.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Early [on -MR].

MS. BRANSTEN: And she is at-early. And Trisha said she saw Dara very recently in Los Angeles at some big art show at the museum. And she said Dara's piece was-and I think I saw this show too. I went back and saw it down there. And it was very beautiful. Then there were two other artists that were also video artists and I-one of them I thought was amazing. Because I saw her in New York, and she had done sort of portraits, talking portraits on a stairway, so there was little-like a corner and somebody would be talking. And they were very refreshing and wonderful. When I gave her a show here, she was so demanding. It was just exhausting. And I can't think of what her name is, but she's still around. I don't think I ever showed her again.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I didn't like what she was doing.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: But so-I think—

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back over, you know, 30 or 40 years—

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, I wish I could say-

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting there's not particular shows that really stand out.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, there were so many.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] There were so many that stood out?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, so many that-there were so many shows.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, you got to remember that's like eight or 10 shows a year.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then we had—

MS. RIEDEL: Or artists-

MS. BRANSTEN: When we moved we had—

MS. RIEDEL: —perhaps would be-

MS. BRANSTEN: Sometimes we would do three shows at once because we'd had, you know, three different galleries.

MS. RIEDEL: Now when was that?

MS. BRANSTEN: It was when we moved to Geary Street.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: So—

MS. RIEDEL: So you were at Sutter Street, at Geary Street, and where else?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, we were two places on Sutter Street.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: One was in Elizabeth Arden.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Then we moved down to-I don't know, some big-I don't know what had been there, but something had been there. And Ruth and I moved down there, and that's when we had-we shared an office, and she was in the front and I was in the back. And then we moved to Geary Street. And because I had three separate galleries, I could-they were all interchanged, I mean, if you were there.

MS. RIEDEL: So there were three spaces with three different exhibitions?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. We could sometimes do it.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think I knew that.

MS. BRANSTEN: So, that—so I mean, it's—

MS. RIEDEL: How long did that go on for?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, it went—well, we didn't always have—well, we generally had two different exhibitions, maybe not three.

MS. RIEDEL: And this would be in the '70s—

MS. BRANSTEN: Whenever—well, I was there for 27 years, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And you kept the Sutter spaces for how long? Sutter Street.

MS. BRANSTEN: I would say we were at Elizabeth Arden three or four years.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then the other place five or six years, something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: So through the '70s, it seems like.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. That is a lot of shows.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired you to do that, to keep three separate spaces?

MS. BRANSTEN: It wasn't. It was all—it was like having three shows here. In other words, because the gallery had the different spaces, we could put up a—we had a movable wall. We could put up a wall and have one in the front gallery, which was right where you came in—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —separate from the back, further back gallery, so we could have two shows.

MS. RIEDEL: So one was 77—

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no. It was all in—it was one office. It was like a big office space.

MS. RIEDEL: So—

MS. BRANSTEN: And then we had like, I would say, 2,500 square feet. So there were the offices with the desks, and then the gallery in front of the offices. But there was like a storage room as part of the 2,500—or maybe it was 3,000, maybe it was 3,500.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was the Sutter Street location?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no. This was Geary Street.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Sutter Street was only we—I don't want to confuse you. It was—the Geary Street had really a large space, which could be divided into three separate spaces.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So—okay. So there might be three separate shows, but they were all still happening at Geary Street.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: They weren't happening on Sutter Street.

MS. BRANSTEN: No. On Sutter, pretty much, I had one show at a time or—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: —a group show. I mean—

MS. RIEDEL: Would you intentionally set up some sort of dynamic between the exhibitions that happened at the same time or no?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. Sometimes we liked to try and do that, but we didn't always. Trisha may remember shows that were particularly successful.

MS. RIEDEL: When did she start to work with you?

MS. BRANSTEN: Very soon—I think more when we moved down—we moved out of—she didn't work with me when we were in Elizabeth Arden.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: It was further down. When I took on Viola.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So probably late '70s, early '80s?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. This [next one -MR] is a big question: What do you think defines success in the art world? For you?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think, basically, it has to do with your reputation of having good shows, of having really good shows and interesting artists, and some kind of affirmation from the museums.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] So that's an important part of it? The museums. What about critics? Less so?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, you have to remember our critic here is Kenneth Baker.

MS. RIEDEL: I take it you're not a fan?

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, I think he—I like some of the critics here, but I don't think there were a lot of them. I mean, they're now—a lot of stuff online that I don't happen to read. I mean, it's—

MS. RIEDEL: So you were like—

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I don't think—I don't—

MS. RIEDEL: You were, like, more on museums, curators—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, and some of it was—somebody in the *Wall Street Journal* who said Hung Liu was the best painter in America, that—I don't remember his name, or her name. I think it was a he. You asked me about writers, and periodically I would read—it'll be sort of an impulse. I read a lot, but it doesn't always mean I read, you know, criticism.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I find it hard sometimes to get into it. And philosophy has never been something I've read well.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] So you read more aesthetics or artist monographs, that sort of thing?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] That makes sense. How do you think American artists in general are perceived overseas? And what sort of changes have you seen in that in the time that you have been doing international affairs?



MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, I think that certainly after the war, the Second World War, America came into its own very definitely. I think not only with Abstract Expressionism, I think with Pop Art. I mean, I think that Pop Art was something that everybody could recognize.

MS. RIEDEL: Who did you choose to exhibit when you did the international art fairs? Were there artists—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, we just—

MS. RIEDEL: —that you took every time?

MS. BRANSTEN: It was people that, you know, we show, basically. You can't say, "Well, now I'm going to show a Picasso." I mean, it has to come [inaudible]—

MS. RIEDEL: No, of course not. How were the American artists perceived at those fairs?

MS. BRANSTEN: Sometimes—I don't know, sometimes—I never had—I think most of the time there was interest. I mean, the only international fair I was in was ARCO—

MS. RIEDEL: ARCO? Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: —which was enormous, and you could—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think you could show photographs of your mother at that thing.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, it was fun. I liked ARCO, but I liked it as much for the Spanish food as anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then it went on forever. It was, I think, a week long.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh my goodness.

MS. BRANSTEN: And it was very expensive. And when I realized I had spent \$80,000 one way to ship stuff, it was—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. BRANSTEN: And the last time we went, it wasn't too successful.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you able to—

MS. BRANSTEN: I had a beautiful Markus Lüpertz, which I almost sold, but I didn't. I still have it. The last time I saw a show of Markus Lüpertz was at Nederland [ph]. That is a big mess.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Really big mess. I've never been involved with anything crooked except that personal thing where the guy, you know, wouldn't pay me.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] For the [inaudible]—

MS. BRANSTEN: And then I had to sit—yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes. Did you see—in the time that you did—how many years did you do ARCO?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think three times.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Because I couldn't get into Frieze.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So I thought, we should go overseas.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And we did. I mean—no, the first—we went to an English fair that was there at the same time as ARCO. It was a hotel fair and that was a total disaster.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: But it wasn't, I mean, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: And you've done the Miami fair?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And has that brought in an international clientele as well?

MS. BRANSTEN: We even did a fair in Guadalajara, if you can believe it.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh. That would be interesting. [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: It was fun.

MS. RIEDEL: I love Guadalajara. I would think that would be really interesting, actually. That could be a very interesting perspective.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, it—but it was a terrible fair.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that's too bad.

MS. BRANSTEN: But we had a good time. And it was—it was in a big, you know, convention center. And half was art fair, and the other half was a food fair. The food fair—the smells would come over, you, know, into the art—it was a kick.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I think what happened, I don't know who did this fair, but they bought several things from us, so that made me—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that's great.

MS. BRANSTEN: —feel good. I don't know what happened to the things they bought.

MS. RIEDEL: So you only did—

MS. BRANSTEN: And then somebody, a big collector in Miami, broke something. So that's—I got money for that too.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] What year was that fair in Guadalajara?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't know. It was like—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember? Eighties?

MS. BRANSTEN: [Inaudible]. It'll be written down some place.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. We'll have to see. Have you been involved in commissions at all?

MS. BRANSTEN: Some.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Some. In fact, there was a commission of Viola's, which I think was—I'm not sure was clay or bronze, and that was in Pasadena.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: We had a few commissions. Not a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: How did they come about? Did a collector come seek you out? Did —

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Or an art advisor, or a committee, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So I just have one last question and—which is, how would you like your gallery to be viewed in the future? What do you think that your contributions and the gallery's contributions have been to art in America?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I think I'd like to feel that we promoted the artists in the area and that we were able to—suddenly realize that the painting has a penis in the middle of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Which one are you looking at?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, you have to find the penis.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. [Laughs.] We'll do that after we finish up. Sort of hard to top that comment, but —[Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: [Laughs] You know, it's something I bought very recently and I—it was a little bit of, you know, that I really liked the painting and I wanted to be supportive of the gallery. I think you can't miss it. It's right in the middle.

MS. RIEDEL: It also looks like a finger and a fingernail. Is it the white outline?

MS. BRANSTEN: [Inaudible] sort of, yes. A little bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, it could be. But to me it looks—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Single digit, you're right. [Laughs]. We'll discuss that afterwards.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it's just the same thing that, I mean, I hope that we're able to—I really hope that my daughter, and whoever is working there, and whatever art—enjoy it and feel positive about what they can promote.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Something about keeping those artists' visions present in the world and helping to get them out there in the world.

MS. BRANSTEN: Which is harder and harder to do with a gallery my size.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Yes. I mean, it's interesting, because at this point in time it seems like what direction the gallery is going to take in the future is very much up in the air.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, a little bit.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.]

MS. BRANSTEN: I would say a little bit.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] Because this space is—you have for a year, and then we'll see—

MS. BRANSTEN: We'll see what happens.

MS. RIEDEL: —what happens after then.

MS. BRANSTEN: That's what I felt. We should take a year to see what would develop.

MS. RIEDEL: And just so we're clear on the card here, you were in that space on Geary Street for 27 years, 29 years, and then—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, 27 I think.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's really a causality of this expanding tech world that—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —a tech client on that floor wanted more space, and so—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well—

MS. RIEDEL: —you were asked to leave.

MS. BRANSTEN: —we had already been looking for space. I mean it was sort of a shock because it was right after Christmas.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And—

MS. RIEDEL: February of this year.

MS. BRANSTEN: —we did not want to pay more rent. So we were on month-to-month for about—I would say a good year.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And now you're in a space on Market Street that is owned by the plumbers union. Is that correct? The whole block is owned by the plumber's union.

MS. BRANSTEN: They own the whole block, including the parking lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary. So do you—

MS. BRANSTEN: And there, they have the building on the one end.

MS. RIEDEL: [Affirmative.] And have you and Trish had a conversation about where things might go from here?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, we—taking this time to—I mean, we've only been there since March.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: To see how it goes.

MS. RIEDEL: And it could go on there for another five or 10 years, or you couldn't—

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't think we could go—stay there. As I told you yesterday, there is an idea by—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: —two people to make a big statement.

MS. RIEDEL: And a space here in the city—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —it's committed [inaudible]—

MS. BRANSTEN: It's probably—

MS. RIEDEL: —gallery.

MS. BRANSTEN: It's probably down, like, in Bayview.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Because that's—

MS. RIEDEL: That makes sense.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That makes sense. There are so many artist studios down there still.

MS. BRANSTEN: Some. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. Any final thoughts?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I've enjoyed this. I think—I wish I had something that, you know, sort of felt that you could run away with. But I—

MS. RIEDEL: I think this is pretty good. We've got a few hours to run away with. [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, something that enlarged your perception of what was able to be accomplished with any of

the artists.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think a lot—it's been very interesting to sit here just in your collection for these two days and just—the conversation among all these diverse pieces, many—most of them figurative, but just from such different parts of the world and such different visions of the world. [... -MR] It feels like a cross section of humanity—

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, that's nice.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Thank you.

MS. RIEDEL: I appreciate the diversity that's represented [... -MR].

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Thanks very much.

MS. BRANSTEN: Thank you.

[END OF branst14\_2of2\_sd\_track03\_r]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Rena Bransten at her home in San Francisco, CA on July 10, 2015 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number one.

So thank you for agreeing to meet again, suggesting that we talk again about Viola, and I just would like to let you start out right away because I know you've thinking about this for some time.

RENA BRANSTEN: Well, I have been thinking about because I think, initially, when we first spoke, it was sort of in my living room, and it was sort of conversational, and I got distracted, and I wasn't as aware that I should be more thoughtful about what I was saying about Viola, partly because my memory is going. But I think what I said in the interview initially was true. I hadn't known Viola's work really before. I think that I sort of woke up to the fact that she was having a big show at the Crocker Museum, so I better do something about it. And that's when I got to know Viola and, of course, went up to see the show at the Crocker, and as I said in the thing, in the first interview, I remember going to the opening and she would say, "Stand here in front of me. I don't want to talk to that person," you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So, we had a—Betty also said her relationship with Viola was easy. I had the feeling that both Trish and Pauline felt it was more competitive, but I don't think so. Now—

MS. RIEDEL: Now you mean Pauline Shaver and your daughter, Trish, and Betty Woodman, just to clarify.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Now I—so I started to think about how I would go about trying to get sort of the art history of Viola placed in some kind of way. But I mean, having studied art history a million years ago differently than it's taught now, I then tried to put her in context. So the way I did it was to think about Betty Woodman and Mary Frank, and all of these women artists were about the same age. Betty is a little older. They all came from very different backgrounds, but they focused on ceramics. This is a big deal, certainly if you are trying to make a story about it.

They all had very different backgrounds. Betty studied at Alfred University, which was, of course, very focused in ceramics, but it was much more utensil-oriented, pots and everything, and the first time I ever heard Betty speak, which was at some museum event on ceramics, she talked about that she made platters or plates that were for special occasions. In other words, not everyday use. And I sort of didn't know Betty then as well as I do now, and I love Betty, but at that time, I was sort of snooty about it, you know. But—

MS. RIEDEL: In terms of utilitarian wear?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Not that, but it was that that's what—that she sort of made it special by being on a special occasion.

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

MS. BRANSTEN: So—and not just because she was making it for—because she was creating something.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Then I also showed Mary Frank. Mary Frank, Viola and I—I think Mary's still alive, but are all the exactly same age. And Mary's background I don't really know. I do know from the curator of photographer, Sandy Phillips, that Mary Franks' mother was an artist. I don't know what Mary's—I know that Hayden Herrera wrote two books about Mary, but I don't know where they are. And I don't know what her background was. I do know that Sandy Phillips said that she and Robert Frank and their children lived very, very Bohemian lives. And I know that, but by the time I knew Mary, she was not at all Bohemian and had, you know, a very nice reputation. Not amazing, but certainly a respected art reputation. Much more so than Viola.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: She was also, I would say, a little more formidable than Viola or a little more, maybe, sophisticated, but I also put that to the fact that both of these other artists, Betty Woodman and Mary Frank, came out of the east.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Viola was a farm girl from Lodi.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I only know that Viola didn't talk about her background too much. She sort of had this crazy idea that her family took up too much—her brothers, who had done a lot for her. I mean, the family sent her to college and everything. She was the only person to go to college in her family, but she sort of ignored them. She didn't want anything to do with them because she said it would take up too much time. I mean, whatever justification that is, I don't know. But I—maybe she—maybe they angered her. I have no idea. There was another thing that came up in this interview with Betty Woodman.

MS. RIEDEL: This is an interview that Betty Woodman did about Viola, and we don't know who did it. We don't even have the date. You have a copy of it here.

MS. BRANSTEN: That's all I have. I didn't make—I didn't put it in anything. So Betty must know when she did it. And I can give you her contacts—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I can get that, too.

MS. BRANSTEN: Where was I? See, that's the trouble with me.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you had been talking about Viola's family, and she didn't want to have anything to do with them; it would take up too much time. And then you were shifting to a new thought. I think it had something to do with Betty's opinion or something like—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I also—in trying to sort of make a difference of the fact that they came from the east. Also Betty and Mary had both been married and had children. They had tragedy in their lives. Robert Frank was a really horrible person, maybe a great photographer, but really a horrible person. And so they—and of course, Betty's daughter committed suicide. So they had something that Viola didn't have at all, but Viola, I think, made a decision not to have any of that. Now, whether that was because she was covering up something that she lost or whatever, I don't know. I never asked her. I know she felt that women artists shouldn't have children because it took away too much time, but that also—I mean, that also—I didn't question her and say, "What a dumb idea," you know?

Viola and I had a very good time traveling together. We had, which Betty says, "An easy relationship." Betty also—what I was sort of fussing around about—Betty also said that she didn't feel Viola wanted a show in the Metropolitan, that her ambitions didn't go that way. But Trish, on the other hand, when I read her that portion, said, "Absolutely not. Viola was very ambitious"—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's the impression I have, as well.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, that she absolutely wanted a show at the Metropolitan, and I reminded her that Betty Woodman's show at the Metropolitan was dreadful. I don't know if you ever saw it.

MS. RIEDEL: No. I saw the book.

MS. BRANSTEN: What?

MS. RIEDEL: I saw the book, but I did not see the exhibition.

MS. BRANSTEN: The exhibition was terrible.

MS. RIEDEL: That's too bad.

MS. BRANSTEN: The woman just shoved everything in one room. I mean, it was just awful. No thought. No sensitivity. So, I don't know. I don't—I obviously didn't get that thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I—go ahead. I don't want to trip up your thought.

MS. BRANSTEN: I do think that Viola possibly had—maybe because she lived out here and was sort of on the outskirts of the art scene at the time, was more experimental. I think she was very aware of sort of artifacts that represented things, particularly figurines. I mean, she had a figurine collection. And really, her groupings are based on figurines. And she—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know that from seeing her studio? Do you know that from conversations with her?

MS. BRANSTEN: Conversations. And she liked to collect. She also had a closet with figurines in it. She also, which, interesting enough, Richard Armstrong, when he was at the Corcoran [Gallery of Art], bought assemblages of figurines that she created and took photographs of them. Now, he's the only person I know that recognized these things. I don't think Betty or Mary ever did that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry. I'm not following that train of thought. What do you mean, "She didn't do that kind of thing?"

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, she would—she would sort of experiment with other material—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I see.

MS. BRANSTEN: —with a camera.

MS. RIEDEL: I see. Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Putting stuff together and making—I mean, Betty was—pretty much made these pieces, and whether they grew more decorative, they were never figurative, as far as I know. I think she had something with sort of ladies in kimonos that I can remember, but basically not. But both Mary and Viola were pretty figurative. Mary from one aspect, which was maybe more emotional than Viola. Viola's, I think, was more trying to make a point about something. Maybe it was—I don't think Viola was a feminist, other than the idea that an artist should be focused on art and not on children.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, she was also, too, in the hotbed of West Coast ceramics at the time where everything was so experimental.

MS. BRANSTEN: But she wasn't really a part of that.

MS. RIEDEL: But I think there must have—she, of course, was completely aware of it. And—

MS. BRANSTEN: She was aware of everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I think she was sort of—she didn't play the game, or she wasn't—

MS. RIEDEL: I'm thinking about in terms of experimental technique, that she was constantly experimenting with techniques, certainly with getting larger and larger pieces, with glazes, lot of experimentation there. And I have the feeling that that's part of that spirit at the time.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I don't think she ever went into the glaze thing like they did at Alfred where they—

MS. RIEDEL: No, no—

MS. BRANSTEN: None of that. I don't think—I think she used commercial glazes.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I know she went to that Shigaraki Conference in Japan in '91, and I think that was all about glaze.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, I'm sure.

MS. RIEDEL: And the glazes—there was definitely the China-paint quality, but there was also a pitted-ness and a volcanic quality and a dryness to some of those glazes that I think she experimented with.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh yes, I think she experimented. She had all that—she had some kind of black thing that she

plunked on the plates. Absolutely. I mean, you took it another step. I was basically focusing on these photographs.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: And then Trish found out that Garth Clark had 18 of these photographs. Now, at times, I didn't think Viola was the most—kind of person that would like to give away things. But she obviously—Garth got these photographs out of her. And there weren't too many around.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were photos that she took of things that she had acquired at the flea markets, that sort of thing?

MS. BRANSTEN: Not only that, it was things that she acquired at the flea market, and she would make, like, a composition out of it. It was like a three-dimensional collage of stuff. It didn't really say anything. I mean—

MS. RIEDEL: I think they were light studies, too, as I understand it—

[Talking simultaneously]

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't remember them, except that Richard bought two of them. Let's see what else I had to say. Well, color was always a primary element just like Betty's, but certainly not—Mary did prints, but color was not—I think it was more form. Viola also made pots, I said, but her interest is in figurines and what they represented at various times. For instance, after the war, there were a lot of, like, heads of pretty women in like, hats, or something. They could be cups or pitchers. And the women had their eyes sort of closed, with eyelashes. And she felt—she had a theory that after the war the women who had been working in the factories had to go back to being women in the homes with pretty hats and things.

MS. RIEDEL: And did she tell you that?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: She did? Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Very much, I remember her saying the women with the eyes closed. And if you look around at sort of tchotchke ceramics from the '40s, you'll see what I mean. I mean, they definitely have their eyes down with the eyelashes and hair up. Then I felt that, possibly, Charles, who was a historian, also interpreted some of Viola's art. He certainly, apparently, according to both Viola and Charles, wrote the book that Garth Clark—the catalogue that Garth did for the Crocker because Garth was really basically interested in pots.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Back then.

MS. BRANSTEN: Absolutely. I think still. She was—when you talk about the ceramic world here, I think she was a little—she wasn't part of that. But she was definitely respected by the ceramic people here, like [Peter] Voukos, because I remember Voukos telling me that he respected Viola's and so forth.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. BRANSTEN: However, I think her imagery and sensibility was closest to [Robert] Arneson.

MS. RIEDEL: Definitely.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think she had—I can't remember what her connections with Bob and Sandy [Shannonhouse] were. Apparently, Sandy did give an interview about Viola.

MS. RIEDEL: She's going to later this month.

MS. BRANSTEN: Okay. I also said, "Not close to anyone I can think of." And I was particularly moved by Sam saying, "When Viola got sick." And I don't know whether she got sick first with—I think she got head cancer first and then all these strokes.

MS. RIEDEL: I know she had colon cancer, I think. Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. And he said that, around that time he was thinking about, you know, moving away and doing his own thing, but he realized that Viola had nobody to take care of her except him. So that sort of—even though Squeak and Gary—Squeak was close, in a way, to her, I don't think she was really close to anybody. So that's—so Sam really stepped in, which was wonderful. I mean, it was—he was there till the very day she died.



MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. He really enabled her to work up to the end.

MS. BRANSTEN: No question. I think she was very revered by her students. And several of her students were close to her, too. I mean, I—definitely Squeak, but I can't think of the other person I'm thinking of, who's a respectable artist, not very well-known.

Viola had a very extensive library. As Trisha said, when she began to get money, she, you know, bought books like there was no tomorrow. And she was very well read. I think she enjoyed that. Trisha felt she was one of the first people to recognize the idea of globalism, like the sleepy Mexican, which was interpreted by the Japanese and sold to the Americans. I mean, I thought that was interesting. That never would have occurred to me at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I'll have to ask Trisha about that.

MS. BRANSTEN: Definitely do that. So, I think that's as far as I got, except that, all of a sudden, I found this thing on Betty Woodman and felt that I would hate to not have Viola—well, not have Viola placed somewhere in the art world as we know it. And the way I thought it could possibly be was with Betty and Mary. I can't think of anybody —

MS. RIEDEL: How do you see her in relation to, say, some of the other figurative ceramic work that was happening here at the time? I'm thinking Manuel Neri. I'm thinking Stephen de Staebler.

MS. BRANSTEN: Now, Manuel Neri ceramic lasted for several years, then he went right into plaster.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] How about Arneson? I mean, we have talked about that in relation—

MS. BRANSTEN: Arneson was very much focused on Arneson and did his own thing. I don't—I think—none of those artists wanted to be thought of as "funk" artists. Ever. And I don't think Peter Selz ever even thought of Viola as a funk artist. He certainly didn't include her at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Which was fine. I don't think any of the funk artists wanted to be funk artists.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. But it's sure has stuck, hasn't it?

MS. BRANSTEN: Sort of. Sort of. I don't think people think of it too much anymore. Or I don't think of it. I mean, I found the catalogue, and I thought, "Oh my God."

MS. RIEDEL: How would you describe Viola? Where would you place her?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I would definitely—I mean, you can see that I'm attracted to figurative art.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: So, I felt she was a figurative artist, who had some sort of vocabulary where she interpreted life as she saw it, in some way. I mean, certainly, she didn't grow up with men in suits and ties.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Well, and that made me think of one of the, I thought, the most insightful things you said during our last interview, which was—you quoted something that she had said about, "Women had their strength by being naked, and men have their strength by wearing a blue suit." I thought that was one of the most insightful—

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. I think she said—I didn't make that up. She made that up.

MS. RIEDEL: No. But you told me. I hadn't heard that before.

MS. BRANSTEN: I may have thought of it like an eye roller, but I, you know—and I think Viola may have liked to say things that were provocative. But when you read this thing with Betty—and I don't think Betty would have tried to make things different. She said they got on very well. They mostly talked about art, nothing personal. I don't think Viola wanted to know anything personal.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: About me or anybody else.

MS. RIEDEL: No, I didn't get that impression either. The focus was always on the art.

MS. BRANSTEN: What I didn't say was that Viola had a very pretty voice. She had a nice voice. She had—she

liked talking about people. She loved gossip and that kind of thing. But Trisha felt she was very ambitious, and she—and she said, "There's no question that between Viola and Betty, at the time, when they were in Sèvres together, that Viola was considered an art person, and Betty was more of a craft or design person.

Still, I think Betty was more—she came from New York; she knew a lot of people; she got around. She and her husband, certainly, promoted Francesca's career. I think there are people that sort of roll their eyes about that, but I think it meant maybe they felt badly that they hadn't realized she was depressed. I never discussed that with Viola either, and I think—I do know that this is completely off the subject, that Betty came back from Sèvres and stayed with me for a few days, and she said—but Betty was much—Viola wasn't at all athletic, but Betty was. I mean, I think she still does run. And she was running, and she said that somebody grabbed her and raped her in the bushes.

MS. RIEDEL: Betty?

MS. BRANSTEN: Betty. In France. So I said, "My God, Betty. What did you do?" I said, "Did you go, you know, to the Sèvres—did you say something?" She said, "No. I thought, well, you know, George is coming tomorrow. I'm going to go home the next day. And I don't know how to say, 'rape' in French." That was it. And she just said, "We were dog walking." I didn't have these dogs then, but.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that? Well, when she was in Sèvres, so the '80s, the mid- to late-'80s. Wow.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, way, way back.

MS. RIEDEL: How awful.

MS. BRANSTEN: Did I say, "No?" Did I say, "No fussing around?" Come here.

MS. RIEDEL: We have a pug that wants to be part of the conversation here.

MS. BRANSTEN: And she likes feet, especially bare feet. And shoes. Come here.

Viola had—also had several dogs in her studio, and they always—they lived and died, always with the same name. I think she called them "Poppy."

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I remember reading something about the dogs. Rena, I wanted to ask you though, thinking about—did you have anything else you wanted to say?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. That was as far as I got.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. I wanted to ask you, while we are on the topic of ambition, because you—you know, it seems safe to say that you met Viola in '80, or your first show for her was in '80, I believe, when it was still Quay Gallery, which was just the year before the Crocker. Right?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. No. Well, I think it was after the Crocker to tell you the—I couldn't find the catalogue.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, according to Viola's CV, you had 10 shows with her, and the first was in '80; the first two were in '80 and '82 when it was still Quay Gallery.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Because I thought it was—Ruth dropped the name "Quay" and I thought it was too—it was sad to drop the name entirely. I mean, I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Well then by the time she had a show in '85, it had become Rena Bransten Gallery. But this really pivotal time that you started to work with her in '80 when—'81 she's having the Crocker retrospective; '84, that exhibition at the retrospective at the Whitney, definitely would not have happened without your getting involved. So I just wanted to talk with you about that whole idea of ambition and how you facilitated that exhibition. I know, last time we met, you talked about putting Viola and Patterson Sims on the train together and sending them down to New York as if to hatch the plot. But I wanted to hear a little bit more about that around this idea of ambition; was this something that you imagined and pushed for? Or was it something that Viola came to you with an idea for—

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I think it was that—you have to remember, too, that I sort of touched on it very badly, that the art world has changed so drastically now.

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

MS. BRANSTEN: In those days, there was no Internet. You know, we connected by slides and phone calls and letters. And the idea that this show could travel—

MS. RIEDEL: The Crocker show or the Whitney show?

MS. BRANSTEN: The Crocker show. The Whitney show did travel.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I had nothing to do with that. I think the Whitney did that. But the—maybe. I can't remember. But certainly—I don't know who put the idea in my head, but definitely, I felt we could do it. I reprinted the catalogue, which Garth was not too mad at, but said I should have gotten permission to reprint the catalogue and not just go on and done it. But I did reprint the catalogue. We sent out a whole lot of stuff, and we did send that show around. So I think Trisha trained with somebody who was sort of an artist agent, who I think still is Manuel [Neri]'s agent, named Anne Kohs. And she trained Trisha how to proceed with this idea.

MS. RIEDEL: With the retrospective at the Whitney.

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no, no. Nothing to do with the Whitney.

MS. RIEDEL: With traveling the show.

MS. BRANSTEN: Traveling the show.

MS. RIEDEL: With traveling the show from the Crocker.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: So, it wasn't the whole show because the Crocker show was enormous, but it was portions of it. I don't remember how we picked it out.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So it was when you got involved that the opportunity to travel the show began. Up till then, it was just going to be at the Crocker.

MS. BRANSTEN: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I had nothing to do with it. It was Garth that had something to do with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: I really don't remember how it—but it was Garth that brought it to my attention.

MS. RIEDEL: But it must have been something that you felt had enormous potential and was important because that's not something you did all that often, is it? To get involved with traveling an exhibition or having—helping to pull an exhibition—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I did. At that time, I did more with little catalogues and things like that, but—so I'll take credit for it, but I don't really remember when it popped into my head. It might have been other people that were interested in Viola that said, it's too bad the show was—I mean, I have no idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I do know that we did it, and as I said, I think in the other thing, because I sort of remember, it was a different time. Insurance wasn't so crazy. You know, moving something around wasn't that crazy. And I was younger, so I thought it was worth a try.

MS. RIEDEL: It was an incredible opportunity for Viola, really. I mean, your—

MS. BRANSTEN: I do think—I mean, Pauline said, "You didn't say enough about how you made Viola's career."

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's what I mean.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, Viola made her career—

MS. RIEDEL: But you had a lot to do with that. You had 10 shows from her, from 1980 to 2008. The other thing that struck me as amazing is that she did a show every year, from 1980 to the year she died.

MS. BRANSTEN: She was very prolific.

MS. RIEDEL: She was certainly prolific. She was really driven. I think incredibly ambitious. But I think you and Nancy Hoffman—

MS. BRANSTEN: But she loved doing it. I mean, this was her thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I don't want to take away from what Trisha told me on the phone because she has very strong feelings about all of this—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Which we'll get to, for sure. So it's important to get to yours, too.

MS. BRANSTEN: So, I think she'll remember things better than I do. But I have forgotten an awful lot. There were people that popped up that were interested in Viola, and we would work on that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Did her collector base change over time, from more private collectors, as the pieces got larger and larger, to more public collections? Or was it—or you don't remember, or it was a mix all the way through?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think it was a mix. We sold an awful lot of them. I mean, when I look back, we really did. But when they get on the market now, they are so big that, you know, the auction houses really don't want to deal with them because they don't make that much money, and they are hard to set up, and—

MS. RIEDEL: They are unique, though, and it is wonderful to see—

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, I don't—you know, you said, "Where does she fit in?" I think she just had her own vision and was able to make it real. And some things came out better than others. I don't know if you went to see Nancy Hoffman's show?

MS. RIEDEL: I'm going to see her next week.

MS. BRANSTEN: All right. Well, I thought the show was terrible. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Now, why did you think so?

MS. BRANSTEN: Because it was too crowded.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. The show that's up currently? Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: She had I-don't-know-how-many plates on it. And, I mean, it's not a very big gallery. So she had—the first room was a million plates. Excuse me, I wasn't going to be nasty, but I just felt—I guess I feel, maybe, you'll attract people because the plates aren't too big, and they are not too expensive, but—so you pull people in this way. But really, I think Viola should be focused on her figurative pieces or the pieces that were sort of funny combines of things that were—

MS. RIEDEL: It is interesting what you say about the pieces needed space and being too crowded. I was just reading, I think, a review of Kim Johnson's from 2010 talking about Viola's show at MAD, and then a similar show at Nancy Hoffman and saying how essential it was that those pieces had space around them.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, because they are very colorful. I mean, even this piece—

MS. RIEDEL: They are so much about relationship. It's about relationships either among the figures or the relationship that they establish with the viewer.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, that's very much what Trisha feels, that you should be able to move your eye around and follow a sequence of some sort. There isn't one. She has one very large seated figure in the second gallery space, which I thought was very handsome. Trisha wasn't too keen on it. But she also included pieces brought from Sèvres. Well, I don't know if you have seen pieces of Sèvres. I have some here, but this is not what I would—This is not how I would promote Viola.

MS. RIEDEL: How would you promote Viola?

MS. BRANSTEN: Just concentrate on these sculptures.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, the large figures.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, not only the large —medium size. Things that she would sort of assemble various elements together.

MS. RIEDEL: The bricolage pieces? Okay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Those are quite unique and powerful.

MS. BRANSTEN: They are very unique, and they are very powerful, and I don't exactly know what they are saying, but that's what I would—I know that there's a feeling that everything should be combined, the drawings, the paintings, but I don't think that's how people think. And I think the way—it's sort of my old head in thinking about art history. How do you move somebody along? It's not really what they did to commemorate somebody's birthday. You know what I mean? You have to focus, and then you can sort of go out into little areas if somebody wants to do drawings or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you try to do that in your exhibitions over time was to really have a focus on, say, specifically a certain size or the figures, or specifically with three-dimensional ceramic work? And then you would do a show of the paintings or a show of the bricolage work?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I think we did it all.

MS. RIEDEL: You would mix them all.

MS. BRANSTEN: We mixed them. I think I never curated an artist's show. I mean, I always said, "What have you got?"

MS. RIEDEL: I remember you saying that.

MS. BRANSTEN: Sometimes it didn't work well.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: The one artist I can think of is Bill Wiley, who I really respect and love, but he thought you should love everything, and at a certain point, you don't. You know, or you think it's not going to look like anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Going back to Viola, what was the response to her painting as oppose to the ceramic work when you had exhibitions?

MS. BRANSTEN: I don't remember, really. But I do think that some of it was wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you sell it as well as the ceramic?

MS. BRANSTEN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I do remember she had—I think the first time I ever went into her studio, she had some very intricate, large either acrylic or oil paintings that were sort of landscape-y. But I never saw her do that kind of thing again. And she didn't like doing that. She didn't like little, it'sy—I think she really—you couldn't say she was abstract expressionist because she wasn't, but she was making an expression of some sort. Control.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Well, there was certainly expressionist quality to that painting in particular, but also on the clay.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Oh, very much on the clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Did you show me the bronze figures?

MS. BRANSTEN: I didn't particularly care for them.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And why not?

MS. BRANSTEN: I thought they were stiff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. There is something about clay that just seemed so—

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, because it gets luminous.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It's luminous. It's so malleable. It seems to breathe.

MS. BRANSTEN: I mean, if you are going to do bronze, I don't think you should—well, I mean, that's painted. But it's also not painted. I mean, you know, so I can't make a—I mean, that's why I never put it outside.

MS. RIEDEL: So much of the power of the ceramic pieces, to me, felt—of course, the scale and the way they did lean in, and I know she did that very intentionally, and it felt as if you are just thrust into that space and into a relationship with those pieces. Did it feel like that to you? There was no way to be detached from them. I think that was why the placement of them is so important, is that space that they create in relationship, either to each other or to a viewer.

MS. BRANSTEN: I think that's true. I mean, I think some of the faces didn't quite come off. So maybe she didn't want them to come off too well. I mean, if you look at the ladies back there that, you know, that are in the garden?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I can see two of them from here.

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, yes, one of them, I have to cut one of the branch, but their faces are different. Some are pretty. Some aren't. I don't—but I felt they were—I call them The Three Graces. I don't think that she thought of them that way, but I didn't want to separate them.

MS. RIEDEL: And she didn't create—they weren't a group together. You put them together, correct?

MS. BRANSTEN: She made them. They were in the gallery together.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. But they weren't a cluster. They weren't sold as a single piece.

MS. BRANSTEN: No. They were sold separately.

MS. RIEDEL: And they also have that sort of pitted quality that came later.

MS. BRANSTEN: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And as opposed to that much clearer, glossy, glassy ceramic glaze quality that happened much earlier.

MS. BRANSTEN: But I think it's around the same time. The piece that—who is it has in Washington that I gave. I think it's really her masterpiece. I mean, it's an enormous piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Where is this, Rena? And who has it?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, it's not—I gave the collection to—who is the round museum in Washington, D.C.? [Hirshhorn Museum -ALF]

MS. RIEDEL: The round museum.

MS. BRANSTEN: Which was given by the collector in New York? Oh, you got to know.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so the *Decline of Western Civilization* at the Hirshhorn.

MS. BRANSTEN: That was the last terrific piece she did.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That was extraordinary. *Decline and Fall of Western Civilization*. Yes. Did it get easier to interest critics in her work over time? To get reviews? There are 10 shows. Were people generally excited on a regular basis, or did enthusiasm swell over the—

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I think she had her own little—

MS. RIEDEL: Museum exhibitions.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, there were certain people that—not the kind of criticism I sort of was looking for. Or still am looking for, thinking of, you know, the three woman who worked in clay together.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. BRANSTEN: Something that was a little over—a little more ambitious than just—

MS. RIEDEL: Did you see that David Pagel essay, the recent one?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes, I did.

MS. RIEDEL: I thought that was pretty good.

MS. BRANSTEN: And I liked. I really liked it. But now I have forgotten.

MS. RIEDEL: He had some great points. One of the things he touched on I thought was really interesting was the double-ness that was so frequently in her work. I thought that was an interesting way to think about it. From the obvious self-portraits, the double self-portraits, but there seems to be a juxtaposition and attention that came from a sense of double-ness.

MS. BRANSTEN: That's true. I mean, but that's the kind of criticism I was sort of looking for. But you don't find that in a lot of criticism.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's also—I think sometimes it's easier, in retrospect, to look back now and be able to place it in context. It's easier to see.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. Yes, that's maybe why I was thinking of the three women.

MS. RIEDEL: And what in particular about the three women were you thinking?

MS. BRANSTEN: Well, I mean, because they were all the same age.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I see. Mary Frank, Betty Woodman and Viola. I thought you were talking again about the sculptures. [Laughs.]

MS. BRANSTEN: No, no, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. I mean, you carried her work for 20-plus years, 25 years.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you think of it as having significant transitions or significant phases, significant series? Or did you think about it as a long trajectory or a long conversation?

MS. BRANSTEN: I think Viola always had different ways of—you know, she experimented. But basically, towards the end, she wasn't really that well. And I don't think any artist can go like this. I mean, there are sort of—

MS. RIEDEL: Ups and downs. Ebbs and flows.

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it a big shock when the pieces began to recline or receded?

MS. BRANSTEN: No, I thought it was great. I mean, I thought that was Viola. She wasn't afraid of anything.

MS. RIEDEL: And then when they got so white with just little dabs of color—

MS. BRANSTEN: She didn't like it all white. A friend of mine bought a piece, and I chipped it or did something, and I sent it back to her to fix it, and she glazed it, and he was furious.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh my gosh. She glazed it differently than it was?

MS. BRANSTEN: Yes. She put color on it.

MS. RIEDEL: I heard that Peggy and Bill Foote had a number of her pieces, and I think they gave one back to be repaired, and it came back completely different. Peggy was pretty annoyed.

MS. BRANSTEN: Somebody once told me that about—Viola and I went to a wedding. It was Patterson Sims' wedding. And we flew into Rhode Island where the wedding was, and then we drove down to New York. And somebody told me that on the way to—near New Haven, Chamberlin had a whole—like a meadow of pieces that were all there and that I should try and see them. It was part of a little—"Look for a little museum, and they'll tell you where it is."

So we go into the little museum, which is, I'm sure, still there. It was part of Yale, but it was about—it was something to do with submarines. It was not an art museum. So I said to the nice, blue-haired lady behind the

desk, "I'm looking for the Chamberlin group of sculptures that are somewhere around here."

"Oh," she said. "We got rid of that person with the junk stuff." And I'm looking around for where Viola is, who's beat it out the door because she didn't want to hear the lady yelling at me. But it was funny. And Chamberlin, I understand, did the same thing. If you said, "Well this is broken," he'd fix the whole thing differently.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think this has been a very helpful addition. Any other final thoughts?

MS. BRANSTEN: No. I would love to—I mean, I hope it comes off well. I hope it's what Pauline is looking for. But I think this—Betty Woodman's is very readable.

MS. RIEDEL: No, this looks wonderful. And thank you for this. I'll make copies.

MS. BRANSTEN: Okay.

[END OF branst14\_3of3\_sd\_track01\_m]

[END OF INTERVIEW]