

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: Melanie Monios (MM)

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PH: Okay, so we'll start. I'm Phoebe Herland. I'm the NYU Public Humanities Fellow here at MoMA, and I am interviewing Melanie Monios, who is the former assistant director of special programming at MoMA. Is that correct?

MM: Yes. When I left the Museum in 2020, that was my title in the Department of Special Programming and Events where I worked the last six years of my 37-year career here.

PH: We'll get into all of that. Let's see, it's April 9, and we're here at the Museum of Modern Art. So that is the official beginning. Now we can start. It's best to start wide, so maybe you could tell me a little bit about your background, when and where you were born, and how you grew up.

MM: Oh, wow, I wasn't expecting that. Yeah. So, I was born in 1958 in Southern California. As a kid, and throughout high school and college, I gravitated toward the arts of all kinds, eventually getting a BA degree in theater arts with a minor in dance. I was drawn to avant-garde theater, performance art and less mainstream culture with a dream to live in New York City. Then in my early 20s I met a fun like-minded friend. We each knew one person in New York City and moved together in August 1982, ahead of time to see Laurie Anderson perform *United States* at BAM. We lived in the East Village. Do you want me to talk about that?

PH: Well, let's even go back a little bit. Where did you go to school in California?

MM: I grew up in Long Beach, and I went to Cal State University Long Beach, which had a great theater department. But I knew all along I would not pursue higher education, because my sights were on a life in New York City.

PH: And then in '82 you moved here. So that's pretty much when you started at MoMA.

MM: Pretty much, yeah. I had been here three months or so.

PH: So, this was your first job in New York?

MM: My first job was at a very sketchy costume shop in Times Square, where the owner [laughs] wore guns strapped to his ankles and under his jacket. He was a creepy character and it was a weird experience. So, I did that a short time, but my dream was to work in an art museum. During college, I volunteered at the Long Beach Museum of Art and loved it. They showed a lot of video at the time. After I started at MoMA, I remember

Barbara London, the Video Curator, told me she has some relations at the Long Beach Museum and I felt so cool.

PH: Tell me about Long Beach—

MM: The Long Beach Museum of Art? It's a historic California craft house that became an art museum in the 1950s. Realistically I did not aspire to be an actress or a dancer, although I did both. So, my friend and I moved to the East Village on St. Mark's place. I kept seeing our neighbor, Lisa Schubert, carrying a MoMA tote bag, and thought, "Oh, she works at the Museum of Modern Art." So, I got up the nerve and told her I was looking for a museum job and she arranged for me to interview with the bookstore manager. I was hired to work all by my little lonesome at a temporary holiday bookstore annex in the Rockefeller brownstone on 54th Street. That lasted a few months.

PH: Had you been to the Museum before, had you been to the galleries and seen the collection?

MM: No, because when I came in '82 the Museum was closed after the major [Picasso](#) exhibition of 1980 [*Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*, MoMA Exh. # 1290] for César Pelli building expansion. A few galleries and a store were open. When the temp job ended, I reapplied and worked in the main bookstore and then as a ticket seller. I think we used a "Ka-Ching" cash register [laughs].

PH: What was the application process like at that point? Because if you're bouncing around from different departments, just trying to stay in the institution, I'm curious, did people recommend you, or—

MM: It was pretty easy. I mean, those were the days when you didn't need a museum studies degree. It didn't even exist then. I just applied and I suppose my job performance was fine enough. I was very happy to get a permanent job in the small lobby in August 1983 anticipating that in a year, the museum would reopen, as a new, big, fabulous place and hopefully there would be opportunity. And it turned out, there was opportunity. Should I talk about that?

PH: Go for it.

MM: And that was the Visitor Services Department, which had never existed in the Museum's history or at museums at large. It was the brainchild of Susan Jackson, the Assistant Director of Human Resources, to pioneer a department that would improve the quality of the visitor experience— like greeting visitors in the lobby, selling tickets, tracking attendance, managing signage and the floor plan brochures. A department that would liaise between visitors and staff. The powers that be said, "Yes, good idea. We're going to welcome *a lot* more people in the expanded museum." There was an opening to be her secretary and I got the job. I remember taking a typing test [laughs]. Susan and I couldn't have been more different human beings, but we worked really well together. We're friends to this day. So, that was the founding of the Visitor Services Department and kind of segues into how I ended up doing music programs and events.

PH: Let's hang out here for a little longer.

MM: Sure, sure.

PH: When looking through the old staff directories I saw that initially you were hired as a secretary in Visitor Services, but then in '86, or around then, the title was changed to an administrative assistant. And I was wondering if you noticed that happening, if you had any feelings about it at the time.

MM: Yeah, I was aware that Susan wanted to recognize me and I was grateful for the promotion.

PH: So then you do that role, administrative assistant, for a few years before you start working on Summergarden? Or when do you get involved with that?

MM: It probably started when I had that title. The thing about this newly formed Visitor Services Department was that it became sort of a catch all. So, you know, "What do we do with Summergarden?" It was with the Communications Department the year the Pelli building opened in 1985, and it was wildly popular – way beyond capacity so couldn't be done like that again. There were no permanent staff to manage and produce it, so Susan Jackson said "we'll take it." And I'm like, "Fine, I have a theater background and will give it a try." So, Summergarden came into Visitor Services at that point, and there is stayed for many, many years.

PH: And there were other public programming events that you worked on as well during that time?

MM: Not so much during that time. I was mostly doing Visitor Services tasks, like coordinating public signage and Information Plan brochures with Graphic Design, filling in for receptionists, and secretarial work for Susan. But I was production manager for a couple of performance series when I had that title in the 80s. One was associated with the [BERLINART](#) exhibition that Kynaston McShine had organized [MoMA Exh.#1451]. Joan Jonas was in that. And Kirk Varnedoe's show [High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture](#) [MoMA Exh. #1559]. RoseLee Goldberg was brought in to program, and I was a production manager. Laurie Anderson, Brian Eno, Spaulding Gray and other notable artists were in that line-up.¹ There was no Media and Performance department at the time, so over the years, live performance often fell to Visitor Services, and then to me.

PH: Well, you were a practicing performing artist at that time.

MM: I was actually, yeah.

PH: Can you tell me a little bit about that? Like, were your co-workers aware of those performances?

MM: Not too much. I was always kind of shy about that. I was in a performance group called [Watchface](#). Seven of us living in the East Village collaborating and performing together. We worked hard and had fun– a tight little family. We performed in so many venues,

¹ ["Six Evenings of Performance."](#) featuring Laurie Anderson, Eric Bogosian, Bongwater (with Ann Magnuson & Kramer), David Cale, Brian Eno, and Spalding Gray, presented on Tuesday evenings between October 23-January 8th, 1990-1992.

small and big clubs, alternative spaces, galleries, and we opened for some bands. So, I understood what it was to be on both sides of the stage. Performance production gave me a lot of joy over the years.

PH: And was it ever hard to balance? I'm assuming you had to work, I mean, during Summergarden, certainly weekends. And was it ever too hard to get involved with Watchface or stay involved with Watchface while you were doing this job?

MM: I do not know how I managed everything then, quite honestly, between working at MoMA during the day, rehearsing or performing with Watchface in the evenings, and I also had a restaurant job to make ends meet. And then, yeah, Summergarden. I finally said "You know what, I can't do this anymore." That might have been after my next promotion, whatever my title was--

PH: Assistant to the Director?

MM: Probably. So, I let the restaurant job go. And then in the early 90s Watchface ended— oh, I should have the year on the tip of my tongue.

PH: You know, I have a timeline I prepared.

MM: I am amazed. So, you're asking about me and my life?

PH: Yeah, we want to know— [consulting notes] your last performance was *2000 Questions* in 1991.

MM: You're blowing my mind.

PH: Well, it's all online. You have a fabulous website.

MM: It is online, yeah. That happened a number of years ago through efforts of a few diligent Watchface members.

PH: So, in those instances, where you were getting to coordinate things with people like Laurie Anderson, were you very— like, were those your heroes?

MM: Yeah, they were, in a way, my heroes, and so was RoseLee Goldberg. But I've never been an insane fan to anyone, I tried to respect and relate to artists as people. I always wanted every performer to have the best experience at MoMA and feel part of this family, of this history and this legacy.

PH: Did it give you a lot of insight into what was needed to facilitate those performances, having been a performer?

MM: I suppose it did. It's different, I think, producing something in a museum rather than in a theater setting. Especially in the outdoor Sculpture Garden. At that time, the AV [Audio Visual] Department didn't have the staff or sophisticated sound equipment for live music performance, but we pulled it off. An outside sound engineer was always hired to run Summergarden and we scrimped to buy better mics and gear little-by-little over the years. I saw the production value improve with every year.

PH: Well, I think with Watchface, you were performing in places like Franklin Furnace and the Pyramid Club. Would you have ever wanted to perform in MoMA's space, or was that not something you were interested in doing?

MM: No, no, not really. I kept that pretty separate.

PH: But when you're saying things are very different in a club setting versus a museum setting, I guess you were very aware of those differences.

MM: I guess, more specifically, in the Sculpture Garden setting and other spaces not designed for live performance like cafes and restaurants where the acoustics were not conducive and you had to figure out how to make staging and seating work. There was a lot of adapting to the challenges.

PH: What were some of the challenges? Well, of the various places, the café, there are obvious challenges, but maybe of the garden. What were some of those challenges?

MM: Well, number one was acoustics. Also, timing. We had to either block part of the Garden off or wait till the museum was closed to quickly set everything up - like 300-500 chairs. Myself and others, probably moved thousands of the [Harry] [Bertoia](#) chairs around the Garden over the years [laughter]. They hurt and they're heavy. And we had to configure seating around the sculpture installations. Oh my goodness, try putting on concerts among cars or giant Richard Serra sculptures. How many seats and sightlines were eaten up that year? But it was all part of the adventure, you know, and we always made it work, with a small but mighty team of porters, techs and volunteers. Weather was a big stressful factor. In the 80s and 90s there were two Summergarden concerts per weekend— on Friday & Saturday nights— to allow for a rain date. It didn't happen often, but was sad when both nights were rained out— especially because the musicians worked so hard. This was pre-weather-app, so we'd be staring up at the sky wondering what to expect. . We finally got a weather radio. But, yeah, there were a number of times we had to shut it down.

PH: During the performance?

MM: During the performance. And sometimes we'd get it wrong, and cancel, and then the sun would come out. That was always really heartbreaking. So, weather was a big deal.

PH: What about traffic noise? I'm curious.

MM: Oh yeah, traffic noise could be terrible.

PH: I mean, it must have just gotten increasingly bad as time went on.

MM: Well, in the Pelli building iteration, when concerts were on Friday and Saturday nights, there was more traffic and street noise. In the [Yoshio] Taniguchi building Summergarden was on Sunday night, so it was quieter. But trucks, cars, drunk people, sometimes roared down 54th Street. One night there was a huge explosion during a concert. I thought, "what is that? Are we going to have to evacuate?" So I went tearing out to Fifth Avenue, and a manhole had exploded, with flames shooting up, like, I don't know, 30 feet high.

PH: Do you remember who was performing?

MM: I'm pretty sure it was one of the Juilliard concerts where that music tended to be more quiet with a wide dynamic range I don't think the performers noticed, but our sound engineer sure did. Con Ed got it under control, and the show went on uninterrupted.

Here's another thing. There was a solo saxophone player who used to perform over the years on the corner of 54th and 5th Avenue in front of the University Club. And he'd get lost in his playing, which was improvisational, kind of far out [laughs] and loud. We could hear him from the Garden once or twice every summer, for maybe five or six years. So I would go out there and say, "Hey, hi," in my most respectful manner, because I really did respect his playing, then I'd give him a nice, big tip, and ask, "Do you think you could move down maybe a block or two? We've got a concert going on at the museum." I'd invite him to the concert. Then he was like, "yeah, cool, cool man," and he'd move. So we dealt with other kinds of noise as well.

PH: Yeah, and with that second museum expansion there's a restaurant overlooking the garden [The Modern]. Did that impact you?

MM: In the Taniguchi building, Summergarden concerts were on Sunday nights, when the restaurant was closed so we didn't disrupt their business. I remember wondering, "are people going to come on a Sunday night?" And lo and behold, they came and filled the Garden to capacity. Later at some point, I think the restaurant wanted to open their outdoor terrace— Oh wait, that was Thursday nights when we started another more casual music series. I don't know if you're going to get around to that, but the restaurant and terrace were open on those evenings.

PH: Was that to help fill in the schedule, because you had reduced Summergarden to just Sunday?

MM: That's a good question. Over the years, Summergarden was rolled back budget-wise and went from 8 concerts to 4, so I think that was part of the reason. But it was mainly to add programming that would draw visitors to the Museum's Thursday late hours. They ran from 2007 to 2018 first under the banner MoMA @ Night, which changed to MoMA Nights, then Summer Thursday Nights, and finally Summer Thursdays. The graphic identity changed every year, but the spirit was the same. The museum was open plus live music— lots of bands— and a bar in the Garden. Summergarden was different because the museum was closed and it was the only thing happening on those nights. Also, conducive to the contemporary classical & jazz music, the set up was more controlled and concert style with lots of seating.

PH: Did you notice, I don't know, a difference in the audience that would come for Summergarden, versus Thursday nights?

MM: Yeah, Summergarden was established and the majority of our audiences came for the high caliber programming. Lots of New Yorkers. Thursday nights, was a combination of visitors already in the museum who happened upon the music and fans of the musicians. That was a more varied program, and because it was during museum hours, we sometimes tied music to certain exhibitions.

PH: Yeah. How did you go about that?

MM: I'd look at the exhibition schedule and contact curators to ask, "hey, do you see any possibilities for a collaboration?" Generally, they liked the idea of programming that would call attention to their show and give it another dimension. And then eventually, curators knew about Summer Thursdays and approached me.

PH: Do you recall any specifically or especially successful moments where the programming intertwined with the—

MM: Yeah. There was Jytte Jensen's Premier Brazil film series. I can't remember which of us approached each other but it was great because there would be a screening, and a Brazilian band all in one evening. Jytte's programming partner in Brazil recommended Béco Dranoff, a Brazilian music producer who brought some great people in. One of those performances was the most crowded I have ever seen the Garden. Shall I talk about it?

PH: Yes, please.

MM: He booked the singer songwriter Adriana Calcanhotto, and we found out, like a day before, that she was—maybe still is—enormous in Brazil. Like, enormous. And I thought, "Oh my gosh. Security alert. We seriously need an escort for her and crowd control. Brazilians will come out of in droves for her show." And they did. She played a solo set with her acoustic guitar. The Garden was packed beyond capacity and fans were swaying and singing along to every song. It was pretty incredible and the security team was amazing.

We also did a nice collaboration with Leah Dickerman's Jacob Lawrence exhibition [*One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Visions of the Great Movement North*] with programming partners from Harlem Stage and our friends at Jazz at Lincoln Center. One night Jon Batiste and his band performed. He had just signed to be the house band on the Stephen Colbert show, so we had him right before he absolutely exploded. He's all about social music, so the band broke away from the stage and went out into the audience, as they do, playing their instruments all through the garden and then back onto the stage. It was packed that night too and great fun. We also had some very cool musicians for Barbara London's show [Soundings](#) [*Soundings: A Contemporary Score*]. The composer Tristan Perich was in the exhibition, and he brought Meehan/Perkins percussion duo in to play one of his pieces. That was beautiful. They performed on the bridge, and so were presented in the round, instead of at the end of the garden on the elevated platform.

PH: That's a pretty creative decision, when you're sort of directing viewpoints of performers with all these sculptures around, how did you negotiate that?

MM: The sound engineer and I always wanted to push the boundaries and try performances in different areas but sculpture installations wouldn't allow. But that year there was enough space around the bridge so we could go for it. Also, the composition is extended and repetitive, so it could be experienced anywhere in the garden.

PH: I imagine capacity is a constant concern when you have so many historically rich objects around the Garden. Were you trying to make sure you didn't get somebody too popular? Was that ever part of the conversation?

MM: Yes, yes, exactly. In fact, you kind of hit the nail on the head. Because all the way back in '85—

PH: Sonny Rollins?²

MM: Yes. That was a dazzling summer of programming, but way too popular for the Garden. I was in Visitor Services at the time, helping with crowd control and we were all kind of terrified. Most of the performances maxed out quickly so the gate had to be closed. People hung around outside on the street angry about not being able to come in. Again, it was a stellar line-up, but not sustainable. So, the following year, for the [Vienna 1900](#) exhibition [*Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design*] there was a Viennese café in the Garden and Summergarden featured period Viennese popular music played by a string quartet in the café.

PH: Very calming.

MM: Yeah, but not a whole lot of people came. The following year 1987 began the collaboration and partnership with the Juilliard School—

PH: Can you speak a little bit about that. How did that come about?

MM: I would love to, because I would be remiss if I didn't talk about Ethel Shein. Have you come across her name?

PH: Yes, I was hoping you would bring her up.

MM: Yeah, oh my goodness. The relationship with Juilliard really was due to Ethel Shein, who, at the time, was the assistant to Richard Oldenburg, the director of the Museum. Ethel had been here for many years and had connections with all the trustees. I will never forget that woman's Rolodex—it was just massive. I'm pretty sure June Larkin was on the board at Juilliard and at the Museum, which bridged the partnership, and of course Ethel's connections. She also worked with the Development Department to secure funding. Can't remember who sponsored it at the time.

PH: I mean, over the years, the sponsorship shifted from Mobil at one point to—

MM: Paine Webber I think?

PH: Paine Webber Group, yeah. NYNEX?

² For more, listen to episode two of MoMA's Jazz in the Garden podcast series: <https://soundcloud.com/museumofmodernart/jazz-in-the-garden-episode-two-one-magic-summer>.

MM: I think that was a telecom company.

PH: That was a brief sponsor, and then Everett B. Birch Foundation, Daniel Shapiro—

MM: That's right, trustees, yeah. Thank you, Ethel. Ethel was a great lover of music. She and I had a good rapport. She could really play hardball, but was kind inside. [laughs].

PH: Tell me a story about her, if you can.

MM: Okay. Ethel was one of the most devoted museum employees, and was here at all hours. The museum was her life and she cared a great deal about it. She was the keeper of the gate to the director's office. When Richard Oldenburg left, she became the Director of Special Programming and Events. I remember she wanted to poach me, but I preferred to stay in Visitor Services at that time. But I digress. Now I'll tell you a story about Ethel at Summergarden. It was—when did [John Cage](#) pass away? 1992. That year Juilliard programmed a summer of John Cage's music to celebrate his 80th birthday. And at the time, the artistic director was Paul Zukofsky. Well, a lot of John Cage's music is very quiet, often with gaps and sometimes unconventional instruments like seashells. But as we know, John Cage didn't think there was such thing as silence or emptiness – that there was always something to hear, so he was perfectly content with street sounds or any other noise that accompanied the concerts. He and Merce Cunningham came to every concert until his passing that August. They sat together in the front row thrilled to be there and thrilled with the Juilliard performances. But, back to Ethel. So, one of the performances was John Cage sitting solo at a table with a mic reading from his text piece *Empty Words*. It omits sentences, then phrases, then words, then syllables and letters until there are only sounds. Pretty abstract. Ethel was in the front row near Merce with her dachshund dog, Lulu, who came to work with her often. So, John is droning on [imitates], and suddenly Lulu starts to chime in, howling, barking and making these [laughs] funny sounds—almost riffing on John's words! And Ethel and I look at each other mortified, then both of us, you know, start to laugh, stifling it to the point of tears. Lulu went on for a little while and John just kept on reading. I don't remember if he said anything after, he probably loved it. Anyway, that was a playful moment with Ethel who could be on the gruff side, but not without a sense of humor.

PH: Can I ask you why you didn't want to leave Visitor Services and go directly to Ethel at that point?

MM: I wasn't interested in doing corporate events most of the year until Summergarden came around. I really enjoyed the Visitor Services stuff, which was about 70% of my job and also wanted to keep live music production, and Garden horticulture coordination— that was another part of my job.

PH: Well, can you maybe tell me about all that other stuff?

MM: Oh gosh, there were so many phases of the Department of Visitor Services, and operating in the two buildings—Pelli and then Taniguchi, which was distinct but similar.

PH: For you, it's very related to the building.

MM: It's related to the building. I will also reiterate Visitor Services, became this department where, "Oh, what do we do with the with housekeeping and the porters?" Well, okay, it's going into Visitor Services. "The mail room needs a home." Visitor Services. "Summargarden?" Visitor Services. "Who's going to schedule the tree pruning and flower planting?" Visitor Services. And we also had the receptionists, Maria Martin, and the switchboard operator. And later the Volunteer Program and Group Services.

PH: Switchboard operator, we don't have one of those anymore [laughs].

MM: Nope, nope. The switchboard operator. Maria will tell you about Dottie Lehti.

PH: Oh, I have actually pictures from her retirement party.

MM: Oh, we planned that retirement party [laughs].

PH: If you want to check them out, they're in that folder [gestures].

MM: Did you bring this stuff for us to look at?

PH: I just picked a few because there are so many pictures in your files.

MM: Oh yeah, because I decided to leave behind all of my disposable camera pictures for the archives when I retired. It was during the pandemic when the museum was closed so I was in the office all alone rifling through my stuff. [flipping through them]. Oh God.

PH: The Dottie pictures are in that next envelope. So, she was a switchboard operator?

MM: For many years.

PH: When did she retire? Do you remember? You probably can't remember that off the top. Is it on there? Well, I'm sure we can find out.

MM: Dottie Lehti she was the quote-unquote hostess in the members dining room before somehow becoming the switchboard operator. [Laughs] This isn't very nice but it's amusing, so I'll tell you how she'd sometimes answer the phone. She would pick it up [gestures] and say in her thick New York accent, "museum ah modern aht." But, she would raise the receiver slowly, so the caller might only hear "aht." God knows what people were thinking on the other end. She was a character, but dear, dear lady.

PH: What other characters did you work with that at that point, in that mid 80s moment?

MM: I can't think of too many off the top of my head. You know, I met the best people over my years here. The Museum always felt like a family, even as it got bigger and bigger. Do you feel like it's a family?

PH: I mean, it's definitely bigger, but I feel very at home in my little nest in the archives.

MM: Yeah, I guess there are just more little nests in a much bigger tree.

PH: And, so, you have all these hats.

MM: Many, many, many hats. I worked with the Graphics Department a lot over the years on signs, brochures and tickets. Always had reverence for the Graphics team and lots of fun working with them. They were doing mechanicals by hand when I was first started. So many talented, creative people went through that department and hard working. I was really aware that the exhibitions, and projects like the visitor guides took precedence over music programs and yet, Graphics would build those materials into their schedule with fantastic outcome.

PH: I love that early Summergarden logo.

MM: [Ivan Chermayeff](#). Beautiful. I felt like we could have kept that logo forever. It's timeless.

PH: If that was on tote bags today people would snap them up.

MM: It might have been at some point. There were pins with that logo. We talked about seat cushions and other items over the years, but would have had to charge for them and didn't want to commodify Summergarden in the spirit of keeping it free.

So, I wore many hats and stayed many, many, many, many late nights to get it all done, but I never regretted it. My responsibilities were pleasure. Ethel used to stay late too. I always knew I could pick up the phone and say "are you still here?" [laughs]. And she'd be there. Sadly, she had cancer and passed away in 2002, I believe. When Summergarden was going to be reinstated in the Taniguchi building in 2005, the question of sponsorship was raised. As always, our trustees are so wonderful, Aggie Gund and Jo Carole Lauder established the Ethel P. Shein Fund for Music at MoMA in honor of Ethel's support and appreciation for music. So, Ethel was instrumental in Summergarden even long after she was gone. We acknowledged her in the program and at the mic.

PH: How did, how did budget affect programming? Were you ever really in a tight bind or—

MM: To be honest, it was tight for every music program. Because, we're an art museum, and you know, there are—

PH: Priorities?

MM: Yeah, absolutely. Priorities for exhibitions, the staff's time, fundraising, the trustees' generosity, and I get that. So, it was always a challenge to put on a show given the budget, but fun to meet the challenges. And being MoMA, people were delighted to partner with us resulting in many wonderful mutually beneficial partnerships.

PH: Right, like, I'm sure it was great for the Juilliard students to perform, and it was also pretty economical for the Museum.

MM: You're spot on. Budget was another reason we couldn't have big name popular acts at Summergarden. But in fact, the contemporary new music was a beautiful fit with MoMA and synchronized with the mission. I used to revisit the mission statement pretty much every year, and also send it to new programming partners for inspiration saying, "take a look at this and keep it mind."

PH: And what was the mission statement?

MM: Always looking at the art of our time, you know, staying very current. And learning and creativity is a huge part of the mission. At Summergarden, especially the Juilliard concerts, we exposed people to adventurous new music from around the world and always had program notes which were educational and insightful. A lot of premieres. In fact, when we came back and invited Jazz at Lincoln Center that became the theme to unite the music genres. Here I am out of sync again, but the return of jazz reminds me of another music program I organized called Jazz at MoMA from '93 to, I think, 2000. It started because the Museum was staying open late on Fridays. And I believe it was James Snyder, a deputy director,³ who said, "Well, we should have some music on our late night, like the Met does." Then whoa, of course, Visitor Services and Melanie. So I said "we've got to do jazz. They're doing classical and MoMA has a history of jazz." So we put together a series and shoved it into the Garden Café [laughs], one of those areas that really isn't a performance space. It had humble beginnings, but quickly grew an audience. That was a really special program, especially to me.

PH: Jazz at MoMA.

MM: Yes, Jazz at MoMA.

PH: What made it so special?

MM: Well, for one thing, I'm not tooting my own horn, but it was a one person show so I had to figure everything out. I thought, "Where am I going to find the musicians? I like jazz, but I don't know the scene." So, I got a few contacts and booked some groups. And then, of course, once the jazz world got wind of this thing happening at MoMA, oh my goodness, so many people wanted to perform here. You know, you bring in one bandleader, and all of their supporting musicians have their own groups. So it just kept blossoming. I would write blurbs and fax all the free listings editors in the City. It was a

³ James Snyder was the Museum's Deputy Director for Planning and Program Support from 1987–94.

lot of fun for me. I was going out to shows and meeting musicians and managers. Once I had lunch with Max Roach. But it was a bit overwhelming at times, because I was very open about taking press kits and CDs. I was also open to suggestions from the jazz fans who came.

PH: Oh, so you were really deciding.

MM: I was, pretty much, except when Ron Carter brought in musicians to play with him in a special mini-series, that coincided with the [Roy DeCarava](#) photography exhibition [*Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective*, MoMA Exh. #1736]. Ron and Roy were friends and they hatched the idea with the curator. We also put together a mini-series for the [Jackson Pollock](#) show [MoMA Exh. #1819]. I might have sought some programming advice for that. One of the beauties of Jazz at MoMA, and Summergarden, was presenting younger emerging artists who went on to have successful careers. Like, multi-reedist composer Ted Nash. He joined the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and played in both of our music programs. We also recognized amazing older musicians who might have had more notoriety at one time, like the incredible pianist Andrew Hill. He gave a solo performance, as it happened, right when Blue Note was about to reissue one of his records. That was a serendipitous and joyful evening. And we had Barry Harris, another seasoned pianist who came with his Harlem choir. You know, the choir didn't have a lot of opportunities to play out so that show was memorable for all of us. Lots of the singer's family and friends came. So, there was a range of artists and everyone had a good time even if the Garden Café wasn't an ideal room. I called it the rec room, "pile in everybody!"

PH: Not very comfortable seating.

MM: No, no, but people came every week and crammed in there. Sort of like the Garden—uncomfortable seating, not the best listening situation, but quality music. You're going to hear something new. A really good vibe. Speaking of chairs, there were these metal stools in the Café that made a horrible grating sound against the floor. So before each set I'd announce "please move your seat carefully or not at all." When the drummer Matt Wilson performed at Jazz at MoMA he incorporated the infamous stools into a tune by queuing the audience to stand and scrape them against the floor—it was hilarious.

PH: Given all of those challenges, though, why do you think jazz performers in particular were so eager to be part of that series?

MM: Well, for one thing it was on the early side, so they could jump out to a later gig. Also, it wasn't the usual jazz venue or small club so it gave musicians wider exposure. And they were genuinely excited about, you know, performing at MoMA.

PH: A prestigious institution.

MM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There was no Jazz at Lincoln Center at that time. I guess that kind of segues back to how and why we partnered with Jazz at Lincoln Center on

Summerygarden. So, the partnership with Juilliard was solid, but we also wanted to bring jazz back into music programming. As I recall, Wynton Marsalis was made an honorary MoMA trustee at the time of the Taniguchi building reopening in November 2004. Coincidentally, Jazz at Lincoln Center opened their new house of swing, as they call it, in the Time Warner Center the month before, and, like Juilliard, they're a constituent of Lincoln Center, so it came together very nicely. We wanted daring musicians with strong compositional skills and musicianship to pair with the Juilliard concerts. I think being able to program music more left of center appealed to Wynton and especially his team. But we had to find a common theme for the jazz and contemporary classical concerts, so we said, "Okay, we're going to do premieres. Every concert is going to have premieres." Each piece on the Juilliard programs was a New York, Western Hemisphere or world premiere. And the jazz artist's emphasized their original compositions, and also composed a piece to debut at MoMA. And we created the subheading, "New Music for New York."

PH: Was that a decision made between MoMA and then the artistic directors at Juilliard and Jazz at Lincoln Center?

MM: Yeah. In fact, Joel Sachs, the artistic director and conductor for the Juilliard concerts came up with "New Music for New York." Joel was with Summerygarden from 1993 through the last year in 2018.

PH: What was it like working with him?

MM: Fantastic. The first Juilliard artistic director, Paul Zukofsky, was a little rough.

PH: Yeah? Why?

MM: Brilliant man. He passed away. He was a violinist, conductor and teacher with a passion for the avant-garde. Brilliant but socially odd and deadpan with an ego.

PH: Hard to collaborate with.

MM: Yes, hard to collaborate with and to decipher. Paul would dictate his program notes into a DAT machine, in his monotone voice, and I would transcribe them for hours not understanding what on earth he was talking about. My boss at the time, Jo Pike, was the only person he would tolerate suggestions from—she was the Paul whisperer. Even so, his notes could be perplexing. But he was an excellent programmer well suited to Summerygarden. He did the John Cage summer, a summer of [Igor] Stravinsky's work, and an [Erik] Satie and [Claude] Debussy program. After Paul left Juilliard, Joel Sachs came on board the following year and he was a terrific collaborator. He's a pianist, conductor, teacher and was the director of the New Juilliard Ensemble. He retired in his 80s a few years ago. Joel is also brilliant and an absolute force—enthusiastic, clever and funny, a wonderful writer, full of ideas, full of energy, and very connected to contemporary composers around the world. His programs were always global, current.

Ethel knew him, and we'd have an annual get-together meal. Joel and I still meet up for lunch.

PH: Is Ethel the one that brought him on?

MM: Ethel was part of the discussion with Joe Polisi, the president of Juilliard, at the time, but he assigned Joel. Yeah, Joel is amazing. And the students, I can't say enough about their extraordinary musicianship and openness to playing very difficult music outside the classical repertoire. Those performances were staggering. Lots of standing ovations, also for jazz.

PH: I know in 2000 there was no programming because of a strike at MoMA, were there any other times that programming lapsed?

MM: That is correct, there were a few summers while I was at MoMA that we did not have music. So let me just go back to music in general. During the Jazz at MoMA years, MoMA presented jazz from September through June and Juilliard at Summergarden in July and August. So from 1993 to 2000 MoMA had live music year-round. In 2000, during the MoMA strike the musician's union called the jazz musicians booked prior to the strike encouraging them to cancel their gigs in solidarity. That was tough and emotional. I was management and I mean, I wanted to support my colleagues and also the musicians who were excited to perform. Of course, I met with the legal department and then carefully let the musicians know it was their decision to cancel or not. Most weren't in the union and only one group cancelled. I remember there was a window in the café facing 54th Street and the picket line with an inflatable rat was out there during Jazz at MoMA. We covered the window with paper during the performances and I felt just terrible. So we made Juilliard aware of the situation and I recall there was a unanimous decision to cancel Summergarden that year. And then obviously, summer music was suspended during the building expansions.

PH: What about the year that Summergarden was in Bryant Park?

MM: I was just going to get to that. In 2001 the museum was closed for the Taniguchi building expansion. We still had the funds and Joel's program from 2000 so thought it would be a good idea to do Summergarden somewhere off-site. And keep MoMA out there in the world, during the closure. I don't remember how we ended up landing at Bryant Park, maybe through Ethel and her rolodex [laughs].

PH: Was that a very big crowd, though. I mean, that's an expansive space compared to the Garden.

MM: Well, we got bigger crowds in the Sculpture Garden. A lot came off the streets to the park. But it was a nice collaborating with Bryant Park and a new adventure for all of us.

PH: Was it free?

MM: Yes, it was free. Summergarden was always free and after hours when the museum was closed. But the Summer Thursday nights was free with museum admission. Summer Thursdays, which ran from 2007 through 2018, and the Jazz at MoMA series, which went on in the 90s, were both included in admission. I know it's confusing.

PH: Yeah, I mean, how did you keep it straight? [Laughs] You were doing so many things.

MM: I don't know, life just rolled along. Merrily we rolled along.

PH: Well, you've mentioned it a few times, but we've never gotten to get into it— the horticulture aspect of your job.

MM: Yes, okay, so again, “thank you, Susan Jackson,” founder of the Visitor Services department [laughs]. Susan used to half-jokingly say, “I'm building an empire.” She took housekeeping into Visitor Services and because they were watering and cleaning the garden I'm pretty sure she decided, “well, then we should take care of maintaining the plants and trees.” And I'm like, “okay, I'll do it.” Ethel came into play there too, connecting us with trustee Beth Strauss, who chaired the garden committee. She was also a key board member of the New York Botanical Garden and an expert gardener herself. She had beautiful, award winning, gardens at her home in Maine. So, the Garden was my responsibility from '86 or '87 until I left in 2020. It involved contracting and scheduling a team. A landscape architect from the firm that worked with Philip Johnson on the original design, a horticulturalist, and a landscape construction company to prune trees, to fertilize, to mulch, to weed, to manage pests, to plant flowers and ivy, to install and repair irrigation and take care of street trees, and to replace dead trees, which was always a little traumatic. Like the time one of the big weeping beech trees, suddenly turned brown and died. It really freaked out the staff and visitors. We posted a sign saying a new tree was coming. I remember going to a nursery deep into New Jersey with the landscape architect who selected a new tree from several that were pre-purchased as back-ups. So, yeah, the horticulture, was a big consistent part of my MoMA life, too, and I loved it.

PH: And you were overseeing, just making sure that everything—

MM: Yes, I coordinated all of that. The other cool thing about wearing the horticulture hat was intersecting with curatorial and exhibitions designers, like, when a sculpture was installed in a planting bed or when trees had to be tied back or pruned to accommodate sculptures. And less glamorous but just as important, working with operations when there were leaks or pesky wildlife, that's polite for rats and mosquitos. Almost every morning from spring through fall, I would do a walkthrough of the Garden. I knew every inch of it. That part of my job also tied in so nicely with the summer music. I have to say, of all the places in this big old, wide world, the MoMA Sculpture Garden is my personal favorite and holds a special meaning for me.

PH: Well, it's such a special place in this big city. It's such a little oasis.

MM: Yes, it's referred to as that, and really is. When you hold an event there with the coming together of sculpture and trees and flowers and music and open minded, open eared people from all walks of life and ages, it's total magic. [Laughs]

PH: There are a lot of pictures of flowers in your files, just documenting—

MM: I was obsessive.

PH: Well, it was your job.

MM: Yeah, and because it is a world-renowned garden and MoMA's outdoor gallery, it really needs to look good.

PH: Ultimately, whose choice was it about what kind of flowers were being planted?

MM: Before my time and through the Pelli building years, it was Beth Strauss. Then she brought in Lynden Miller, the esteemed landscape designer and horticulturalist.

PH: And that would have been in the 90s?

MM: Yes. Lynden advised voluntarily. She returned in the Taniguchi building in 2004 with an associate. And that's when Susan Lowry, another expert gardener, became a sort of behind-the-scenes advisor to our team. She was on the board of the Central Park Conservancy and she also co-wrote several books on public gardens. Susan never wanted to interfere, but her input was invaluable and she was a sounding board for me. Then around 2013 Lynden bowed out, and we contracted her associate, Ronda Brands, to design for the two seasonal planting beds and consult on all things horticulture. Ronda remained involved a few more years after I left. She came up with some really creative combinations, especially given the limited plants that can grow and last for months in that environment. We had an annual schedule for the seasonal beds. Autumn Ferns fall through spring, then a pairing of tulips and pansies in the spring, then a mixed planting in the summer. We'd just hope and pray with care and no calamities that it would last until fall, which usually it did and often looked amazing as plants filled in and became big and wild. It's tricky because masses of plants have to be ordered from a grower way in advance and if they die over the season it's almost impossible to get that quantity later.

PH: Right, and then the disaster where a tree dies, and you have to get rid of an entire tree and bring in another one that's been raised for years and years.

MM: Yes. Okay, so this was the worst disaster. I don't remember the year—it was in the Taniguchi building. One day in late spring after the birch trees leafed out there was a massive freak blizzard. I got a frantic call from Kevin Gafford, he and I worked together in Visitor Services keeping an eye on the public spaces. He said "have you seen what's happening in the Garden? All the trees are bent over from the storm." I ran down and sure enough every birch tree was bowed nearly to the ground from the weight of snow on the leaves. It was horrifying. Most of them didn't recover and had to be cut down until

new trees could be sourced. Asian Whitespire birch trees no longer grow well on the East Coast because of climate change, so it was very difficult to replace them. Finally, a different variety was found in Oregon and trucked cross country.

PH: Yeah, I was going to ask how climate change has made an impact over the years.

MM: We were definitely seeing signs. Before I left, the garden team started having conversations about planning for the future. The only time I had seen so many garden trees removed was in 2000 when all of them came out so the garden could become a staging area for the Taniguchi building construction trailers. I remember standing in the second floor of the Garden Hall, looking down teary eyed as the big old beech trees were leaving. They went to the New York Botanical Garden. But ultimately, I don't think they made it. And then in the fall of 2004, I was there for the installation of all the new trees. They were sourced by the landscape architect, I think, and held at a tree nursery in New Jersey. There are photos, I don't know if I left them here.

PH: I definitely saw some in your files.

MM: The trees were craned over the wall. They were literally flying over. Two landscape architects were there directing a crew on positioning, and Kynaston McShine was there with his curatorial eye.

I had one opportunity to meet Yoshio Taniguchi face to face. I was introduced as the person who would be coordinating care of the trees and plantings and producing concerts in the Garden. And as Taniguchi was talking about the importance of the Garden with much reverence, he said "the Museum without the Garden is like sushi without fish". I loved that quote so much I printed it out and tacked it to my workstation for years. It was kind of hilarious, and so true.

PH: Well, and it is in the center.

MM: It's in the center, [laughter] and it's a really tasty part of sushi.

PH: I'm curious what it was like working with curators at different moments to put on installations in the garden.

MM: I mean, I was in no way curatorial. My involvement in the Garden was from the standpoint of, how can we do this and not harm the trees and plants? How can art and plant-life co-exist? Sometimes I would go out when they were installing, just to have eyes on the planting beds, like you know, "there's irrigation in that zone" or "the tulip bulbs are still under there so don't step in that bed". To accommodate certain sculptures, we'd have to schedule the tree pruners to open up space or tie back branches. I also connected the exhibition designers to our tree people to find a tree and pot for [Yoko Ono's Wish Tree](#). So, that kind of thing.

PH: I'm wondering if you have any stories of working with the curators over the years?

MM: Well, Ann Temkin comes to mind first because she was most considerate of the summer music set up. Like she might say "Okay we can nudge this over to give you a little more space on stage." There were plenty of years when a big sculpture was part of the performance [laughing].

PH: Were flowers and plants often tied into the programming in subtle ways that maybe a visitor wouldn't necessarily know, but were thought through?

MM: That's a really great question. Well, in the 80s, in the Pelli building, Beth Strauss might have considered sculptures on view for the fall mum selection, I'm not sure.

PH: Yeah, I have some pictures of the mums.

MM: But later, in the Taniguchi building, yes, we did consider the exhibitions. Yeah [looking at pictures]

PH: So many.

MM: Oh, how cute. That's me.

PH: I thought these yellow flowers work so well with the sculpture there [referring to [Anthony Caro, *Midday*, 1960](#)].

MM: Yeah. You are right. When Ronda Brands became our outside horticulturalist and landscape designer, she always considered the sculpture installations. I would send her the floor plan with a checklist and thumbnail images for her reference.

PH: There were never any, like, mock ups, right? It was more—

MM: Of the of the planting beds?

PH: Yeah.

MM: Actually Ronda, made a PowerPoint for the spring and summer plantings with a few plant combinations and she would send it to me, Lynden Miller and Susan Lowry for input. They were the experts but I weighed in too. We would plant after Party in the Garden, because, well, inevitably, there was damage. So, that was the procedure for about 10 years or so. But before that, it wasn't quite as—

PH: Intentional?

MM: Eh, yeah. But really it was— you really had to have a hort [horticulture] person who knew what would thrive in that environment.

PH: And, you know, for how long.

MM: And for how long. I mean, that was a big part of going out there every day just to make sure things were looking okay. Do we need to tweak the irrigation, replace a few plants? The landscape contractors came in weekly as well. Sometimes, sections of the flowers would die, beyond the reserved plants that were originally ordered. Then our contractor would have to call a lot of nurseries and say, "Do you have any of this specific variety left?" It wasn't easy. So, yeah, you're dealing with nature.

PH: You mentioned wear and tear from Party in the Garden. Do you have any stories?

MM: Oh my gosh. Well, after I transferred to Special Programming & Events, it was definitely better because we were able to work together firsthand to take more caution. Also, I might have made them a little nervous [laughs]. But there was one year when the Special Events team—I also want to give them a huge shout out, because Party in the Garden is always done so beautifully and everyone works very hard to make it a success. You know, with all the outside crews working fast and furious it's impossible for staff to say, "don't step in the planting bed. No, no. You can't put a light in there!" So, there is bound to be damage. But one year they built a raised plywood floor over the entire Garden to increase floor space for tables because I think they couldn't have the dinner inside. It covered the pools and planting beds and was a major construction job. So, the floor was supposed to be removed early the next morning before the summer flower planting but they started way too late, so when the plants were delivered and Ronda and the landscape crew arrived the floor had just barely started to be disassembled. Poor Ronda called and was beside herself trying to negotiate space for the flowers. Plus, it was a blistering hot, hot day, and the plants had to go in or turn to mush. In the end, the Special Events staff spoke with the floor foreman and everyone worked around each other. That was a brutal day. We always prepared to order and plant a lot of ivy too.

PH: To cover up things?

MM: To fill in any winter dieback, and also Party in the Garden damage. Because there was a lot of trampling in the beds. It was just hard to avoid.

PH: I feel like that's another reason why it's like the fish in sushi. It's so vulnerable, because you are really at Nature's mercy. And it's so visible to everybody. If visitors come in and there's mud everywhere, that's just a bad look for the Museum.

MM: Oh yeah. I mean, not only mud. The Garden at large really should look as pristine as possible. But yeah, the plantings. So what can I tell you? They did coincide with the [exhibitions] sometimes when possible. A lot of years flowers were white because they would show up during the evening events.

PH: Speaking of events, there are some pictures of holiday parties here.

MM: Okay, we have to go way back again. I am so glad you're asking about that.

PH: The holiday parties looked really fun.

MM: Have you been to a holiday party here, now?

PH: I went to a department holiday party, but not the expansive staff party—

MM: Oh, it was completely different in the 80s and 90s. Ethel was in charge and the staff kind of put it on. It was catered by the company that ran the restaurants, I'm pretty sure, however, there were staff committees, like cheeses, appetizers, and deserts. Like a potluck [laughs] people were reimbursed. Oh, and the Conservation Department, decorated the tree. Did you ever hear about the holiday party Christmas tree?

PH: No.

MM: So the Director's office paid for a big, beautiful Christmas tree, and staff was invited to make ornaments. Pat Houlihan and the Conservation department were in charge of decorating the tree and conserving the ornaments. The party was on the day the museum was closed and it took them all day. After the party they would pack and store the ornaments until the following year adding new ones. I wonder if they exist anywhere today? There have always been lots of artists and creative people on staff. Ornaments were so well done and mostly inspired by the collection.

PH: The pictures I brought in, I think in that folder, are of the modern women theme.

MM: Yeah, so the Visitor Services Department was the decoration committee.

PH: You always did it every year, or just that particular year?

MM: Well, let's see, every year from '86 to '90-something. It was elaborate and exhausting.

PH: And themed!

MM: There was always a theme. I remember we were afraid to tell Ethel that we just couldn't do it anymore. It was too time consuming, and there weren't enough of us. For like, three weeks before the party, our office would be full of art supplies and we'd stay late and come on weekends trying to get the decorations done. Our best tool was an overhead projector. We would project onto rolls of craft paper to make large scale drawings and paintings.

PH: It's so clever, looking through the pictures, there are all these artworks that are tied into Christmas or holiday themes.

MM: We were pretty clever. The year Richard Oldenburg left, the theme was “oh little town of Oldenburg,” and we made storefronts that played on artists names and movements and museum insider references. You could have your photo taken next to a life-sized photo cut out figure of Richard Oldenburg.

PH: Like a department store.

MM: Yeah, like that. Our last year we made giant Matisse cutouts. We re-created Matisse’s swimming pool down the long corridor that led to the Garden Café where the party was held. I remember Jo and I made most it and that’s was when we said, “Okay, enough. We’re done.”

PH: It’s a big job.

MM: It was a really big job, and it was messy.

PH: And the staff keeps expanding, so it’s more and more people you have to—

MM: Exactly. Back then you could have a cheese committee. I don’t think we had a staff person DJing, but a lot of people liked to dance. Peter Galassi curator and department head of photography was famous on the dance floor. And Clive Philpott the library director.

PH: Were you on the dance floor a lot?

MM: To be honest, I was so exhausted by the time the party came around.

PH: When did it transition to being what we know now?

MM: When we came back to the Taniguchi building, I’m pretty sure that’s when Special Programming and Events started throwing the big parties. They do a spectacular job.

PH: You worked at MoMA for 37 years. Did you, do you, notice any overarching changes in the culture of the museum in that time?

MM: A lot. Like, when I first started working at MoMA, you could get your foot in the door easier, and you didn’t necessarily have to have a higher degree. I worked here for so long and in that department for decades while it morphed under three fantastic directors—Susan Jackson, Jo Pike and Diana Simpson.

PH: If you had gone to work with Ethel Shein, that would have been more private events, correct?

MM: Correct.

PH: I think you prefer being public facing?

MM: Yes. And because Visitor Services interfaced between the public and staff we worked with lots of other museum departments which made it even more interesting.

PH: Why? I mean, what was so gratifying about that aspect of the job?

MM: I genuinely like people. But I think what gave me the most personal joy was being in a position to bring audiences and musicians together especially at The Museum of Modern Art. How did I get so lucky? To be a little cog in the wheel that facilitates someone's discovery in the arts.

PH: It gets bigger than the art world in that moment.

MM: [Considering]. Say that again?

PH: Well, I just mean when you're inviting people who maybe aren't familiar with MoMA's programming, but are here for the jazz programming, and then they learn about MoMA's programming, and it sort of becomes a larger community.

MM: Right, right. And I also really loved working with graphics.

PH: Well that's public facing, too.

MM: Yes. I worked with graphics on brochures and a million different signs.

PH: What was it that you liked so much about your overlap with graphic design? Like, what was so satisfying about that aspect?

MM: I think I have always harbored a secret desire to be a graphic designer. I loved, sitting with the designers at their computers while they tweaked layouts. Also, seeing their presentations. The big reveal of graphic identities for music programs was always exciting, they presented a few designs to discuss. It was fun working with the editors and the graphics staff, seeing how text and concepts would shape up. I'm a pretty visual person.

PH: Yeah, I think most people at MoMA are.

MM: Yeah, exactly. I must say, I will always have gratitude to MoMA, for forming and cultivating my aesthetic and my appreciation for art and design.

PH: Thank God for that MoMA tote bag.

MM: Hear, hear!

PH: Graphic design got you, in that instance.

MM: Oh, that reminds me, when I started in the 80s MoMA had an offset printing shop in the basement. My neighbor Lisa, who got me the interview, was in Publications and the shop reported to her. Those guys cranked out everything—the old three-part carbon forms, invitations, stationery, brochures, and the Summergarden programs—everything. I don't remember when it closed but one of the guys, Andy Haas, took a job in film shipping. He and the other film shipper Pierre are both musicians and they played at Dottie's retirement party and other internal events. All in the family.

Another public facing aspect of my job was writing and recording voice messages for the telecom system when it was more widely used, pre-website. You'd call the museum and—

PH: Oh, you'd hear your voice?

MM: You would hear my voice, yeah. "Thank you for calling The Museum of Modern Art located at 11 West 53rd Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues..." I can probably still recite the whole thing. I'd shut the door to my office or wait till everyone left at the end of the day, put on my phone lady voice and, "the following exhibitions are now on view...To return to the main menu, press nine." That was me for years. And the voice of God closing announcement, was my voice too. "May I have your attention please, the museum will close in fifteen minutes". There was no sound booth, so an AV person brought a portable mic and recorder to my desk. Later I coordinated MoMA lecturers to record the announcements in other languages—seven women's voices. It was long. It might be back to English now with somebody else's voice.

PH: Was there any hat that you wore that we haven't talked about at this point?

MM: Good question. Let me think. Oh, for a time, I oversaw the Volunteer program when it was transferred from Education to Visitor Services. I was Assistant Director but could never take any credit because there was a very wonderful manager, Megan Murphy, who reorganized and grew the program like never before. There were volunteers at info desks on every floor and volunteers assisting staff throughout the museum, including me at summer music. And then I was transferred to the Department of Special Programming and Events when there were some organizational changes. That was when Visitor Services was renamed Visitor Engagement.

PH: And in what year was that?

MM: 2013. It was when Glenn asked Diana Simpson, to head a new Management Information Department. So when I transferred to Special Programming & Events, I became the senior staff liaison to [PopRally](#). Do you know what PopRally is?

PH: No.

MM: Are we? Is it like eight o'clock? Just want to check. God, poor Omer.

OL: [unclear].

PH: Oh no, keep going. It's 4:12.

MM: Okay, so that's when my title changed to Assistant Director of Special Programming. I kept the Garden horticulture. I kept Summergarden. I kept Summer Thursdays. I kept all the music and gained other special programs as they cropped up and PopRally. I reported to Maggie Lyko, who is the current director of that department, who's—again, one of the best, best directors I could possibly report to. She had the PopRally liaison role, and but was too busy to keep it. I was like, “yeah, yeah let me do it!” So, you don't know what PopRally is?

PH: [Nonverbal confirmation].

MM: It was formed, I think in 2006. Glenn Lowry famously said, “what would happen if we gave younger MoMA staff the keys to the museum, and had them do their own programming as a gateway for young and diverse people to the museum.” Post college pre-natal, younger than the Junior Council. So, it was a voluntary committee with staff from multiple departments and two co-chairs. There was never a shortage of ideas and they produced a ton of cool events over the years, I mean they were very cool and innovative. I won't get into the details, it's all in the archive. Someone should interview a PopRally member one day.

PH: How long were you involved with that?

MM: From 2013 to 2020 until I retired. PopRally has not come back since the pandemic. Before I had that role, there was a point when I approached PopRally to program some music performances at Summer Thursdays. I had been collaborating with outside programmers and one year I thought, “maybe I should tap PopRally to book some bands.” And they continued programming from then on, even more so after I joined the committee. They referred to me as the PopRally godmother [laughs]. Myself and a couple of members selected the musicians and others made groovy pre-show playlists.

PH: Yeah, those got pretty diverse, those programs.

MM: They did.

PH: I guess because you're working with a diverse group of people.

MM: Well, mainly because we had themes that were sometimes based on the summer exhibitions. When Summer Thursdays started I thought it would be interesting to invite Barbès to program music. Do you know that little club in Park Slope, Brooklyn? The owner Olivier Conan is a musician, producer, programmer with an encyclopedic knowledge of music and is super connected to the contemporary global music scene. One year he brought in four French acts to tie with the exhibition [Matisse: Radical Invention](#) [MoMA Exh. #2125]. It was a stretch but it was very fun.

PH: And the idea was that, because the museum is still open, people could go see the art, go hear the music, kind of fluidly move between them?

MM: Exactly. Whereas Summergarden was its own after-hours entity. Joel Sachs, the artistic director from Juilliard, called it a festival, which I always liked.

PH: It's very special, I think, in New York, when people tend to be gone over the weekends. It's like, "here we are together in this space."

MM: You are so right on.

PH: Because it's quiet over the summer.

MM: It's quiet. Oh god, I can't tell you how much I loved coming to Midtown for Summergarden on weekends. It felt like we had it all to ourselves.

PH: Right, because all the office buildings are empty.

MM: Yeah, we were in this bubble, all the people who came, and the musicians, and the security officers and crew, and staff serving ice cream and drinks. It was just us sharing a glorious moment [laughs]. And the trees and architecture.

PH: And sunset reflecting off the windows, that's always nice.

MM: Oh, I have to tell you about the birds!

MM: They would flock like crazy into the trees just before the concerts started. As birds do at sunset, they got excited and very loud. Well, we got so many complaints we finally had to acknowledge the birds in our welcome announcements. Joel Sachs, usually said something like "just ignore the birds. When it gets dark, they'll quiet down. It's just part of the evening." [Laughs].

PH: Like Lulu the dog [laughs].

MM: Like Lulu the dog, except the birds were always there with us.

PH: You never felt too overwhelmed with all your hats?

MM: Well, that was probably self-imposed.

PH: Okay [laughs]. But you had support in your department for offloading things if you needed to, or—

MM: Yeah, I don't think I off loaded much to tell you the truth. But yeah, if I had to, absolutely. All of my directors gave me support and trust. I admired them and learned a lot from each one—Susan Jackson, Jo Pike, Diana Simpson and then Maggie Lyko. I think ultimately my role at the museum was kind of unique, because I was here so long, and integral to the shape-shifting department of Visitor Services.

PH: Yeah. Anyone else you want to mention?

MM: Oh gosh. I met and worked with so many fantastic people. I just wish I could mention them all. I definitely want to mention incredible Cat Henry from Jazz at Lincoln Center and Eric Wright. Wynton assigned them to select musicians for Summergarden. They really got MoMA's mission. Some of the jazz and especially the Juilliard concerts could be pretty challenging for listeners. I'm sure some who showed up thought "oh, what kind of music is this?" But we didn't get many complaints. Well, eh, sometimes.

PH: Really? I can't imagine complaining.

MM: We would get complaints when the garden was at capacity and security had to close the gate. There'd be a long line down the block and people would rush in to get seats. Eventually we printed tickets to hand out on the line and as they ran out we were like, "sorry folks standing room only, or this is all we can allow in for now." So, it was jam packed by the time concerts started and as people trickled-out we'd let others in. The gate count usually averaged 900 to 1000. It was well controlled and security managers were heroic—big shout out to Joel Nunez and Louis Bedard. And officer Johnny Bush who was posted in the Lauder Lobby and always gave musicians and crew the warmest welcome.

PH: I mean, it could be an experimental program because it's free, like you said, and then also because you're actively not trying to get a big crowd. You're not trying to have a big name.

MM: Right. There was a sweet spot and of course a budget. Same for Summer Thursdays, lots of emerging musicians. We wanted to draw or expose people to hear something fresh or in a different context.

PH: Do you think it ever affected membership? Do you think it helped draw in new audience members that stayed? I mean, I guess you wouldn't have the data.

MM: Yeah, Membership would know. But, certainly a goal of the music and all programs is to draw return visitors and new members. Part of the joy was making people feel welcome. "Come join us. Come enrich yourself. Come be part of MoMA."

PH: And you always would tell the musicians, "you're part of it now, too, you're part of the history."

MM: Yeah, yeah. I mean, maybe they knew that inherently, but I said it an awful lot of times. [laughter].

PH: Well, is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you want to get off your chest?

MM: Gosh, well, it's great we talked about the holiday parties. This is ridiculous, but again, going way back, we used to smoke cigarettes in the offices and conference rooms. Those were the days when upper staff had lunch and happy hour meetings at the Dorset Hotel restaurant on 54th Street, before the Museum bought it. I scheduled lots of meetings for Susan there. Maybe all that came to mind because the other day I was looking at Michelle's book *Art in Our Time*. But yeah, a lot of business was done at the Dorset and we smoked up a storm in the office.

PH: That's crazy to think about now.

MM: I know. I want to mention Joe Hannan, who was part of the MoMA staff, I don't know if you've run across his name anywhere. There was a member's magazine, a lovely, small, glossy, magazine that was published for a few years and he was the editor He's also a composer, so at some point he began editing the Summergarden program which was perfect because both of Joe's worlds came together. When he left MoMA, which I think was in 90s, we hired him as an outside contractor every year through 2018. Later he worked on the Thursday night brochures too. So, Joe was also a key member of our long-time music team and his talents live on in the literature. And we were lucky to have editor Caroline Kelly and music lover editor Jason Perse at MoMA to proof Joe's edits. Who else am I remiss in [not] mentioning—well, Maria Martin, of course. There are too many.

PH: Yeah, it's a long history that you have with this institution too, but I think you've done a great job.

MM: But, yeah. The culture changed so much over the years. It changed with the times. It changed with the physical institution. With the demand, or thinking there's a demand, for more programming. Just like life, like society has changed, museum culture changed a lot. You know, here was a slight Mom and Pop feel when I first started. I mean, it was still the Museum of Modern Art, the Modern, as it was known. We did not call it MoMA in those days.

PH: Do you know why that shifted?

MM: I'm not sure. Maybe it happened when acronyms entered the zeitgeist. When real estate brokers started calling Little Italy "NoHo."

PH: "FiDi," that's a more recent one.

MM: What's that?

PH: Financial District.

MM: Ugh.

PH: I know [laughs].

MM: There were so many loops and circles during my career. John Cage came around a few times. Here I go again. The year the entire world was celebrating his centennial I kept thinking, "why isn't MoMA doing an event? We've got to do something." I'm pretty sure there was a small Cage gallery installation but no event budget so we turned a summer Thursday night into a full John Cage Day with gallery conversations and music. A singer in a long black gown started the day off by breaking into an absurd song in the lobby where visitors were waiting to enter. She popped up a few times during the day in other locations [laughter]. The pinnacle was Third Coast Percussion, an amazing now Grammy Award winning percussion quartet. They gave a concert in the garden with a Cage inspired world premiere.

And a few years before that we had pianist Margaret Leng Tan, who was close to Cage at the end of his life and now a preeminent interpreter of his music. We presented a beautiful concert with her [["The Steel Qin: New/Old Chinese Music for Piano, feat. Margaret Leng Tan," August 27, 2009](#)]. That was in conjunction with the exhibition, *Song Dong* [[Projects 90: Song Dong](#)]. Margaret Leng Tan is a singular musician and performer. She plays the big piano and the toy piano, which she elevated to concert status. But for this concert, she played Chinese related compositions on a grand piano. It

was in the Titus Theater 1 on a summer Thursday night because her performance would not have worked in the Garden. During sound check she asked, "is there any way we could have a video camera focused on the strings of the piano, so people can see what I'm doing?" Because most of the works were for prepared piano, she placed screws and other objects in the strings to evoke particular sounds. So, AV, [gestures towards OL] yeah, AV! They stepped in with the video camera and projected her on the big screen, which was illuminating.

PH: Yeah, that's another big synchronous department.

MM: Really big. From the beginning we hired an outside sound engineer for Summergarden and later there was a MoMA AV person on the stage crew and to videotape. There's another person I have to mention. May I? He's from Juilliard.

PH: Go for it, please.

MM: Marc Waith is key to Summergarden. He is a sound designer and musician; he outfitted all the theaters at Juilliard. Marc really raised the bar for Summergarden. He came around 1998, and we rehired him every year until 2018. Through Marc we started audio recording the concerts and gradually improved the sound system in collaboration with AV. He engineered the concerts with finesse and skill so you could hear the quietest music all the way at the back and the loudest music was never overbearing. Not an easy feat with acoustic instruments in the outdoor garden.

PH: A marked difference, as a listener, I'm sure.

MM: Oh, my goodness, yeah. His recordings are on CD in the archives. He would take them home, master them and play them for me the next week in his car on our way back to Brooklyn when he gave me a lift home. Thanks to Marc, there's a really good sonic archive of Summergarden.

PH: Yeah. I only wish it went back farther.

MM: I know, even photographs and videotaping. In the 80s and early 90s, we didn't have much of a budget. We didn't know. We were wearing shorts and sweating our brains out.

PH: [Laughs].

MM: Me and Lynn Parish, who was the trusty lobby manager for years, plus two porters set up all the chairs and staging. There was an outside sound guy, not from Juilliard. We did the best we could, and it was still special. But we definitely got better and more professional every year. Like finally, okay everybody, "we're all wearing black," and, "I'm going to wear a dress." [Laughs]. So, yeah, Marc was very important and we had

someone from Juilliard who did our lighting for years too—Ted Sullivan. Because we were kind of low budget, we brought everything in at the beginning of the summer—that was a challenge, trying to stash it places for a couple of months. It's not like private events, where you can bring it all in and out on the same day.

PH: Because it's recurring weekly.

MM: Yeah. We just could not afford that. Except for a piano.

PH: I was curious about the piano, because that's a big instrument.

MM: Oh, I can tell you so much about the pianos. When we first started with Juilliard in the 80s—they were such good partners—they would loan us a concert grand piano and percussion instruments, because there was always one concert with, like, timpani and vibraphones. We'd sweat and push all that to the garden too. Early on, porters rolled the piano up from the basement which was a little scary to watch. A piano technician came in to tune it. Then after we came back in 2004 and upped our game, Steinway—another great relationship—provided a piano for credit. That was another reason we had to think really hard about whether to cancel or not, the piano.

Oh, I want to say thank you to Aggie Gund one more time. She's been so many people's angel, but when The Agnes Gund Garden Lobby was established in the new building, it gave Summergarden an indoor venue when it rained. We couldn't have as many people, but it was still beautiful with the Garden in the background through the windows. It was always meaningful to be presenting music in Aggie's space.

PH: And a huge relief.

MM: Huge, huge. I think I've exhausted you and me.

PH: I mean, I love listening, but I'm not sure I can take up too much more of your time.

MM: Well, we can't take up his time. What time is it?

OL: [unclear].

MM: God, Omer, 4:45!

PH: We're only 15 minutes over.

MM: I'm really sorry you had to listen to my voice go on and on.

PH: No, it was a delight! Let's reconvene on Friday.

END AUDIO FILE 1 of 2

INTERVIEW WITH: Melanie Monios (MM)

INTERVIEWER: Phoebe Herland (PH)

AUDIO VISUAL TECHNICIAN: Marc-Auguste Desert II (MD)

LOCATION: The Museum of Modern Art Recording Studio

DATE: April 14, 2025

BEGIN AUDIO FILE 2 OF 2

MM: Phoebe, you'd asked me about my performance life downtown, and if I had any aspirations to perform at MoMA. And you know, I never really did. My bohemian life and my Midtown budding professional life were always kind of separate. But I had three occasions to perform in very micro ways at MoMA, twice at Summergarden. The first was in Erik Satie's ballet, Parade, scored for instruments and other sounds, including sirens, a pistol, and a typewriter. And I played the typewriter. I don't read music, and I remember being extremely nervous sitting at my little typewriter station amongst the chamber musicians, eyes glued on Paul Zukofsky, the conductor, to cue me. But that was a fun experience, I really did enjoy that.

My second performance at Summergarden was during the John Cage 80th birthday season. I was part of the Europa 5 performance. It included an opera singer, a pianist, television, radio and a Victrola. So, I played the Victrola and according to Cage's instructions I had to source classic opera 78 records and decide which arias to play during the course of the performance. I did not need to read music for that, because we were using timers and a score, typical of John Cage. So, at appointed times, the score indicated, "Victrola comes in now," "the opera singer Aria comes in now." That concert took place the weekend after John Cage passed away and I remember very clearly feeling his spirit in the Garden. Myself, the performers, the audience, we felt him looking down from on high. It was a poignant evening. So that was the second time I performed.

And then the third time, I participated in [MoMA Dance Company](#). I don't know if you're familiar with that.

PH: No, tell me about it.

MM: That was much later. I think it was 2016. Ana Janevski, from the Department of Media and Performance organized it with Martha Joseph and Lizzie Gorfaine was the producer. So she [Janevski] invited the choreographer, Jérôme Bel, to participate in Artist's Choice, and he chose museum staff to perform for the public in the atrium. I had no idea what to expect, but I thought, "You know what? I'm 55, I like to dance. This may be my last chance. What the heck, I'm gonna—" We had to video ourselves doing a short dance with music and submit it. I was probably one of the first ones out of the gate [laughs]. So, there were about 20 staff members in the company from various departments and each person submitted a different style of dance that could be choreographed or improvised. Jérôme chose 10 dancers to lead their dance solo, in front, downstage, while the rest were behind doing their best to follow along and imitate the movements as accurately as possible. The result was unprofessional, and raw, and human, also funny at times. We didn't realize how moved people were until we heard from the audience after. There were two women from education, who performed tied together with a scarf. And there was a modern dance piece. Most dances were not tightly choreographed and we struggled to follow along. There was a ballet dancer. Somebody did a Filipino sword dance. We had an African dancer.

PH: What did you do? Was it modern?

MM: Oh no. It was a little punky. I selected the song Year 1 by one of my favorite LA bands, X.

PH: Oh, fun!

MM: That was quite a MoMA moment, and yes, fun. We were all so exhausted, and we really bonded. I remember being backstage in a gallery huddling together before the performance and then marching out and just doing it. We were kind of vulnerable and had no idea how it would come off. But kudos to Jérôme Bel and Ana. I later saw one of his other pieces with unprofessional dancers and I mean, it had such a wide range of emotions. Anyway, I was honored to be part of MoMA Dance Company.

PH: I mean, that's such a special thing that this institution can do.

MM: Yeah, that was, that was really, really special.

PH: I wonder if anyone you know— you didn't take part in [*Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present*](#), did you?

MM: I did not sit with Marina. I kind of regret not doing that. But at the time I thought, "You know what, I'm staff. People are lining up to do this. I'm just going to let it be for the public." But that was incredible. I had a public space role, where pretty much every morning for years I would tour the public areas, make sure all the signs and benches were in place. Somebody else was watching Marina's space, but I still felt connected to

it. One day I was making my rounds and Marina's table was gone, there were only the 2 chairs facing each other which freaked me out. I made a call and found out Marina requested to sit without the table, and so she did for the rest of the run.

PH: Yeah. So, you sort of started to talk about your daily schedule, and Visitor Relations, walking around the spaces. What else would you do on a day to day?

MM: I would walk the building, walk the Garden, most days, unless it was winter. I had also been known to prune once in a while, I had my own clippers and gloves [laughs], for anything that needed to be nipped here and there before the landscapers made their visit. Brochure inventory was huge in Visitor Services, and there was no storage for that kind of thing. I would often go through and count the number of boxes of exhibition brochures and visitor guides to determine, if we needed to order more from the South River warehouse, where the bulk was stored. That was a constant, the brochure inventory, and making sure the signs were all in place.

PH: Did that change throughout the years with new building expansions, or was it always sort of a struggle for storage?

MM: Always a struggle for storage. You could probably ask any operational department and they would say the same. I worked closely with operations, and I became very adept at finding storage space, and negotiating nooks and crannies and closets that were not in fire exits. My office at one point was like, rope and sign making central. We had a craft table and a laminator which was a game changer. Here I want to mention Kevin Gafford again who is still an administrative assistant and receptionist in Visitor Engagement. He has a keen eye. We worked closely on everything from public furniture replacement to sign making, and he also took lots of photos of the garden plantings and helped me pluck dead flowers [laughs]. We tried to be very independent, and do a lot of that stuff on our own in Visitor Services. There was a type of stanchion with screws that constantly needed to be tightened or they would lean and wobble. So, the porters and the Visitor Services staff had these little tightening keys that we'd keep in our pockets. "Okay, guys, if you see a leaning stanchion," and we know Glenn Lowry doesn't like that, and we don't either, "tighten that thing up." [Laughter]. There was a whole world of sign and stanchion maintenance. The institution's rhythm is driven by the exhibition schedule.

PH: That's going to affect stanchions—and everything [laughs].

MM: Yes, for us, stanchions, signs, brochures, the phone messages, crowds. It was all a big wave. Oh, also, if a certain work of art came down, it was Visitor Service's responsibility to inform the public. [Starry Night](#) has been down a few times, and I must tell you, children and their parents, literally wept because they could not see that painting [laughs]. We had paper suggestion forms and under Diana Simpson's direction, templated responses were written. Like why artworks were down or why the garden was closed.

PH: You weren't here when [Guernica](#) went away, were you?

MM: No, that predated me.

PH: But I imagine that was a big—

MM: Oh yeah, huge. Well, there wasn't a Visitor Services department then, so that would have been somebody else's problem.

PH: I wonder whose.

MM: Yeah, I'm not sure. I was reading an old staff newsletter that must be archived somewhere, and Visitor Services was profiled. The article mentioned staff came from the Louvre, the Pompidou Center, and I think the Chicago Art Institute of Chicago to meet with Susan about this new groundbreaking department. Actually, I remember there was a lot of interest.

PH: Wow, so MoMA was a pioneer in that.

MM: Yes, MoMA has always been a pioneer.

PH: How did it change when Jo Pike took over?

MM: It stayed about the same. And then when she left, Diana Simpson was hired at the tail end of the Pelli building. Diana, was, very involved in the Taniguchi building project. I mean, she just brought a different kind of professionalism and perspective, because she came from the nonprofit government sector at the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. She also had a terrific sense of organization and a human resources background. She was business-like but so gracious.

PH: So, for example, like making different forms for visitors to give feedback.

MM: Yeah, she just advanced everything, really. You know, actually, there is something I want to talk about from a Visitor Services perspective. I would like to recall 9/11.

PH: Oh, absolutely.

MM: That day I was on my way into work, from Brooklyn on the F train which is elevated in downtown Brooklyn. People were chattering on the subway car, then all of a sudden somebody gasped. We looked out the window, and saw smoke pluming from the World Trade Center. It was absolutely horrifying to watch and everyone went silent. Nobody knew what was going on. It was only when I got to my stop at 53rd Street, right across from the museum, someone said "planes crashed into the World Trade Center." We're like, "Oh my gosh." So, I ran to the museum, and by then the news was out. Of course, as Visitor Services, we waited to hear from the director and from the mayor's office,

about city closures. So we were on hold, I think for about an hour or more. I remember starting to prepare a closing message for the switchboard.

PH: Wow, yeah, that's just one of those things you have to attend to on the spot.

MM: Yeah, I mean, Visitor Services, along with Security, we were like the front line. It was our responsibility to communicate to the public. Of course, Communications, was dealing with the press and messaging at large. And HR communicating with staff. We worked closely with those departments too. So, we got the word, obviously, that the museum and much of the city was closing down. Then we printed out the signs and taped them to every single door, and I recorded the phone message. We were in a flurry so couldn't get emotional. We just had to get it done. Then somebody said, "Oh, the projectionists are running the news down in the theater." So I raced down, and AV had NY1, projected onto the screen in Titus 2. And that was the first that I and my Visitor Services colleagues saw what had happened. Seeing the horror and destruction on a huge screen. By then the towers had collapsed, and I remember breaking down into tears.

PH: I'm sure. Was it a lot of colleagues from across departments watching?

MM: I think maybe they had already been there. A lot of staff either did not come into work yet or had gone home.

PH: How long did you stay that day before you went home yourself?

MM: I think I left around noon. I don't remember exactly who was here from Visitor Services, probably Diana, but you know, we stayed until everything was messaged and closed, and we were okay, and it was safe to go back home. Fortunately, my train was running, and I got back on the F line. Though before taking the train, I remember walking a while down Fifth Avenue, to process. By then no one was on the streets in Midtown, and there were closed signs on store fronts. I was able to get home relatively easily. I mean, that's just my little account, but I'm sure everybody who worked here, has their own story. That was an extraordinary day in the life of Visitor Services.

PH: Talk about a day where things didn't go like you thought they were going to. Truly.

MM: Exactly, yeah. There's also the blackout of 2003. The museum had not reopened yet, the Taniguchi building, so we were out at MoMA QNS. Do you know about MoMA QNS?

PH: Yes.

MM: So, we were at MoMA QNS in Long Island City when the power went out in the afternoon. Like, "everybody, get yourselves home." And the majority of staff did just that. As I recall Diana Simpson, talked to her husband, she's like, "It's just too far. The traffic is terrible. How are we going to get taxis? I don't want him to have to come and pick me up." And, I said, "You know what? I do not want to deal with walking all the way from here to Brooklyn." And then Megan Murphy, who was also on our staff, said, "I really

don't want to find my way home either." So, in solidarity, we're like, "Okay, ladies, we're going to hunker down for the night." So, the three of us gathered our wits and dashed out to Queens Boulevard for provisions. We beat the crowds and bought a battery-operated transistor radio, some flashlights, a bunch of snacks and what else did we get, some drinks, I think. As it turned out we were the only staff who stayed overnight, other than security, who had to stay, to safeguard the building.

So there we were in our office in the dark with the radio on all night telling stories or trying or pretending to sleep. We took tablecloths from the café to use as blankets. Nothing was working in the offices but there was a generator, so dim safety lights, air control was on in the galleries. Somewhere in the middle of the night we said, "let's go see the Ansel Adams exhibition and take the audio tour." [[Ansel Adams at 100](#), MoMA Exh. #1909]. Because the audio guides were charged up.

PH: Oh my gosh.

MM: And when morning came, Patty Lipshutz, the General Counsel, drove out to QNS to check on whoever was there. Bless her heart. So, she found the three of us. Diana's husband came and picked her up, because by then the traffic was all clear. Patty Lipshutz drove me and Megan across the Queensborough bridge, and dropped us where we could get a bus home.

PH: So you had a night at the museum.

MM: Touché. Yeah, that was our night at the museum.

PH: Sounds really fun, actually.

MM: It was fun in a way. Got really cold on the floor.

PH: Yeah, uncomfortable.

MM: It was uncomfortable, but yeah.

PH: It is always fun to see art exhibitions at night. That's what I think is so special about, like, parties at MoMA when you can see exhibitions.

MM: Well, actually, that was another one of the big benefits and beauties of my job in Visitor Services. Being able to go in the galleries before they open, alone, you know, and have these encounters with art and curatorial genius. You're checking the benches, making sure everything's in place and having these sometimes, overwhelming experiences. MoMA gave back in so many ways, in infinite ways.

PH: Is there more to say about Visitor Services, or should we transition back to the Garden?

MM: Oh, God, see I'm going on and on again.

PH: No, it's good. These are great stories.

MM: Maybe we could leave Visitor Services. I'm sure there's so much more but maybe that's enough.

PH: Well, we can always come back.

MM: Oh, oh, another, well, I'm kind of jumping all around. MoMA giving back in so many ways, and being able to get involved in different things. The education department made an interactive website for kids to learn about MoMA's collections. It's called [Destination Modern Art](#), where kids are led through the museum galleries by a cute green alien. So, education put a call out to staff to audition for narrator and character voices. And I thought, "Oh, well, maybe I'll try that. I have a performance background." So, I wound up being the voice of the Martian. I had some great laughs with the producers. I also recorded general narration. So somehow, over the years, my voice found its way around MoMA. I don't mean to talk about myself so much.

PH: No, that's the point of this.

MM: Okay, yeah. I became tucked into these spaces at MoMA, just because there was opportunity, and I don't know, everything just happened.

PH: And it sounds fun.

MM: I don't recall asking for much. I never promoted myself or asked to be promoted, it just all came my way, and I'm so grateful.

PH: Did you ever consider leaving MoMA for another position?

MM: That is such a good question, because you know what, I came across a resignation letter that I had totally forgotten about. In '87, when I was working under Susan Jackson, my downtown performance life temporarily lured me away. My friend who I moved to New York with and who was also in Watchface, he and I both were working at this restaurant, and the owner wanted to open a performance and music club. And it would be in the derelict meat packing district in the far West Village, not the East Village where everything was happening. In those days, the meat packing district was mostly like gay sex clubs and prostitutes. There was also La Luncheonette, a cool French bistro where everyone went. So, we were like, "okay, we're going to follow a new trail. We're going to make it happen way over there." The club was aptly called Siberia. It had a splashy opening night. Lots of downtown artists and performers and musicians came out. Anyway, I resigned from MoMA and took a big leap of faith to be one of the club managers. It was a really nice space. My friend designed it. Of course, over time not enough people came and it didn't last long. Susan Jackson, was distraught about my decision to leave and concerned for my future. She and I kept in touch so when I made

her aware that the job wasn't what I thought it would be, she immediately said "Come back. You've got to come back. Come back." [Laughs] So I did. I don't know how long I was away, maybe six months. Susan said, "and we're going to work it out so your benefits and your title and your salary will all resume." So thereafter, I never left again.

PH: That's amazing.

MM: Maybe that's partially why I appreciated MoMA so much and had such good time.

PH: Well, thank you again for taking the time to speak, and for all your very insightful memories.

MM: Thank you, Phoebe, you are sweet.

PH: Thank you, Marc.

MM: Marc, cut it! [Laughter]