**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH:** **LUISA KREISBERG (LK)**

**INTERVIEWER:** **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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**BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

SZ: Luisa, I'll start the way I always do and ask you to tell me where and when you were born, and just a little something about your family background.

LK: I was born in New York City, in 1934. I was raised in more than one culture: I spent my early childhood in Latin America, in Colombia, primarily. My father worked for an oil company, in the jungles of Colombia. I have a sister who was born in an oil camp. Then, when I was seven years old, we moved to Houston, Texas, which was still like being in the jungle -- also an oil camp -- and I spent the next twelve years of my life there. At nineteen, I met and married the man I would stay married to for forty years, Barrett Kreisberg.

SZ: Do you remember Colombia? Did you learn Spanish when you were young?

LK: Yes. I spoke Spanish before I spoke English. I returned to Colombia with my mother in 1978, and we co-bylined a *New York Times* travel piece about revisiting the oil camp we had left so many years earlier; the headline was "Baranca Barameja (which means Red Bank) or Bust: Looking for Daddy's Oil Wells." We compared the Colombia that I remembered and grew up in as a child with the Colombia of today. We revisited my childhood house. The country club. The cemetery. The grocery store, the church -- all of that -- and we developed a story on how the Americans had “Americanized” the oil camp. Packaged bread and pre-cut meat were now at the grocery store; the iguanas were gone (we used to see them, including some the size of alligators, and my mother would regularly faint at the sight of these prehistoric creatures).

During the Depression, Colombia was a good place to be. My father made a decent living working for the oil company. He was an accountant and a purchasing agent for the commissaries, for a subsidiary of Standard Oil known as The Tropical Oil Company (TROCO). It was TROCO's first field being explored in Colombia. Today, it's a nationalized industry, owned by the Colombian government. But certain practices were still evident. For example, when I was a child, there were two country clubs, one for workers and one for managers. There were two sections in the cemetery, one with marked graves for managers, and one with simple wooden crosses that were unmarked for the workers. So, even in death, there was still a patriarchal system in place.

SZ: Both your parents came from New York?

LK: Mother was born in New York City, and Father in Baltimore, Maryland. My grandfather was an Orthodox rabbi, an itinerant rabbi. My mother met my father because of the Spanish language; she was a Panama hat buyer for a New York City import/export firm, and she met a German executive working in Panama, who, in turn, gave my mother's phone number to my father. He was a thirty-three-year-old bachelor, and on vacation, he looked up my mother. The rest is history.

SZ: Grabbed her.

LK: He was jaundiced, though, from malaria. She said he was really "two-toned": blue-eyed and yellow-skinned.

SZ: And you grew up in Houston.

LK: Yes.

SZ: Went to public schools?

LK: Yes. I went to public schools. Actually, there was a short interval before then in Texas City, Texas where my father worked for M.W. Kellogg Company, which

manufactured industrial pipe for the Navy during World War II. My father was not eligible for the draft and could not volunteer for military service, but he contributed to the war effort by going to work for an industry servicing the wartime needs of the military. There was a famous explosion of a ship in the channel from the Gulf of Mexico to Texas City. It blew up and actually destroyed the town. This was a very notorious event that happened in the 1940s. We were living there when it happened.

In 1945, we moved to Houston, and I spent my junior high and high-school years there. Then I went to the University of Pittsburgh, where I had relatives; then, back to Houston, and on to New York City, after I married. I finished my schooling at Hofstra University and earned a master's degree at Columbia University. I was nineteen when I met my husband, and twenty when we married.

SZ: Before we get to that, just tell me a little bit -- In your family, were there a lot of cultural interests that you picked up? And did you make use of whatever was in Houston at the time, that you can remember?

LK: Oh, yes. Absolutely. First of all, I come from a family of singers. My grandfather was a cantor, and I have a sister, as you know, who is an opera singer and a professor of voice at the University of Massachusetts. Paulina went to Smith College and traveled in Europe with the Smith College Singers. She won a Metropolitan Opera regional audition when she was sixteen. So music, through the voice, was in our home, early on. We all studied piano. I accompanied Paulina, as a singer, so music was the art form.

I remember that my father kept volumes of Metropolitan Museum of Art seminars on his night table in his bedroom. So we were exposed to the arts always. We had season tickets to the Houston Symphony. Even when we didn't have a lot of money, we subscribed to the symphony. The opera would come later, but we would go see opera on tour. (In those days there was no resident opera company. Now there's a very good company in Houston.)

There was always an art museum there, the Museum of Fine Arts, in Houston. Today, it is a very big, encyclopedic museum. But Houston then was raw, western

culture. After World War II, it showed signs of becoming a megalopolis. It would become one of the nation's biggest cities, wealthy from the energy industry. It today has the Alley Theater; the Houston Opera Company; the Houston Symphony; the Museum of Fine Arts; the Glassell School of the Arts; the Museum of Contemporary Art. Rice University is, in itself, a cultural complex. It has its own museum, music and architecture schools. Michael Hammond, who died recently, was Dean of Music at Rice. He was dean at SUNY-Purchase, as well.

And Houston had the De Menils. The living memory of De Menil is in Houston, through the De Menil Museum and the Rothko chapel. De Menil was beginning to imprint the city's culture in the '50s.

SZ: Did you like school? Were you good at school, when you were in high school?

LK: No. No. I liked school well enough, but I had a sister who would end up being a Phi Beta Kappa, who was just so smart. I was the middle of three of the same gender, and I was not an achiever. I was the real under-achiever in the family. That wouldn't work out that way in life, in the long haul. In the short haul, however, I was the one who was the middling student. I absolutely fit the profile of the middle child of the same gender. Anything you want to know about me, just go to any psychiatry book and study the middle child of the same gender.

SZ: That's you.

LK: That's me.

SZ: So you went to the University of Pittsburgh, then you went back to Rice.

LK: Yes. I finished at Hofstra -- one half year I had to go, and then I went to Columbia for graduate work.

SZ: How did you, at the age of nineteen, bump into your husband?

LK: He was introduced to me on a blind date by mutual friends.

SZ: In Houston, was this?

LK: No, in New York City. My friend Marcia, whose mother was my mother's childhood friend, introduced us. Marcia and I are pre-natal friends. Her brother was a friend of Barry's. Barry was single, and ready to be married, I think. I was introduced to him on a blind date, and five days later he proposed; a few months later, I decided I would definitely marry him, and three months after that I did. Forty-three years later, when he died, we were still married.

SZ: And you moved to New York.

LK: Yes. And then a new phase began -- I really love New York, and I think I love it because it affords one the opportunity to participate in ways that would be very unusual in most big cities. Heredity does not determine your participation. Money does have a role to play, obviously, a big role, in terms of how one orbits the city, but if you have talent you can move in and out of many circles. I always loved it for that. It's the ultimate democratic city, because you can participate in so many ways.

SZ: How did you discover your talent?

LK: My mother said that when I left the house after I was married, the house became quiet. She said suddenly this ball of energy just left the house. I think if I've had any gift at all, it's a gift for being able to pull together the pieces of the puzzle of how things get done. I'm a catalyst. I don't know how else to describe that, but I've always been good at saying, "Well, if you put so-and-so together with so-and-so, in this situation, you'll resolve the issue of how to make something happen, or create something new."

I began my career as a journalist. How did that happen? It was total serendipity. A man named Burt Masterson invited me to write a newspaper column for a weekly newspaper. I'd never written anything like that. It became "Luisa on the Lively Arts."

SZ: You were living in Westchester.

LK: Yes. We moved to Westchester rather quickly. We were in Queens for a short time, and then we moved to a house in the Worthington section of the town of Greenburgh.

SZ: Had you finished college by then?

LK: Yes.

SZ: Did you have an idea that you, as a woman, would want to have a working life?

LK: Absolutely. And I come from the era of *Peyton Place*, where women, in despair, would solve the issue of how they were going to stay married by simply having love affairs and destroying their marriages, or else having nervous breakdowns. I decided pretty early that I had to work, or I was going to have a nervous breakdown. Barry was generous in that way. He really did celebrate anything I chose to do. I wanted to raise my children, and I really wanted them to be healthy, but I myself wasn't going to be healthy if I didn't find my own voice. I needed that. And my voice turned out to be a voice in culture.

SZ: In the lively arts.

LK: In the lively arts.

SZ: So who was Burt Masterson?

LK: He had headed United Press International. He was a newspaper man, who had retired. He'd seen me help Barry win public office. I campaigned with Barry when he ran for the school board and was defeated. Then he ran for town board and was elected. So Masterson had seen me campaigning, and he asked me if I'd ever written. I said, "Not for newspapers." I'd done a lot of writing as a student. He said, "I'm going to give you an opportunity." He had a weekly newspaper, and said; "I'm going to give you X-amount of space every week. You can do anything you want with

it, but it should be on the arts." I had always been involved with the arts, so I wrote about all the arts to be discovered in the county.

SZ: In Westchester. So you would write about the Westchester Symphony Orchestra --

LK: Absolutely. I became a music reviewer. I critiqued museum shows. I was a “Jill-of-All-Trades,” culturally, I wrote about everything. That led to free-lance work as a critic. Then I became a part-time reporter, and soon a full-time reporter for the Gannett-owned Westchester-Rockland group of newspapers. After that I went to work for the Gannett News Service, which encompassed thirty-eight suburban newspapers headquartered in Rochester, New York.

I got to really see what was happening. There's nothing like being a journalist reporting on community events, where you're given a really huge welcome if you want to cover local organizations. So my mailbox began to fill up with all information, packages, invitations, news releases, etc.

SZ: This was a time period corresponding to the growth of NYSCA [New York State Council on the Arts]?

LK: Yes. And the community arts councils. The Westchester Arts Council was formed while I was still a reporter there. That was the time when Nelson Rockefeller created the New York State Council on the Arts. I won a New York State Council grant to create a regional news service on culture. I then began to report on the tri-state area. I traveled across New Jersey, Connecticut, upstate New York, and I would funnel out news to a wide array of subscribers, reporting on what was happening culturally in the region. That grant led to a second grant, which came from the American Council on the Arts to write a book on the growth of cultural programs at the municipal level. It was a book of “recipes” for mayors and elected officials to create, fund and support programs in the arts.

SZ: This was the late '60s, early '70s?

LK: Yes.

SZ: If you could just characterize, in a very general way, what it was that was happening at that point?

LK: What was happening, I think, was that politicians were actually beginning to believe it was a good idea to acknowledge the arts as a public service and that there was a constituency for cultural programs. Politicians don't do anything without thinking about constituencies. A few elected at the municipal level were beginning to be leaders nationally. Maynard Jackson, mayor of Atlanta, became an open supporter of culture as a way of developing the economy of a city. And Frank Logue, the mayor of New Haven did too. They began to speak out. They formed arts committees in the National League of Cities and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Each year they'd go to national conferences, and they'd see resolutions setting cultural priorities at the city level.

The beginning of my career was a time of continuing prosperity in this country (the stock market would continue its upward trend over a twenty-year period), the suburbs were growing rapidly. People were moving to the suburbs from the city, moving into tract homes, and wanted some of the amenities they were giving up in city life. So there was a lot of pressure to enhance local institutions, to build and expand. Then, Nelson Rockefeller planted the State University of New York in Purchase, which is dedicated, completely, to the arts. It became the first real arts campus in the New York State system with an arts campus plunked fifty miles from New York City -- where you could receive conservatory training in music; conservatory training in dance; multiple theatres for the training of actors; a museum, the Neuberger Museum, which contains significant collections -- a statement was being made that the suburbs were "urbs," not "sub-urbs."

Now the "urbs" are having the same problems that city centers have; they're just as stressed.

SZ: As strapped financially, you mean.

LK: Right. But they voted resolutions, at the U.S. Conference of Mayors in those early years, that the arts were essential to a city. Then there was the era (I think it comes about in the '80s) when the arts were de-prioritized.

Now, I'm not sure about cultural engagement in the post-9/11 world. In Washington, the attitude toward culture often is that it's something subversive. Politicians did not consider culture as subversive when the National Endowment for the Arts was created (under the Republicans); when the state arts councils were formed; when the local arts councils were born. Today, suspicion is cast on the cultural infra-structure as somehow subversive.

It's a little frightening, because now we're living in a time when the U.S. Attorney General has the nude statues at the Library of Congress draped when he's photographed. What's wrong with this picture? There are so many contradictions. Popular culture is an enormously powerful influence, and it touches the whole world. American films, popular music are international commodities. They influence culture everywhere. I was on the Galapagos Islands and heard Rap! In the remotest Chinese villages, they were listening to rock music. It's a revolution that I think the Far Right justifiably fears, because it's unstoppable.

Yes, it was an interesting time. It was an explosive time, actually, in terms of new groups with new ideas cropping up. The suburbs were not a dull place, actually. Westchester had the Hudson River Museum, a small, community museum, which was a place to take your kids to, complete with a planetarium. There was the Neuberger Museum, with Roy Neuberger's fine art collection in Purchase. There was the Hammond Museum in North Salem, with its wonderful Japanese gardens, and Natalie Hammond's artifacts. You had Caramoor in Katonah, a beautiful, music festival that is now a tradition. You also had the Katonah Gallery, a kunsthalle for changing shows. It was a decentralized culture, which, while it fed on the inspiration of Manhattan culture, it wasn't a wasteland.

SZ: Well, you finished that book.

LK: *Local Government and the Arts*, 1978.

SZ: And you went to MoMA in '78.

LK: That's right. The book had been finished, but it came out in '79. But I had been contributing regularly to *The New York Times*, all during that time.

SZ: As what?

LK: A cultural writer. I was contributing pieces for every section of *The New York Times*. For seven years I did that. So I had lots and lots of bylines in the *Times*, in odd places, like the Real Estate section, and the Travel section, and the Education section. I wrote for every single section of the *Times* on culture.

SZ: Did you think at the time that's what you wanted to continue with? Or did you think you wanted something else?

LK: I would have liked it, but there was a glass ceiling. I knew I was not going to become a star reporter for *The New York Times* in culture, even though I knew I could do it, I thought, pretty well. It's an odd thing to say this, but, actually, I felt it at MoMA, too. Being a suburban woman, having mothered grown children, being long-term married to an attorney, was a conventional, middle-class life, not the stuff that makes for stardom at *The New York Times* or The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: Or anywhere, for that matter.

LK: I was not supposed to be married. I was supposed to walk to work and live in Manhattan when I got to the Modern; I was not to ride a commuter train. I certainly wasn't supposed to be preoccupied with the domesticity of parenting.

SZ: So those were the issues you felt at the time?

LK: I did not fit in, in the sense of being able to compete, if you will, on urban turf. Remember, you're talking about a girl from Texas, who was learning every step of

the way how to move in many circles. And through luck and serendipity, I always had some opportunity opening up to me.

SZ: Tell me the story of how the Modern opened up to you.

LK: It's pretty interesting. The Modern hasn't had many public information officers; it's a short list. If you go to the beginning of the history of the Modern, for 1929, the office called Public Information was first -- and I have to get the name of the person who was the very first Director of Public Information at MoMA. She should be mentioned. She came from within the staff with no journalism or P.R. credentials. Cultural public relations was a very ill-defined field, and really had no precedents whatsoever. Elizabeth Shaw also was an “insider”, a product of the institution, as other, wonderfully educated, pedigreed women who would work for the Modern, but she ended up defining museum public relations. She set the standard for it, and spent most of her career at the Modern. She left to become vice-president of Christie's, post Alfred Barr, post René d'Harnoncourt.

SZ: And by "defining it," you mean what, exactly?

LK: It didn't exist as a profession within museums so that one could point out, "That person does that job particularly well. Take a look at the way that job is done." Elizabeth Shaw established the way museum public relations should be conducted -- the way exhibitions should be documented; the way you build an archive for publicity uses; the way you protect and put away the pieces of history that should be, in some way, not discarded; and, above all, how you deal with the public when information is disseminated. She was a very skilled person. She did come from a generation that held the Museum's image very closely to an official view, a “party line.” She held that very tight. I would, temperamentally and through my own values, be much less like that. I would democratize it if I could; I would open it up much more widely, if I could. But I followed in her footsteps, and they were big shoes to fill. I found it quite fascinating

SZ: How did you get there? You heard about the opening?

LK: No, I didn't know anything about it. I received a phone call from the CEO of a public relations firm that had done some work for the Museum. He had heard that they were looking for a successor to Liz Shaw, who had resigned to go to Christie's. I then heard from George Weissman, who was at the time president of Philip Morris (he would become chairman, and when he retired, chairman of Lincoln Center. I received a call from each of these men, saying, "The job is open, and I think you should go for it." I had no idea whatsoever that I would ever work for The Museum of Modern Art. I had received MoMA's press releases, I knew who Liz Shaw was, but I didn't seek the job, I bumped into it.

SZ: And in terms of being familiar with publicity --

LK: I was not a publicist. I was a reporter, absolutely not a publicist. Anyway, I asked, "How am I supposed to respond to this?" The answer was, " Submit your name to Jane Rice." She was director of personnel. She's now in San Diego; she became deputy director of the San Diego Museum. So I submitted my name to Jane Rice. As the Modern would do in those days -- and probably still would do -- before I even received a phone call, there was a lot of scurrying around, trying to find out who I was, what were my credentials, who else knew me. Nevertheless, Jane Rice (I attribute it to her) was intrigued by my particular background -- the years of cultural news reporting across the Northeastern states. Dick Oldenburg was director, and I remember receiving a phone call from Jane, asking me whether I would be interested in the job, and would I consider coming in for an interview? I said yes, I'd be interested.

I've a history of following powerful women in jobs. Nina Jones had held my job at Gannett. The job I took was Nina's job, when she joined the Nelson Rockefeller's staff. She became Director of the women's unit. Rockefeller established a women's unit in Albany, dedicated to women's issues. I don't know if it's still around, but she stepped in to take on that unit. Her office was at Pocantico Hills. When I received the call from MoMA, I called Nina, because she had recommended me for my job at Gannett, and I asked her whether or not I should take the MoMA opening seriously. She said, "Absolutely. Go," and she coached me as to how to go for a job in a

Rockefeller dominated institution. There is no question it was very much a Rockefeller institution at that time.

Anyway, I showed up for an interview, and then I went through nine interviews. I ended up saying to Blanchette Rockefeller, " It's a full-time job to get a full-time job in this Museum. No normal, working person could qualify for this job. You could never take nine days off from work to apply for a job."

SZ: Who did they have you see?

LK: Everybody. Bill Rubin; John Szarkowski; Arthur Drexler; Dick Oldenburg; Riva Castleman, Mrs. Rockefeller; Mr. Paley -- every one of them, and others too. Vivid in memory is the interview with Bill Rubin, who looked at my credentials and said, "It strikes me, when I look at this -- that you're somebody who likes to do many things; that you like a variety of challenges, and you have very diverse interests." He looked right at me and said, "Why would you want this job?" He was incredulous that someone with my background would want that job. In his eyes, I was narrowing my vision, not broadening it. I didn't agree with this at all. By the time I finished studying the history of the Museum (at that point, I'd gotten a hold of the book *Good Old Modern*), I thought, "Wow. This is going to be interesting." I saw it as a very politicized institution, and it still is. I had learned a lot from my husband about politics, so I was well trained to become Director of Public Information at The Museum of Modern Art.

When I was named to the post I began an entirely new phase of my life, a totally new career.

SZ: Were you intimidated at all?

LK: Oh, yes. I do remember that nobody spoke to anybody in the elevators at MoMA. Your initiation into The Museum of Modern Art would be to not only be ignored, but scorned as you came in and out of the elevators. It was not a friendly place for a new department head. It might have been for others, but it wasn't for me. I was going to be tested, and I was tested roundly. I wasn't introduced to anybody. I just showed up

for work, and then I had to find my way. Dick Oldenburg did not help -- I did attend a board meeting and was introduced to the trustees finally. With some amusement, I remember being in the bathroom on my first day at work, washing my hands, and next to me, washing her hands, was Blanchette Rockefeller. I said, "I'm Luisa Kreisberg, are you Mrs. Rockefeller?" and she said ”Yes. How do you do? I'm so happy you're here." We talked in the ladies' room. That's my memory of arriving at MoMA.

SZ: And, in terms of heading this department?

LK: It was a very demoralized department by that time, because there had been an interim appointment, an acting appointment [Linda Gordon]. She left to become PR officer for the Whitney Museum, but not without a lot of bitterness. She wanted to be named Liz Shaw’s successor. That's always hard. I'm sympathetic. I would then go on a crash course of learning the politics of the institution I was going to work for. I've also been lucky in life to have guardian angels. My guardian angel turned out to be Bill Lieberman. He was the one who guided me through the pitfalls and the traps.

SZ: Why do you suppose that is?

LK: Because he loved to gossip. [Laughs] And through his gossip, he was able to caution me about where I could make tactical errors. He wanted me to ask him what to do, because it was also his way of controlling things. He would end up going to the Met, partly in bitterness. I think he's gotten the last word, though. He just added the Pierre Matisse collection to the Met’s 20th century holdings. Boy, does he get the last word. And he's now how old? Bill has to be eighty. What an amazing figure.

I was taught early to call him Uncle Bill, and I would have regular (maybe every couple weeks) time to sit down with him, and he would teach me the politics of MoMA from his view -- whom to trust; whom not to trust; whom to work with. Everybody had opinions about everybody else at MoMA, and ultimately I came to the conclusion (and I do believe it in retrospect) that I was the concierge, or the butler. But I had the keys to the pantry.

I love the memory of my first introduction to Paul Goldberger of the *N.Y. Times*. He was reviewing Stewart Johnson's first show. In the essay, the word "lacunae" was used for the word "gap." Paul said, "Why can't you use the word 'gap?' What is this with 'lacunae?' What a pretentious thing. The word is 'gap.'"

There was a lot of that at the Modern. But my view of people like Arthur Drexler and John Szarkowski is that they were exquisite writers, and I would never, ever dare to criticize their writing. It might be slow, and tedious, and hard to get the writing out of them, but when they wrote -- I don't think anyone has ever written as well on photography as John. And Arthur was a wonderful writer. It was just difficult for him to write.

SZ: When you first got there, did you know most of these journalists, or did you have to make their acquaintance?

LK: I was hired because I had been a journalist and a reporter. I think my interview with Bill Paley, by the way, was the turning point of the process. He wanted to hire a journalist, not a publicist. He wanted to know that I could tell MoMA's stories And Elizabeth Shaw actually recommended me, because she had followed my writing herself. There's no question in my mind that I came into the Museum as a working journalist, and it was a great advantage.

SZ: Well, I just wondered whether you actually knew a lot of them personally.

LK: I knew the *Times* people, because I pitched stories to them. And that was very helpful. But I had some learning to do. I had to manage what was often the contradiction of my former career in journalism, where I knew what a journalist would want and need, and my new career as an advocate for a powerful institution undergoing significant change. I was arriving at a time when there was going to be litigation to prevent the rezoning of 53rd Street. I arrived at a time when a whole new non-profit entity would be created as the Trust for Cultural Resources. We were breaking the zoning on the side streets in mid-Manhattan; we were creating a trust through which the sale of air-, not heir-rights, could be funneled. We were creating all kinds of new entities under the law in order to subsidize and sustain, if you will, The

Museum of Modern Art's growth. I spent one summer of my writing career gathering and researching ten of the most famous law cases won by a man who would become a judge on the Court of Appeals, Jacob Fuchsberg. The Court of Appeals would hear the lawsuit against The Museum of Modern Art, to prevent the change of zoning. It would go through the various courts to get to the Court of Appeals, and I knew the decision, in favor of the Museum, before the Museum knew it, because Jack Fuchsberg called me and told me. He said, "Before you read it in the paper, I want you to know that the court is going with this. So the Museum is going to have it." On reflection, I was really probably a pretty well connected person, but I didn't know it.

**TAPE 1, SIDE 2**

SZ: Luisa, when you got to the Museum, what did you perceive to be, or what were you told were, the major challenges you were facing? You said you had the issue of the zoning on 53rd Street --

LK: The sale of air rights.

SZ: So there was that.

LK: We had the 50th anniversary coming up, and that was to be marked at a time when, if the zoning was upheld, we would be going into construction. They assumed they'd win the litigation. So I was going to go through a building program; I was going to go through the politics of zoning, and then the politics of construction.

SZ: And the huge Picasso show?

LK: Then we had the Picasso retrospective, which would revolutionize exhibitions, because it would temporarily empty the Museum of its permanent collection, and replace those works with a thousand works of art by a single artist.

I had no idea what the transitional period of construction would be like -- I'd never gone through that -- and I was not an art historian. I had a huge learning curve, to be knowledgeable enough not to earn the complete contempt of the curatorial

department heads. That's a sore point. I was not an equal. My education was not that of the art historian or a curator, and I didn't come out of museum work.

SZ: So when you got there, what was your staff like? These were people who had been there: how much help did you get from them?

LK: Well, I had a secretary. I had Lillian Gerard, who was a consultant, who would introduce me to Sharon Zane, actually. She was a film expert and a legend in her own way. There was Bill Grant. Bruce Wollmer, who has since gone into publishing as editor of a couple of art magazines. Under Public Information, I didn't really have "publicists." I had Bill Grant, who was called an assistant; Bruce Wollmer to write the Members' Newsletter. Bill Grant wrote news releases, but I didn't have a real writer on the staff. And no one with real publicity experience. I essentially inherited a staff with little experience.

I knew I would have to rebuild the department to clearly identify writing as a fundamental responsibility of the department, vis á vis press materials, and that the ability to tell a story would be essential. I made the decision rather early on that there would be a deputy director. You notice, on this list that you've provided from my first few months that there's no deputy director.

SZ: So you restructured.

LK: I restructured it. I candidly said, "I'm going to hire a second in command, and we're going to sink or swim together. This is it. We're going to do this together," and we did. My predecessor, Liz Shaw, ran a very tight ship, and she had to be the key player. I don't like to work that way, and it was really crucial that other people also manage the press; other people relate to the staff; other people do a variety of things. I think I was fairly successful in achieving that. We had some staff turnover. People were poorly paid, as you know. I'm not sure who the alumni are anymore from the department, because of relatively frequent turnover.

SZ: What I'm interested in is more a question of how you began to really perceive what the job was that you had to do?

LK: I really saw it as a newsroom. There was an assignment editor, and that assignment editor was on top of what had to be reported on. I saw myself in that role. I knew what had to be reported on, and that we had to be able to cover that particular universe, if you will, called The Museum of Modern Art. I wanted it to run much more like a newspaper office and much less like a museum press office, but, if anything, if I reflect back on it now (I didn't know it at the time), I think that I brought a different kind of energy to the job, and the work I had done as a journalist set the stage. To gain wide exposure; to be able to savor everything that was to be savored, being totally open to the world outside the office walls. That's not the nature of my predecessor, who guarded the Museum from over-exposure; managing very closely its image; managing its messages.

SZ: The curatorial department heads, were they resistant to the sense that things were going to change, under you?

LK: I was tested pretty much all the time. Riva Castleman didn't believe anybody in the department could write. She was the great doubter about anybody being able to do anything. She criticized everything, except your work Sharon. I think every one of the Museum department heads tested my determination to create my own identity, and if they could intimidate me, they would. But I'm not easily intimidated.

SZ: And the administration?

LK: Dick Oldenburg -- I'm very fond of Dick, but he was not a strong director in terms of personnel management. He was an effective liaison with the board and trustees, but less effective with the staff. He essentially ran the Museum like a university. Each of the curatorial departments had its own turf, its own power. Public Information was a service to the five colleges within the university structure. We were analogous to security or retail operations. We provided a service, so we were looked upon as the non-intellectual side of the institution. Yet, what we did required intellectual competence. We couldn't be illiterates; we really had to be very capable, because we were dealing with intellectual issues and ideas.

So it was a wonderful opportunity to learn how to communicate what is often considered an exclusive activity, with a language that accompanies that activity. I saw myself as a translator. I know I was a liaison between the media and the Museum, and its advocate with the media. I played the advocate's role, articulating the policies and priorities of the institution, and my interpretative skills were driven partly by my personality, by my energy.

SZ: This is the last question for today. Articulate a little bit more, if you would, what you sensed the culture of the institution to be when you first got there?

LK: Well, the ghost of Alfred Barr walked the halls. And some wanted to slay the ghost. I think Bill Rubin certainly didn't want the ghost present. He was going to create his own presence, so there would be no room for a ghost. Arthur Drexler, on the other hand, revered the ghost. Riva Castleman worshipped the ghost. So did many of the board members. René d'Harnoncourt didn't play a big part in that legacy. MoMA was Alfred Barr's legacy for 40 years. He created the blueprint for it. It was his concept, each of its departments and the order in which they were formed and their context. He sent curators with five bucks to a five- and ten-cent store, and said, "Bring back examples of the best design under $5.00. We're going to build an industrial design collection with what you find."

He had a remarkable vision. He was deeply trusted by the Rockefeller family. Yet, he would go through periods of being ostracized, even fired. So it was Alfred Barr's institution, but it's not his institution now. But in 1979, it really was still Barr's creation, and you had people like Philip Johnson who deeply respected his memory. Dick Oldenburg didn't see himself as a curatorial authority. He came out of publishing, a literary man, and an intellectual, but I know he was reticent to express opinions about modern art because he was not a curator or an art historian. So he would hold back. He would not risk having opinions on subjects he knew were specialized.

So it was still Alfred's institution and still small. The photography collections were in a room this size. The old-timers or "regulars" filled the same seats every week in the film auditorium. But there was still the legacy of the first-generation of the women who took a ride through the Egyptian desert, on camel-back, and decided what New

York needed was a museum of modern art. So you had the children of the founding generation still holding to the mission that the first generation had put in place together with Alfred Barr. Now those people are gone. It's a very different institution.

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH:** **LUISA KREISBERG (LK)**

**INTERVIEWER:** **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION:** **61 WEST 62ND STREET, NYC**

**DATE:** **4 APRIL 2003**

**BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1**

SZ: I wanted to pick up where we left off last time. We had talked about your arriving at the Museum, what the atmosphere was like, what your department was like, and what you were setting out to do. Maybe we could start today with the 50th anniversary, because that really was your jumping-in moment, and that really brought a lot of changes about at the Museum.

LK: It seemed to be rare for the museum's curatorial departments to actually collaborate, and the 50th anniversary, through Bill Lieberman's show, "Art of the Twenties," in a rare instance, used photographs, prints, illustrated books, paintings, sculptures, and even films to reflect the era that led to the formation of The Museum of Modern Art. It was really a wonderful show. Historically, I understand, MoMA's departments did not overlap in exhibitions. So here was an integration of the curatorial departments in one exhibition. That was quite special.

The climax, if you will, of the anniversary would be the Picasso show, a retrospective of the artist's work that would require emptying out the Museum, and placing in every exhibition space, works by Picasso. The whole museum became a Picasso Museum.

The anniversary, though, broke new ground in my area through funding received from Dry Dock Savings Bank of over $1 million. With that funding, we were able to run full-page ads in *The New York Times*, as well as some television ads to tie in with a membership campaign for the Museum, to be facilitated through Dry Dock Savings Bank branches. The campaign was interesting. The actress Jane Powell was the spokesperson, and each of the ads invited the reader to identify a great work

of art (one of six) from the Museum's permanent collection. Rodin's *The Thinker*, is a good example of one of those works. Then the reader could go to a Dry Dock branch, pop an answer into a bowl, and in return receive a poster, an inexpensive museum reproduction. Through a drawing process, a family membership in the Museum was offered. This was a remarkable thing. I think it hadn't been done before, and I don't think it's been done since. To take your most famous works -- Van Gogh's *Starry Night*; Rodin's *The Thinker*; Matisse's *Dancers*; Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and ask the general public to guess the identity of the work of art, through either seeing it on television or reading it in *The New York Times* -- was a marketing "first."

SZ: Well, let me ask you this. How much of this kind of combination had gone on at the Museum before you got there, if any?

LK: Nothing. It was frowned upon. Basically, the Museum never advertised. Occasionally, something would come up, but we were entering a period when corporate sponsorship was going to become very, very important. Throughout the decade of the '80s, when the major blockbuster shows occurred in New York as well as around the country, there was an awareness that corporate objectives might also be part of the mix. Generally speaking, in those days, what the corporation wanted was exposure for its own brand, whether that was a single cut-line acknowledging sponsorship, or whatever.

MoMA was gun-shy. It was a privately endowed and supported institution, and basically still is. It receives some public monies, but it fundamentally functions as a private institution. Many people don't realize that MoMA is a private museum. When I arrived, for example, you would never be permitted to stand in front of a painting to be photographed for any kind of an advertising campaign. It's done routinely now, even by The Museum of Modern Art. When I arrived, the acronym "MoMA" was completely frowned upon; it would never be used. Now it's MoMA-Queens, and MoMA everything. That's a big shift. By the late '90s they were into branding the institution. It had a caché that goes back to 1929 and it was unique, but it had to compete in the open marketplace for visitors and for members.

So began the era of accommodation, you might call it, between the requirements of sponsors and what non-profits might be willing to do. That was right at the time of the Picasso retrospective. It started with Tutankhamen (Tut) at the Metropolitan Museum. But from the big Tut show up to the present, there has been increasing accommodation of corporate sponsors. What was a simple credit line is now a logo and a credit line, plus a sub-head under the credit line, a kind of marketing bullet. All sorts of accommodations – such as entertaining in the Museum – led to whole departments set up to service corporations as sponsors.

SZ: How would you characterize the administration's receptivity to this new era?

LK: Suspicious, very suspicious. The feeling was strong that we were still depending on the individual patron for support, endowment and collections; and that it was the individual, wealthy person who would stabilize and sustain the institution's future. It was never felt that corporate America would provide that. IBM built its own collections, and ended up selling them. You have examples all over America of corporate collections that were built, then dismantled and sold. It was to be an uneasy marriage, that would occur over a fifteen to twenty year period. It really began in the '80s and continued through the mid-'90s. Then, when business started to soften, corporate sponsorship dried up. Nevertheless, I think it brought about a new era in museums. Administrative people now have MBAs, and senior management for non-profits is recruited from the business world.

SZ: But the 50th anniversary, I think, was just around the time that a Business Committee was formed at the Museum.

LK: Right. The Business Committee for the Arts. The Rockefeller family, and Nelson primarily, always felt that business was an important player in the arts. He established the idea of replicating collections -- with great scandal, if you recall. The thought that you would copy, sell and mass-produce copies of objects in museum collections was considered blasphemy.

So it was a turning point for non-profits in general, where new sources of funding had to be found. The flavor of the decade when I got there in the '80s, the latter part of

the '70s and '80s, was forming new alliances with profit sector organizations. The flavor, I think, of the '90s has been marketing, marketing, marketing. The institutions themselves have become profit-sector organizations, functioning the way the profit sector has functioned.

SZ: Any stories come to mind about the 50th anniversary?

LK: Well, the 50th anniversary culminated with the Picasso retrospective. The Picasso show, itself, was absolutely a landmark in the history of all museums. It certainly was the epitome of what a blockbuster show can be, or not be. It was a thousand works of art; it occupied all three floors; it created a great buzz, if you will, all across New York; it made the cover of *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek Magazine*, and Mr. Picasso became the ultimate celebrity. I know it was one of the most fatiguing shows in the history of museums, and I have my own anecdotes. I don't know if they're appropriate for an oral history, but I will repeat one or two of them.

I used to go and actually watch people as they would walk through that show. I, myself, by the end of the run of the show, became very uncomfortable with Mr. Picasso in the final years of his life. He didn't like women, and it was evident in his work. You could become very, very discomfited by him. I remember seeing an elderly couple -- I'll name them Sammy and Ida, I don't know what their names were -- as they arrived on the third floor by climbing the staircase as opposed to taking the elevator. As they reached the landing of the third floor, Ida said, "Sammy, are you getting tired?" and Sammy loudly responded, "No, I'm getting a hernia." It was tough to view a thousand works of art in a single visit. First you stood in a queue to get a ticket; you had a ticket that had a particular time on it -- in those days 5,000 a day was maximum for the institution, But it became, for name-droppers, absolutely *the* thing to do in New York.

I also have another story, about obviously suburban women, who were labeled all over: labeled by their handbags; labeled by their shoes; just walking labels. On the second floor, they stood in front of a Cubist picture, *Girl With Mandolin*, and they stared and stared. One turned finally to the other and said, "Ah, can you see the mandolin?" and the other one said, "I can't even see the girl." [Laughter] There are

many of those stories. *The New Yorker* published cartoons; there were "Picasso burgers" in New York City; Picasso became the name of a cat in another cartoon.

I remember our desire to do something in the Museum's garden, and Bill Rubin sent me on this wild goose chase to Macy's to find out how we could make an inflatable of the *Blue Lady*, which is actually owned by Ron Lauder and hangs in his living room. The *Blue Lady* consists of floating, multi-rounded forms, and Bill thought we ought to have the Macy's Thanksgiving Day people recreate *Blue Lady* as a float, which would be suspended it over the garden. I got as far as getting to the right people to talk to before it was vetoed. I think it became a question of city permits, as well as Dick Oldenburg's reluctance.

So we never did float the *Blue Lady*. It would have been fun. Then the Joffrey Ballet's version of *Parade*, for which Picasso designed the costumes led to Kermit Love, ( Kermit the Hermit on *Sesame Street*), helped to recreate *Parade* on the Seagram's Plaza. The puppets from *Parade* made the front page of *The New York Times*, top of the fold.

SZ: Which was really an advertisement for "The Picasso show is coming."

LK: Absolutely. It preceded the opening. We had several page-one pictures, including the uncrating of the first Picasso to arrive from abroad. We lost Picassos because of the embargo on cultural exchanges with Russia imposed by Jimmy Carter. So we were missing a few Picassos.

SZ: Parenthetically, they're in Queens, right now, some of them.

LK: Absolutely. But that was a mini-crisis. The catalogue, a book sold by the pound, was very well written. Bill Rubin was at his best in the show. This was what he liked to be-- an impresario. He liked spectacles. That was his specialty.

SZ: Let's see. Matisse was John Elderfield. He [Rubin] did the primitivism show. [*Primitivism in 20$^{th}$-Century Art*]

LK: Right. *Primitivism* was not a big success.

SZ: Braque-Picasso. What was that? [*Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism*]

LK: It was not a huge show. But he was a Picasso expert, and he was also very territorial. He would drive any competition out of his way. He was not an easy man, I think quite brilliant, and, most decidedly, a connoisseur of the works of Picasso, whom he knew personally.

SZ: You had all these pressures on you from all kinds of people, to get tickets, and --

LK: Oh, yes. I was the concierge. Or the butler. We saw all kinds of famous people -- Jimmy Carter and his family showed up, Woody Allen and others. You can go down the list. Kings and queens; senators and presidents. We became inured to celebrity, "We" meaning the Public Information Office. The great thing about the people I worked with is that they were not gaga over famous people. It was taken for granted that we would have to accommodate celebrities, and we did. We also knew that Picasso was the last exhibition that would be housed in the old Museum, and we were beginning to pack up our boxes and prepare to work under siege for a while in temporary offices. The countdown toward building the new wing was happening simultaneously with the Picasso show.

SZ: This would be a good place to talk about losing the *Guernica*, because that came about after the Picasso show closed.

LK: That's right, *Guernica* being symbolic of the Spanish Civil War, and the bombing that occurred of the civilian population in the tiny town of Guernica, in Spain's Basque country. General Franco won that war and he used ruthless means to subdue the population. Picasso created a painting that would become one of the most famous anti-war works of art ever, a statement about the agonies of war. It would be a good idea to look at it now, again, because it's still very relevant. I remember the agony of horses; the strain on the neck; the agony on faces; the stretching toward the sky. The "Guernica" became a symbol of the return of democracy to Spain, when it was instructed by Picasso that the picture should be given to the Spanish people after

democracy was restored. After Franco's death, and the return of the king to the Spanish throne (the monarchy was restored), it was deemed by Roland Dumas, the attorney for the Picasso estate, that it was time.

It was a very covert operation. At night, in what was almost an all-night process, I remember, the picture was removed from the wall and its stretchers; rolled up; wrapped; and with police dogs present, placed in an armored truck --

SZ: -- and sneaked it out the back way, right?

LK: Exactly. It was so tense. The *Guernica* had been, once before, defiled with graffiti. It had been spray-painted by a demented art dealer. [Tony Shafrazi]

SZ: Of all people to do a thing like that. [Laughter] Not a political --

LK: No, he was demented. I don't think he paid very dearly for that, either. He became quite famous for doing it. But there was always a fear that something might happen to the picture; that it would be damaged in some way, before it was sent to Spain.

SZ: Because this picture was deemed to be so incredible.

LK: An icon. It was such a powerful symbol. And in Spain, to this day, it hangs under bullet-proof glass. It was never under glass at MoMA, but it was installed in its own space in Madrid with its own guards. So it continues, because I think the Basque resistance continues to be controversial.

SZ: I was going to say, what was it like to handle the press arrangements for something like that?

LK: It was done, basically, in the utmost secrecy, because there was a need to protect the picture. But as I recall, the press was notified that they would have one of the last remaining days to see the picture, before it left. I think we notified the media that the picture would no longer be on view after a certain date. It was covered by the Spanish media when it arrived at the Prado. But no U.S. photographer was allowed

to record the departure. It was not publicized here in any way. I don't remember how we managed to do that, but we did. We did take some of our own photographs for the Archives.

SZ: I think that's correct. There was a photographer there for the entire evening.

LK: Right. It was a modest story in the United States, because, actually, the Museum was ambivalent about losing it. The Museum thought it might in some way represent a loss of prestige. I remember that vividly; the idea was to not draw too much attention to it, because in some way it weakened the collection to lose it. After all, it occupied the most prominent space on that floor. When you got off those elevators, that's what you saw. Many people came to the Museum just to see that picture, that one picture.

SZ: This brings to mind the whole issue of the ways in which you used things like exclusives with *The New York Times* to either protect the institution, or to really gain great publicity.

LK: I always believed (and I still do) that when it comes to cultural news, *The New York Times* leads, and the world follows. That's not always easy to live with, because the *Times* doesn't always see your story as news. MoMA had its own media power, because it had a history of immense accomplishments as well as very newsworthy events. So it was easier, probably, to sell MoMA stories than others, but, nonetheless, we did not consistently receive media exposure for many of the things we did. I would use exclusives as a way to make sure we got the story right. For example, announcing the sale of the air rights above the Museum's brownstones was managed as an exclusive, because the information itself was so complex that you had to work with a reporter over a period of time to get the facts accurately reported. Then the rest of the media would spin off of that story. I did that many times, many times, with stories that I felt needed very careful reporting.

SZ: Can you think of any other examples?

LK: Of exclusives? Well, sure. For some reason I have it in my head that the *Guernica* was that. I remember photos being made available that could be published widely. I think the *Times* probably did get an exclusive, but I don't remember a reporter being present at the dismantling of the picture.

There were other times I used exclusives. I used it with the sale of the air rights; I used it, certainly, with the decision by the court to approve the zoning changes; I used it with various construction issues that came up. There were stories we didn't want published at all. There was a fire on the site. . . Somebody died, falling from a scaffold in the new wing under construction. There was a rat infestation triggered by excavation. Rats the size of cats, scurrying all over the place. Those were not stories we relished having in print. So they took a lot of management. I don't think they were ever published.

I do remember the *New York Post's* "Page Six" reporter calling about the rats. The reporter said, "This is so-and-so from 'Page Six.'" I said, "Oh, 'Page Six.' That's where all the gossip appears." "Well, no, no. We're not only about gossip. We've had a report from the neighbors on 54th Street that there's a rat infestation at the Museum." I said, "Really." He said, "Yes. Do you see any rats?" And I said, "Frankly, the only thing I see at the moment crawling all over this building is workmen, trying to get the place finished on schedule, so we can reopen to the public." He said, "Oh. You don't see any rats." I said, "No, I do not see any rats." Then he asked me my name, and I deliberately misspelled my name, so his credibility would be forfeited. If he ran that story with the misspelled name, he was not in a good position. He never ran the story.

We had many bomb threats. I remember one in particular. We had finished Picasso, everybody was exhausted, and I was finally able to go to the dentist. I turned on my radio, and a report was being broadcast that the Modern had been evacuated because of a bomb scare. In the street and on a pay telephone, I called the head of security and asked him what was going on. He said, "We've had a bomb scare. It came from inside the building; we felt it was imperative that we evacuate, even though they got those scares every day." I asked, "Who has called?" [from the press].

Nobody was in the office. I remember calling the *New York Post*, the *Daily News* and *The New York Times* from the payphone, and the question everyone asked: "We hear you had a bomb scare," and my answer "Really. When was the last time you had a bomb scare?" The answer; "We get them all the time," and my answer was, "That's funny. We don't read about your bomb scares. Why are you reporting on ours?" And the answer "Well, it's news," so I said, "We will have a flood of bomb scares if you go with that story. Every crazy in the city will be calling. I think that's a disservice to us all." Nobody published a word. There was one report on CBS Radio, and that was it. It disappeared.

SZ: Did you have particular relationships with particular reporters?

LK: Absolutely. It tended to be closer to *The New York Times* folks, because, again, we were so interactive; we needed each other. Paul Goldberger was, at that time, writing on architecture and design. He would cover the whole story of the expansion, including a cover story for the Sunday *Times Magazine.* Almost the whole issue of the magazine was devoted to the Museum's expansion. The cultural editor at that time was . . .Sy Peck, who was unfortunately killed in an auto accident on the West Side Drive. Subsequently, Mike Leahy became "Arts & Leisure" editor. I've known them all, some better than others. The critics were the ones I would tend to know best because they were the ones who came most often to the Museum. That generation has passed, my generation. They're all in quasi-retirement, although Grace Glueck continues to write criticism, and Paul Goldberger writes for the *New Yorker*. I suppose old journalists really never die; they just fade away.

SZ: Other names from that time?

LK: Bob Hughes of *Time* Magazine who really preferred to make television films. Mark Stevens from *Newsweek*; for a while he was at *New York Magazine*.

SZ: Well, there is a generational turnover, in almost everything.

LK: Absolutely. And the people writing today -- I don't know most of them. But my successors in The Kreisberg Group, which is the company I formed, have to know those people. That's their work.

SZ: Any journalists who come to mind who were particularly difficult to manage, or troublesome to you?

LK: Yes. There was that guy -- what was his name? [Larry Warsh] He would create *Museums New York.* I used to say to you, Sharon, that I had this recurring nightmare that I would wake up one morning and find that he had become the cultural editor of the *New York Times*. Because he really strained one's patience.

Remember, there were those who saw themselves as far more powerful than they actually were. Amei Wallach was most difficult. She worked for *Newsday*, and wanted exclusives. She would be very angry when the *Times* published before *Newsday*. She would give us a hard time. She contributes to the *Times* every now and then a by-lined piece. But Amei really saw *Newsday* as equal to *The New York Times*, and it wasn't, in terms of cultural news.

Then there were the out-of-town journalists. With the Picasso show, I never knew there were so many Israeli journalists! I think there were hundreds. Everybody seemed to have a credential. It is not possible, in a country the size of Israel, to have that many arts journalists. But we heard from a lot of them, most of whom were living in New York. They would manipulate, cajole, argue, threaten.

Then there were people who carried around false identifications -- false police cards, false press cards -- who would crash events. I always knew I had a great event if it was crashed. If anyone wanted to get in that badly, it must be a desirable event. The crashers never unnerved us. We dealt with crashers a lot.

SZ: Are you talking about press previews, in particular?

LK: Well, they would also crash members' previews and openings nights -- social stuff. The crashers showed up often for the social events; that's where they wanted to be.

Then there were the social reporters. That was never my favorite work. Who was it? Suzi. Suzi was the most powerful woman in the city. She didn't write her own stuff; you had to write it for her, and then you had to pray she would use it, and, if she did, she'd use it verbatim. She wouldn't change a word. You had to pay homage to Suzi.

SZ: So you really got a taste of a lot of different pieces of the journalism community, not just the art press?

LK: Every category. We had many, many international media visits. That was common, because it is an international institution. But we had a big cross section of people, and yes, it gave me a sense of what was happening in more than one category of media, as well -- radio and television. This was post-Jacqueline Kennedy and her walks through the White House, and some of her guided television visits to major exhibitions. We were also witnessing Washington D.C. become a major museum city, and the National Gallery begin to do its own blockbuster shows. So media, through public television and through what would become Carter Brown's baby -- the arts and entertainment channel -- was beginning to look at cultural programming more seriously. But that also has faded away. What we have now is reality television.

SZ: And that faded away for what reason, do you think?

LK: It doesn't pay. Audiences are not big enough. When you're looking at Disney's audiences, compared to a museum special -- the other night I accidentally bumped into the T.V. nun, Sister Wendy. She's wonderful. Wendy covered the Norton Simon Museum, and at the end I noticed the credits: paid for by the Norton Simon Foundation. They paid for it; and Sister Wendy did it. She probably couldn't get the funding to do it herself. Now it is next to impossible to fund programs on the visual arts. Susan Sollins did something with contemporary art this past year that was quite good, but who knows where it goes? Robert Hughes did "The Shock of the New," which was very important in television, and, I thought, a quite good series. But nothing like that has happened since. I think television, in terms of high culture, is a waste land.

SZ: That began with the 50th anniversary?

LK: Well, you were dealing with how you place your stories in media that really only wanted thirty-second sound bites. They don't need a big, long dossier of what's going on; they only need well-written material that can be read on-air, with a time limit. So there go any writing skills you might have. It's just got to be very simple and constrained.

SZ: Can we talk about the expansion today?

LK: The expansion. Where do you begin?

SZ: Well, begin with what you said last time, which was that when you got to the Museum in 1978, it was already understood that they needed more space.

LK: They were going to create a new entity in New York called the Trust for Culture, which is a legal concept -- the creation of a trust, through which the monies would flow from the sale of air rights (and I always tell people that is not "heir rights," that's "air" rights), and for the first time the zoning would change on the streets, rather than the avenues, of the city. We could not have put up forty-story towers on West 53rd Street, because it was zoned to the contrary. But, based upon the premise that The Museum of Modern Art deserved to expand on its own site, an entity was created which actually could be used by any other cultural institution in the city.

SZ: -- and has been used.

LK: -- and has been used by others. It was quite a brilliant legal concept, and it was tested in the courts, all the way to the State's highest court and it was upheld all the way. Then the lawsuits stopped. It was publicly heard ad nauseam. There were endless community board meetings (I went to many of them), and there were many, many newspaper articles. That was a hot subject for media; it was reported on widely.

SZ: Controversial?

LK: Very. You were changing zoning, and you were creating an entity which placed a value on the air in the city. I don't think air rights had been sold much. Suddenly, the ground is valuable and the air is also valuable. This is a stunning breakthrough in how funding of non-profits would be done in the future. I think all over the country, in the biggest cities, air became valuable as real property.

So it was a controversial episode. In the middle of it all, Nelson Rockefeller would die, a somewhat controversial death.

SZ: That wasn't your problem, though, press wise?

LK: I did receive calls from various news wires asking them if I could supply them with a photograph of the woman named Megan Marshak, and I do remember saying, "I'm director of 'public' information, I am not director of 'private' information. Therefore, I cannot help you." But it was a mini-scandal, that's the truth. That said, the Rockefeller family had been and would be the spinal cord of the Museum. Without the Rockefeller family, the museum would have been a very different institution. They set a gold standard for it; and they held to it. They guided it with maximum integrity. Blanchette Rockefeller is somebody who should be mentioned here – she was president of the Museum, with Bill Paley as chairman -- and she was the hardest-working woman in New York City. She worked every single day. She took the responsibilities she had to the institutions that the family had prioritized very seriously. Her husband died in an automobile crash at Pocantico Hills.

SZ: That was after you'd come to the Museum.

LK: Yes. I had gone through two deaths, really, both John and Nelson. So those were very difficult years in that family. Blanchette, herself, would go on to face Alzheimer's disease, and to spend a few years, toward the end of her life, in the most advanced state of dementia, which was a tragic thing as well. Her son, Jay Rockefeller, has spoken publicly about his experience with his mother's struggle against the disease.

Arthur Drexler would die and that was a loss, because he was quite brilliant -- incredibly difficult but, nonetheless, he created, in books and in the collections of

architecture and design, a very valuable legacy. I don't think anybody else would retire. I would leave before Bill or John Szarkowski retired officially. Soon after I left, though, there were a series of retirements from that generation of department heads.

Anyway, the expansion caused a lot of discomfort. Many departments would work out of different office buildings, as they are doing right now.

**TAPE 2, SIDE 2**

LK: The top administrative team would be scattered to multiple sites. Exhibitions would continue on the ground floor of the new wing, where the de Chirico show occurred and several others, so the museum never closed entirely to the public until the final days of construction. Exhibitions were greatly reduced in scale but people would still come from far and wide. It was all factored in, in terms of the budget, as to what the loss of revenues would mean due to reduced attendance.

Anyway, no one on the staff was happy with the office spaces they received in the new building. People didn't want to work below ground, they didn't want --

SZ: You're talking about office spaces.

LK: Right. Nobody was happy, myself included, with space allocations. Because, essentially, exhibition spaces were doubled, but administrative spaces remained the same. There was really no increase. So you now had a museum that was twice the size of its former self, with the same size staff to administer it. The assumption was made that there would still be enough staff, even though you doubled the size of the institution. I remember Bill Paley saying, "How come every time we double the size of the Museum, we double the deficit?" He was very of the problem of operating deficits, and that's probably still the pattern.

The new Museum opened more or less on time. A last-minute labor slowdown made it more stressful. Jim Snyder would play a big role in getting the building built. He was given a tremendous amount of responsibility by Dick Oldenburg. Dick continued to manage the board and Jim Snyder managed construction. He was essentially the

clerk of the works, along with Ed Saxe. Their goal was to get that building built on budget and on time. On the day of the opening press preview, there was a roof leakage in the atrium space, water all over the escalators and plastic buckets out as catch basins.

SZ: This was before the opening.

LK: Right before the opening. I remember it as a flood. But they fixed the roof in time not to be totally embarrassed by it all, and the Museum opened. It was a very different experience to be in the new space. You now had a Sikorsky helicopter suspended from the ceiling of the Architecture & Design department, alongside the Lamborghini, the great little red sports car. Photography was better displayed and better accommodated. There were rules on how to view the permanent collection. Bill Rubin insisted that you begin at the beginning, you do not begin in the middle; and you do not begin at the end and walk backward. You go through a logical progression without detours or back tracking.

Final building costs came in not so horribly over budget that it was a scandal. But it left a lot to be desired. It was not a great architectural accomplishment. Those were the years when a Cesar Pelli would appeal to the thinking, if you will, of that particular board about what was needed and what was practical.

SZ: Perhaps one of the reasons was that this was so controversial, changing the zoning, that to do something that would call attention to itself, in the middle of that block --

LK: Right. So they went for the corporate solution, and they got a corporate product. It served them well, but not adequately to grow the collections or to show as much as they really can show.

What special events happened during construction? It was pretty predictable. There was a "Wrecking Ball," run by the Junior Council, where guests were allowed to wreck gallery spaces, as part of the price of the ticket, after the old building was closed and emptied. Construction in the first place achieved the new wing, and then the old wing was renovated. The beauty of it was that more of the collections were

now going to be seen in optimal conditions. You'd now have an extra film theatre as well, which I think was a blessing.

The Museum of Modern Art was criticized for not collecting the art of our time. It was not collecting earth works; it was not collecting public sculpture; it was not collecting conceptual art; it was not collecting categories or genres of art that require a very different kind of containment. It continued to collect the canvas and frame, and some recent sculpture, but sculpture was being produced in a grand scale. Contemporary work was seen in the gardens of the museums of the nation, and at places like Storm King Art Center. It was an era when people like Mark di Suervo, Calder, Noguchi and others were making monumentally scaled works of sculpture, and we did not have room for such work at the Modern.

SZ: But that brings up a whole other issue, which is the idea that if you interpret the Museum's name, as being the Museum of "Modern" Art, vs. what it means to be contemporary art ---

LK: That divide was there when I got there, and continues, I think -- namely, you can be a museum of modern art (certainly we had the greatest modern collections) and do that very well, and still stop collecting by 1960. Or, you could be a museum of contemporary art, or a museum of our time, perhaps finding alternative sites where more difficult work might be displayed. Certainly, installations require another kind of space. I think after a lot of self-scrutiny and reflection, the Museum has now decided to collect the art of our time, and to find a way to show it.

SZ: And that's a big change.

LK: That's a huge change. Absolutely.

SZ: It's been said to me that when the Museum reopened in 1984 that it was a different institution for the people who worked there.

LK: I think that's absolutely true. I hadn't been there long enough to feel it the way a Riva Castleman would feel it, or the older staff would feel it, those who had been there a

good length of time. It had been a small, intimate museum. I remember the intimacy of the Modern, and it was the opposite of the encyclopedic museums. But that's what made it very special: the idea that you could get so close to the work of art that you could feel you were in someone's living room. It was unique. That all changed with the new museum. It also became much more driven by money and politics, and the need to create a board that had today's wealthy on it. They added Jewish trustees (that was not necessarily the history of the Modern); and Californians and the nouveau riche.

SZ: But that's not unique to the Modern.

LK: No, it's happened to every museum. When you're dependent on private philanthropy, and have little government subsidy, then you go where the wealth is, and the wealth may be held by the Bulgarians, it's not necessarily going to be with those who are connoisseurs or gentry.

The shift really began with Donald Marron and the creation of the Trust for Cultural Resources; the manipulation of assets (air rights) in order to fund real estate. That's a business driven by business, economics, and legal concepts.

We were also moving very rapidly into the age of the computer, so collections were going to be put on websites and made widely accessible. Everybody thought that would be a panacea, but it did not turn out to be so. We had a very good education director in Philip Yenawine, who really was outstanding but didn't have a lot of voice. Those were the years when the education department had little power, but other curatorial departments, each with its own specialty, functioned as a country unto themselves -- not a state, but a country, a whole country.

**TAPE 3, SIDE 1**

SZ: Picking up on last time, we have a few topics I wanted to suggest. We didn't talk about the Museum's involvement in the international museums world, particularly an organization called ICOM [International Council on Museums] which you had some

experience with. I just wanted to do a little bit of that; tie that to the International Council, too, if you want to.

LK: Well, the Museum has always been an international museum from its very inception. Alfred Barr began to collect by traveling in Europe and Russia. He and others were particularly Francophile; Many of its senior department heads have had houses in France, commuting back and forth.

The International Council on Museums is the umbrella organization created by UNESCO to represent museums around the world, and their common interests. While many of the world's museums are subsidized by governments (most of them, actually), MoMA was not governmentally subsidized. As a result, it was always of great interest to the international museum community. I joined the Public Relations Committee and helped to develop a handbook on public relations that was distributed widely. I got to know co-workers in England, France, Switzerland and Western Europe. A few from Asia and Africa.

ICOM was headquartered in Paris, and the man who headed ICOM at that time today works for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva, Switzerland. Visual culture was recognized as a global reality, and was considered to be the single most important “language” that people had in common. I learned that this language crosses boundaries and borders, and that I could sit at the same table with people speaking multiple languages, and share the same concerns.

The International Council, of course, is a bird of another feather. It's about very prominent collectors who banded together...It was Nelson Rockefeller's idea that an international council be created, and it came, really, out of his own interest in Latin America. The International Council was to be the training ground for future trustees. A number of trustees would start in the International Council and then be named to the board. Today the International Council numbers some 100 or so members (I'm not sure of the numbers). There are International Council members in many of the big cities of Western Europe, Latin America and Asia.

There has always been a tremendous involvement on the part of MoMA in Latin America. MoMA showed Latin American artists before anybody else showed them. Walter Rasmussen was keen on what was happening in the arts in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and other Latin countries.

It was really Nelson Rockefeller who recognized the political power of culture and "cultural diplomacy." He understood that culture could be the *lingua franca*, if you will, of many countries. And it is. When the Cold War heated up and the Picasso show opened in 1980, we lost loans from Russia because Jimmy Carter declared Russia to be, not exactly an enemy but not worthy of cultural exchange. That was a prime example of how culture can get caught up in the political mix. The exchange system in museums has been, in its own way, a form of international diplomacy. It happens in the sciences as well, where scientists cross borders, cross languages, and connect.

SZ: The main thing we were going to talk about today was your relationship with Dick Oldenburg. What kind of administrator he was, etc.

LK: He hired me, so Dick would be the only director I would work for. He had to fill the shoes, if you will (rather large ones), of, really, two directors whose legacy he would have to address -- René d'Harnoncourt and Alfred Barr. It was often said that Alfred Barr still walked the halls of MoMA. His influence, until very recently, was incredibly pervasive and long-lasting.

Dick was not an art historian. He was the brother of a well-known painter and sculptor (Claes Oldenburg), and the son of an international diplomat. His father, I think, was Consul General of Sweden in Chicago. Dick was very much the diplomat. That was his great strength. It took the skills of a diplomat to be able to mobilize the Museum’s board of directors. In the past, there had been a revolving door of directorships, during which people came and went in short intervals. It was a very messy thing, and he had the skills to relate to high-powered, wealthy, impetuous, demanding people. That didn't make him so skilled with the staff, however, because he didn't have the time or strength –to manage staff needs and complaints, although some senior staff were absolutely treated like trustees. Bill Rubin was in particular

the most powerful curator and department head, and he had to be kept happy. It was a Balkanized institution, and there was very little interaction between different departments until much later. Nonetheless, Dick could serve the interests of William Paley, David Rockefeller and others with the skills of a diplomat.

If you look back on that period of time, he must be given credit for having been able, at the top policy-making level of the Museum, to keep the place going. I think he paid a high price for it. I don't think the end of his career there was a happy one.

I was always fond of him, although I found him indecisive often, in ways that made me angry. Because he was a peacemaker, he would at the same time create inequities that I felt were unfair. New hires were paid more than people who had been there a long time. Such inequities could mobilize the union; periodically, the union would rear its head and does to this day. Dick had to deal with a vocal, professional union. It was often very, very unpleasant, because there always seemed to be a strike on the horizon. There were labor demonstrations every year when there was a contract to be negotiated.

This was an emotionally-laden time, and the Museum was beginning its real expansion outward. It was changing its identity. It would demolish the low-lying brownstones on the side streets of Manhattan, and it would participate in the building of a skyscraper. The breaking of the zoning, in itself, was immensely controversial, and Dick again navigated difficult waters. When he left, the Museum would become a very different kind of a beast. I thought it was funny last Sunday to see the discussion in *The New York Times* about the very subtle alteration of the logo "MoMA." When I was at The Museum of Modern Art, it was taboo to use MoMA.

SZ: You weren't allowed to use it.

LK: We weren't allowed to use it. But such shifts towards marketing and promotion, and commercially-driven criteria for the running of a non-profit institution, have become much more dominant. That would not have been possible in the old Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: Although in some ways you were pushing for it.

LK: Yes. The use of MoMA as a logo did not start with Glenn Lowry. It started with the gift of a million dollars from Dry Dock Savings Bank for a campaign of newspaper and television ads, using Jane Powell as the narrator, which focused on five of the most recognizable works of art in the collection. You could receive a free family membership, a poster, and a little button that said MoMA on it, by going to any Dry Dock branch, and pulling a button out of a bowl. MoMA was used in all the ads. It appeared in newsprint, it appeared on buttons, and it appeared on television. That was really the first time MoMA was accepted as a branding tool.

SZ: In nineteen-seventy-nine.

LK: Yes, 1979. It takes a long time for these shifts to occur, and when they do occur, often they're subtle. The recent redesign of the MoMA logo is subtle. I felt a little sorry for Ivan Chermayeff on that one, with his version of the logo being described as "squat, dull and depressing," and the new one being described as "joyful, tall and slim."

SZ: Both gross overstatements.

LK: But an example of how change comes to the Modern. That said, Dick Oldenburg loved the museum with a full and deep commitment, and he worked hard. He lived an incredibly demanding social life, which was the requirement of the job. He was out seven nights a week at social events. He was, himself, an intellectual, and a book guy. He came out of book publishing, and books are his greatest love. He felt he was running a small university at MoMA, or a small liberal arts college, which actually suited him quite well.

He did not actually raise the money. He had fundraisers to do that, but he kept the wealthy committed, and that is, in fact, fundraising. He's now chairman of the Board of Overseers at Harvard. His other passion was Harvard University. He continues to be active in the International Council. It was a profoundly politicized institution. But Paley's passing and Blanchette Rockefeller's passing inevitably ushered a new

generation of power into the place. Now it's real estate developers and a whole different crowd on the board.

SZ: What do you think really occurred, to put Dick out of favor?

LK: Money. It's always a question of money. The idea that they needed to expand again 20 years later, carried with it the responsibility to raise at least $100 million. Dick was not perceived as someone who could do that. New blood would be needed. They didn't get a director [to replace him] so quickly; they were turned down by some of the most attractive people in the field. Their calculation that they'd be lining up at the door for the job of director of MoMA was mistaken.

SZ: They were trying to change the definition, to split it.

LK: Right. They were going to follow the model of the Met with a co-directorship. I think it was humiliating for the Modern's trustees to learn that key directors in America would not work for them.

SZ: Not under those circumstances?

LK: No. There was an arrogance built into this; that they assumed everybody would want the job; that anybody and everybody would be clamoring for the opportunity. On the contrary, they were not. It's going to be interesting to see what happens to the Art Institute of Chicago, because Jim Wood is leaving now. It will be very interesting, because they, too, are going through a massive expansion.

So I think it was really about a perception of Dick as having completed his career at the Modern; having been very useful; a very agreeable person, whom many trustees considered weak but could not basically find such serious flaws that they would push him out. I think it was David Rockefeller's decision, anyway. This is still "Mother's museum." It's become a lot bigger than Mother ever dreamed it would be. And it will be a very interesting change, now, because of the scale of the current expansions. It's apples and airplanes. It's a vast, vast change. That's one thing I've grown to suspect: when art is a commodity, and it has a price tag on it of millions of dollars, it

attracts people because of its commodity value rather than its intrinsic value. You can't commodify music and you can't commodify theater. Dollars attach to them, but you can’t take them home collect or save them, other than through a compact disk or videocassette.

It’s the idea of the ephemeral vs. the concrete nature of collected objects. The first museums were created out of the bounties of war. We know there is still a big discussion over the Elgin marbles; The Brits aren't in a big hurry to give them to the Greeks, because they know they'll probably never see them again. Now the Greeks are saying, "Well, lend them to us," and the Brits are saying, “We can't lend them to you. It's too dangerous."

We saw that with Picasso's *Guernica*, how a single work of art had mythical value, and had become a legend in itself. Its aura was so great that it went beyond the idea of a commodity. But museums, as treasure houses, are going to have to dig their heels in if they're going to somehow have a mission that makes sense, or they're going to dilute themselves into businesses that may not be manageable. It seems to me that the growth of restaurants and shops and earned income sources are very much a part of the engine that runs them now. Earned income fuels these institutions, whereas raised income -- donated income -- comes out of a very different set of values, different passions.

It's a delicate balance. In the new MoMA, I don't know that Dick would have liked being on that tightrope. I think he may have found it very difficult, and he probably, as with so many changes in our lives, discovered that his leaving was a gift in disguise, for him. He's living a long life. He's healthy. He's not suffering from an ulcer, and he doesn't have work 80-hour weeks.

It must be an even more difficult task now. Glenn Lowry is a tougher character, more resolute. When it comes to the ultimate decisions, the most important decisions, David Rockefeller makes them still, in my opinion. Or he influences them.

SZ: There's always the question of the next Rockefeller generation and how that's going to --

LK: I have no answer to that one. The cousins are not deeply engaged in The Museum of Modern Art, or in New York City, for that matter. David Jr. will probably, out of sentiment and moral commitment to his mother and father, grandfather and grandmother, etc., stay engaged, but it will be a different kind of engagement.

SZ: After the Cesar Pelli expansion, after the expanded Museum opened, you left.

LK: I had been there from the end of '78 to '84, and I decided it was time to do something else. It was a fascinating transition for me, because I wasn't sure what the something else would be. But Marty Segal, who was on the board of MoMA at that time, and who was also chairman of Lincoln Center, helped motivate me by offering me the vice-presidency for public relations and marketing, which I turned down. I decided that there I would face more of two things at Lincoln Center: more sexism and more ageism. It was still mostly men in the top jobs there.

SZ: Also, you would have been doing pretty much the same thing.

LK: I would have been doing the same thing. A little bit higher pay and a higher profile, but it would be the same, and I didn't wish to go repeating myself. I decided to tell the key leaders at MoMA individually that I was leaving. I saw Bill Paley at Black Rock. We sat around this huge round table in his office, and I remember when I started to tell him I was leaving, he leaned over the desk, looked deep into my eyes, and asked, "Is this about money? Do you want more money?" And I replied, "Mr. Paley, you could triple my salary and I'd still be leaving The Museum of Modern Art." He thought a while then asked, "What do you know about the Museum of Television and Radio?" Within two days I met the director, Robert Batschato talk to him about the museum then in planning.

Blanchette Rockefeller said to me, "Luisa, could you wait a year to make this decision?" I said, "Why would you like me to wait?" She said, "Well, I'm going to be retiring in a year, and we could retire together." I said, "Mrs. Rockefeller, I'm not retiring. I'm going to do other things." She replied, "When was the last time you were at Colonial Williamsburg?" The next thing I knew, I was on a plane to Williamsburg.

My first clients were referred by trustees of The Museum of Modern Art. I will always be grateful to them, because they helped me create the Kreisberg Group, a cultural public relations firm now in its 20th year. The group handled the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum at Williamsburg, the 20th anniversary of the Public Broadcasting Service, and so on. For a good five years, virtually all our business came from MoMA trustee referrals.

SZ: And that business was called The Kreisberg Group?

LK: The Kreisberg Group. Which some people thought was a chamber music ensemble.

SZ: Did you have any input into your successor at MoMA?

LK: Not a lot. Jean [Collins] is very competent, and the great compliment she's paid me is that she's followed exactly what I did, and gone into business for herself after a stint at MoMA.

Jean was from San Francisco. I definitely was asked about her candidacy. She had visited me a number of times when she was head of PR at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. She was much more reserved than I. She was quiet, but highly intelligent and was described as "a purist," whatever that means. I think what they were saying was that at the Modern, she was more academic than I. I was much more interested in the public and what it might be expecting. After MoMA, she made a bold move. She took a job at the Museum of Natural History, doing what she had been doing at MoMA, and she asked me my opinion about that move. I said, "Look, if it helps catapult you into the next best place, by all means do it." She stayed there for a few years, then she formed her own company. I think imitation is a great form of flattery and her firm and mine were similar in many ways.

SZ: So you ended up having a career not anything like what you had originally envisioned?

LK: Absolutely. I look back on seventeen years of having built a firm that services cultural institutions of every stripe all over the world. We have worked in the visual arts and the performing arts; in urban redevelopment and historic preservation; in the sciences, history, and botany -- a mélange of clients and subjects under the rubric of "culture." I traveled the world, and have had a very interesting time of it. Still do.

**END INTERVIEW**