

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: CELESTE G. BARTOS (CB)

INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Tell me where and when you were born and just a little bit about your background, if you would.

CB: I was born in New York City in 1913. That was a very important day for the history of art [laughing].... I think it has bearing on the reason I was so interested in film, though, and that was that I was brought up in a very conventional kind of a household, so I used to go to films and see a lot of movies, which were very educational, for me, because they just brought about whole spheres of people that I would ever be able to meet. It sort of gives you a window on what's going on in the world, [and]...the way the world looked in film is so different than in real life. It was fun to do that.... After I got out of college I went up to Columbia [University] to take some courses in communication.

SZ: What had you studied in college?

CB: I had studied philosophy and French, so when I went to Columbia, I was fortunate enough to have Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. The course, actually, was, I guess, from an anthropological view, because that's what they were interested in. They were talking about films that had been made for propaganda purposes, really, that had been made for the war. That was in the thirties. They showed films that were made, for instance, in Russia, and how different they were from ones made in different

countries and how they were just made to appeal to their own people.

SZ: She was up there in the anthropology department, right?

CB: Yes.... She was traveling all over. She went to the South Seas and so on.... I was very lucky to be in that, because I guess I didn't really know what it was going to be like....

SZ: But your interest in film at that point was still....

CB: That's how it really evolved. Then, when I came to the Museum, I used to work for somebody there in the Art Lending Service, when she went out to lunch. Her name was Ruth Cooke. All sorts of people came in to see what we had in the Art Lending Service. One of the things that I learned was to pick out different kinds of art just to see what they were interested in. It wasn't hard for them to explain to me what they really wanted to see. It was a great education to do that.

SZ: This is after you became a member of the Junior Council?

CB: I think it was before. Afterwards, Blanche [Rockefeller] asked me if I wanted to join [the Junior Council].

SZ: When you joined the Junior Council--you were just telling me off-tape--who were some of the people?

CB: All the people that you mentioned, like Joanne Stern, and Lily [Auchincloss] and Beth [Straus], Barbara Jakobson.

SZ: What was your sense of the Junior Council's place in the Museum structure at that time? This must have been, what?--the mid fifties or a little bit later.

CB: When did the Junior Council start?

SZ: It really started way back, but it was really after the war and the Art Lending Service. So I guess it was '49, something like that. So this was a bit after that.

CB: Yes.

SZ: I think I know this, but I just don't have it in front of me. In any event...I'm just wondering how it was placed in the structure of the Museum, what you felt your place was.

CB: I think it was kind of a...actually, I think it was sort of an "idea" place of the Museum. They were trying to find out what younger people were searching for. It was a good way to do it, because it was a very informal kind of an organization, with lots of ideas, lots of energy.

SZ: I guess what I'm really thinking of is, René [d'Harnoncourt] was director at that point.

CB: What year was René director?

SZ: He was director until 1968. I think he was actually named director in 1949. So there were a lot of years there. I've gotten the impression that certainly the Junior Council, as you say, was a place, though, which, first of all, people could really get involved in the Museum, get to know it.

CB: Yes, to get to know which part of the Museum they really liked and which part they could help with.

SZ: That's obviously what happened with you.

CB: Yes, that's just what happened, because I was interested in the Art Lending Service. They were doing a wonderful job for the public, because you could buy paintings there, or, rather, rent them; if you wanted to buy them, they were about 700 dollars--that was the top price--and there were some really good things. For instance, there was a Jasper Johns that was about this big that was 350 dollars--I think it was an all-white one--and Bill Lieberman bought it.

SZ: Bill was the staff liaison, I think?

CB: At that time he was head of the Print department....

SZ: So, all these wonderful things up in the Art Lending Service were going out to...it was kind of a way to....

CB: It was kind of a way to show people what was really happening. Some people just didn't know what they really liked, and they came in there and saw all these different things, no pressure on them at all, so it was a very good way to have it sort of introduced into their lives.

SZ: Were you a collector at that point?

CB: We used to collect [Alexander] Calder. We have a little [Fernand] Léger.

SZ: So you weren't using it for that purpose.

CB: No, but it was a very, very good introduction--for anybody.

SZ: Also, you say that just being part of the Junior Council allowed you to sort of look at the

Museum as a whole and decide where you might put your best efforts.

CB: Yes....

SZ: What was Willard Van Dyke like?

CB: He was a filmmaker, so he knew what it was all about, and he had wonderful connections in the world of film. He was a very good director and had extensive historical knowledge; I don't know how many years he was there. He was very strong; had his own ideas.... Then there was Ted Perry. For a long time they were looking for somebody, and they really couldn't find anybody. Ted Perry used to be at New York University, and he thought he'd like to try it.... And then I remember under him the Museum got this huge National Endowment award of \$350,000. That was the NEH, the National Endowment for the Humanities. So he was able to have these evenings with film people [Looking at Film, 1976-79]. By that time, let's see, I think Dick [Oldenburg] was already the director. Dick came in twenty-two years ago?

SZ: In 1972, yes.

CB: That was it.

SZ: Let's go back and just do a little bit of the institutional stuff. You were familiar with René and his administration.

CB: Yes.

SZ: I guess you were elected trustee right in the time that there was a lot of upheaval.

CB: Lots, yes [laughing].

SZ: Could you tell me about that?

CB: I remember the staff was very, very much in the middle. It was very hard on them. And, of course, Bill Rubin was the strongest person on the staff, so he must have gotten his own way about everything.... He was very bright and he knew what was going on. But a lot of people didn't like it. But it was a time of great upheaval, and it was difficult.

SZ: I think there was even an interim time when there wasn't even a director but sort of a triumvirate. It was Wilder Green and Walter Bareiss and Richard Koch.

CB: I guess Walter did take on a lot of responsibility at one time. And then he left.

SZ: When Willard asked you to take on the chairmanship of the committee, what did you see as your major objective at that time?

CB: Just thinking about the committee and the department, and just thinking about what would be best for them, getting involved in that way. I was very interested in the archives, but the physical storage area at Ft. Lee could have been better. They were always in Fort Lee, New Jersey; they still are. So at one point we decided that the best thing to do was to look for a place, either in New Jersey or Pennsylvania, and have them stored there. So that took years and years and years [laughing]. It was horrendous. There were a couple of very, very good buildings that we could have had at that time, for not too much money, but they sort of interfered with things the Museum was doing, and people.... So we just had to wait.

SZ: You were looking to buy the space.

CB: We were looking at the New York Telephone building, some place in New York State

where they keep a lot of archives.

SZ: I think they're up in the Hudson Valley, aren't they--Pawling and places like that?

CB: Yes. It was a perfect place about two hours away, and buses went back and forth and things like that. The building that we were looking at was a communications building that John F. Kennedy used during his administration. It was dust-free--it was just perfect--but we couldn't get it. I mean, we could have, but there was so much going on. It was just a bad time.

SZ: That brings up an interesting question: How does one go about lobbying, if that's really what you have to do, for something like that?

CB: It's very difficult, because first of all, nobody was interested in archives, and they still aren't. I think about half of the trustees are in favor of this building that we're doing in Pennsylvania. I think most people just don't think archives are really very important. I can't believe it, I mean, I don't understand why, but they don't. They don't look at it from an historical point of view. You don't have any history without archives.

SZ: I know that [laughter]. They just see it as an expense.

CB: Yes. But actually, it's not such an expense. It is expensive to have things at Fort Lee. They have to be cared for in the right way, otherwise, filmmakers aren't going to say, "We'd like to have our work at The Museum of Modern Art." And they all feel very secure that they are being taken care of properly. Also, companies give prints to the Museum and so on; they have to be sure that they're taken care of very well. And lots of times they are. There are so many new things that happen in just technology, really. If you want to be at the forefront of that, a lot of research has to go into it. And that's what Mary Lea [Bandy] was very good at doing. She did a terrific job on the research.

SZ: Actually, Mary Lea was an unconventional choice for that position at that time, wasn't she?

CB: Yes, because she was really in publishing. It was kind of a brainstorm that Dick had, choosing her. He's very good at personalities and knowing what can be done. It's a very good lesson, really, showing that a person who's good in one field, if they're very bright and interested and have enough energy, they can do anything. And that's what happened.

SZ: She really has overseen a real change in how things are done. What about the whole issue of fundraising, specifically, bringing in film artists who in some way can help the Museum?

CB: That is just done by very good artists who like to have their films at the Museum, and getting a lot of their films so that you have a bigger archive and you're sort of known all over the world. The film archives at The Museum of Modern Art are really known better in Europe than they are here.

SZ: I think the Cinémathèque Française has a comparable...I really shouldn't say that.

CB: Yes, and the BFI, the British Film Institute, has a wonderful place, which we've been through....

SZ: And how are they the same or different?

CB: First, they're so different, because the shelving problem is completely different in the new archive building. They had different problems, because in London it's like a cherrypicker kind of thing. You can go up on a ladder and pick out what you want,

whereas in Pennsylvania the films are going to be able to be moved back and forth.

SZ: Like on a conveyor-belt kind of thing?

CB: Yes, and there are lots of new things that they've invented for that. And shelving--shelving is totally expensive.

SZ: And when is the facility going to be done?

CB: It should be done by the end of the year, so it'll be interesting to see.

SZ: So that's really the completion of one big challenge.

CB: Yes, it is.

SZ: I guess the other has really been the preservation of the films themselves?

CB: Yes.

SZ: Before, I was actually thinking of, as an example, bringing Clint Eastwood into the Museum.

CB: That was a big coup, and he really likes the Museum a lot.

SZ: How did that come about?

CB: I think that came about through personality and being aware of his films and knowing that he was very good about showing them. He, of course, always worked for Warner Bros. They allowed him to do whatever he wanted when he was doing a film. They

knew he could be a director, he could be anything, and they were smart enough to allow him to do that. So it was good for them, good for him. And then, of course...one book that they've done is the [Jean-Luc] Godard book. Have you seen that? It's a beautiful book. Godard is one of the most difficult people. Everybody shies away from him. There were some really good people who were able to reach him and talk to him, just for short times, during the year, because he lives in Switzerland, and they were able to go there and interview him and go back and forth; it was really a long haul. The book came out and got a prize. The College Art Association for the first time gave a film book a prize; they'd always given prizes to art books. So that was a great coup for Mary Lea, which I think she really enjoyed. And Colin McKay from the British Film Institute was very, very helpful. He did a lot of the writing and interviewing with Godard. And then recently, Godard came, just a couple of weeks ago, and brought his new film, which is going to be distributed; there's a showing at the Museum. This is the only country that could have done anything like that, because in France they think of Godard as a father figure, and they all hate their fathers [laughter]. So they did it here, and nobody thought that Godard would actually come, but at the last minute he actually came. The audience was full of young people. At the end of the film they asked questions. He doesn't understand English all that well, but there were people who helped him, and the evening went off beautifully.

SZ: And how was the film?

CB: The film is the most amazing film because it's not like anything I've ever seen--just beautifully done in every respect, in the technology and the acting. It's just part of him; it's a very personal kind of film that he did. He's in his own little world, you know.

SZ: Having been interested in film for so long, what's your feeling about it in terms of its place within the hierarchy, if there is one, of the arts?

CB: It's terribly important--much more important than it used to be.

SZ: Because?

CB: I guess because it has such a great audience. If you want to have something...there's a great relationship between our and all the other departments at the Museum. Some of the directors, some of the curators at the Museum aren't interested in film a great deal.

SZ: Very few are, you're saying?

CB: Very few are, yes. I think Peter Galassi's interested in film, and Kirk [Varnedoe], I think, is interested. Have you ever interviewed Kirk?

SZ: No, he's too young, and he's still there [laughter]. Actually, I should flip around the order. No, so I haven't. I worked there for quite a bit, and he hadn't come there when I left, so I really don't know him, other than just to say hello to him.

CB: When did you leave?

SZ: In '84, right at the time of the opening. And that was just about the time he came. But I was going to say, you've just named two curators, both of whom are fairly young.

CB: That's right.

SZ: It's interesting to me what film means to people of my age today, or even younger. It has to be different than what it meant to someone like you, taking it when it was a really young artform.

CB: Yes, and it's changed so much over the years.

SZ: I would assume, also, that there's a much greater mass audience now.

CB: I think so.

SZ: You said that people did go a lot, but probably not in the same way.

CB: Probably not. Though now, of course, it's used in a lot of the colleges, also. For instance, Bill Pence has a collection of 35-millimeter films, which he's used over the years for the Telluride film festival; also, he's collected them personally, he's made one of the best collections you can think of, and he just sold them to Harvard University. When it came time to do this--Michael Fitzgerald and Robert Gardener were very interested in getting his films--and Harvard University wasn't interested at all, except for the new president up there [Neil Rudenstine]. He was the only one. And then there are two people up at Harvard who also are very interested in it. So I think that is amazing, because they can use that, and they will use it, in all their departments. MIT used to have a very good department of film, and they don't have one now. But that's because Ricky Leacock left.

SZ: You also have sort of done prints and illustrated books?

CB: Yes. I'm going down to Washington to see the Gemini collection that they're going to show there on Tuesday. All the artists are coming--Claes Oldenburg...I don't know whether Jasper's coming....

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END INTERVIEW