

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: VIJA CELMINS, ARTIST

INTERVIEWER: BETSY SUSSLER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, BOMB MAGAZINE

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BEGIN AUDIO FILE Celmins_T04 duration 25:52

BS: We're in the Drawing Center at The Museum of Modern Art at 11 West 53rd Street in New York City on October 18th, 2011, with, I'm Betsy Sussler, Editor-in-Chief of Bomb Magazine, and we'll be interviewing, or doing an oral history, I should say, with Vija Celmins, the artist.

And Vija, I just want to start by saying yes, that this is an oral history, so what I'm going to be doing, and at any point if you don't want to discuss whatever I bring up, just say, "Let's move on." I'm going to be moving in and out of a narrative that's basically a linear narrative from the time you were born up until now. So we'll be moving in and out of your life, into the art, and from the art, back into your life. And at any point, if you have any anecdotal material that you want to add, just go, and I'll shut up, and you can come on in, because it's your oral history. So I want to start, of course, as we all start, with Riga, with Latvia. You were born in 1938. In your first years of your childhood, there were two occupations, the Russians came in in 1940, I believe, and then the Germans came in. And I'm curious. One rarely remembers much from that time of your life, but it was so traumatic. What were the stories that your parents told you? What do you remember of that time period, living under two occupations?

VC: Well, I don't remember hardly anything at all. I was born late in '38, and I don't remember hardly anything from Latvia at all. So, I do remember the kind of anxiety

that was always around, and I do remember occasionally, when there was -- one time soldiers came in the house when we were having dinner. They seem to have got in the wrong room, and the extreme anxiety, and my parents' anxiety. But most of that occurred later, when we were refugees in Germany, of course. And I remember, I remember -- you know, I had no, I had no knowledge of anything, you know, of course.

BS: You were a child of course .

VC: And I had no idea about what was going on. And I don't know how much my parents really knew, either. But they certainly knew -- you know, I really didn't know anything. So my, I didn't also have the kind of understanding that this was really bad, or, I thought that's how the world was. I didn't have the knowledge that I know now. So, you know, it was a time of, I would say, now, that it would have been a time of great stress, really, for me. And it was a good time of great stress, mostly because there was so much noise and chaos. And my biggest fear was being left somewhere and not finding my parents. And there were so many people moving through and running from the front, which was moving back down in '44. I mean, you know, what can you say? This is our world, you know? So many people went through it; so many people have gone through it since; and America was sort of like a refuge.

BS: Yes. But I have a question. You brought up the sounds. And so much of the imagery, when you went back to look at photographs from World War II, the bombers, the gun. I'm curious; what did you hear? Do you remember those sounds? I happen to know

VC: Yes. I heard, [laughs] sometimes I think I used to love airplanes. Sometimes I think I used to hear the airplanes coming. And another sound I remember is of the air raid sirens. You know, I mean, I don't want to start off my work, really, with talking about -- well, I guess that is part of my life.

BS: It was huge.

VC: But you know, people manage to find a lot of traumas in their early life. This is, this was not -- this was sort of the background that I think most of the people, well, of course, all of the people in Europe my age, would have had, and would have to somehow deal with it, you know?

BS: Yes. When you all escaped, was it a very quick escape? Do you remember? In the middle of the night?

VC: No, no, no. There was a front moving down. The Russians were moving down. The Germans were running. And people were trying to get out, by trains, boats. There was a boat leaving for, I think, mm, well, you see, I'm not, because I'm not

BS: Eastern Germany.

VC: Because I'm not really – nobody ever talked about anything, you know. Nobody ever talked about anything in the war, nobody I ever know. The only thing that – I became part of a community. Well, wait a minute. Okay, so, there were all these refugees moving out of the East Europe that were going west to try to escape.

BS: Escape the Russians, because you knew they were going to take over Latvia.

VC: Escape the Russians, right. And we left on a ship the very last minute. My father did not want to go. I know that. He did not want to go. He had just – you know, I came from a pretty poor family that worked very hard. He had built this building in Riga, and he was renting it out, and he did not want to leave. But people were saying that it was all over; that they were going to destroy everything, maybe burn everything, send everybody to Siberia, whatever. You know, I heard stories like this after we were in the United States with a community of Latvians who met on Latvian Independence Day and, and cried. I mean, I remember a lot of crying from all the older people, because they had to, you know, they left.

BS: They left so much behind.

VC: So, part of that, I mean, I don't know what to say about it. I'm not a very, I mean, this is where I was born. I really had no choice and I had no, I mean, I guess you could say that everybody can say that, of course. And those were just the circumstances that

BS: Well, history was pretty brutal then.

VC: That made me, you know?

BS: Yes; history was very brutal then, and you were born into that brutality.

VC: History was very brutal. It's probably the most brutal thing that has happened in our lifetime, you know, the killing of so many people. But I can see that it's continuing on with a great gusto.

BS: Yes. We haven't learned.

VC: It's sort of hard to come to terms with. But I mean,

BS: So you're in Germany, you've escaped. You're in a Latvian community there, but you're in Germany while they're losing the war, they're becoming defeated.

VC: Oh no, it was the end of the war. There was nothing but rubble, and women and children, and hiding, and groups of foreigners, which, you know, the Germans were not -- were taught that foreigners were not really.

BS: Right. Welcome.

VC: Well, I don't know whether I can really say that, but I think they had a suspicion of foreigners, of the other, you know, as we can say. Certainly of Jews and of other peoples that they decided to blame everything on. Probably the most horrendous thing. So I mean,

BS: Were there Jews in your family?

VC: I would not say that my work has much to do with it. I might say that this is somehow in the background of my psyche, but I would hate to say that it was the primary. I mean, what can I say? There it is, you know.

BS: Well, I think you bring your childhood

VC: That kind of a beginning. I didn't sit home and watch TV like children do now, you know.

BS: Right. You lived through history.

VC: It was a different beginning, but I don't know. I think it's, like I said, I think it's in the background of my life but is not, mm.

BS: I have one last question about this. You said when you heard the planes, that you loved planes. And I'm curious, because in your later work, they're bombers. It seems to me, well, Flying Fortress, certainly.

VC: Well, I mean, what we have here, sitting in this place with all of these images sort of tucked around, is work that I really did about, the earliest work, about 47 years ago, which is the painting behind me. And it sort of is mostly early work. There's hardly any work here from the last twenty years at all. And there are various periods here, like the period when I started dealing with images, like, and this is one of those. And there was a little period where I think, in some strange, intuitive way, I sort of dealt with the memories of war, where some of the images, when I first started doing images like the lamp, and I mean, all of the images that I painted after trying to paint like de Kooning, of course, the guy upstairs, the man we all loved, the paintings that we all loved, the paintings we tried to paint, my generation, looking at magazines, of course. And after I left that period of my life, most of it student life, I started painting images. And first I just painted things in my studio, as I've said many times, as sort of like I am now, like, interrogated, single, you know, straightforward.

BS: Uh-huh. But with that electrical cord going out to its source. I like that.

VC: Yeah, yeah; with the electrical cord going out. And then I had a period, going back to the bombers, where, you know, your life, you have different things you do. I had been collecting all of these images like you would, I don't know; I always really liked images. And I had the whole set of images dealing with World War II. Now, you see, when I was doing that, was I even thinking?

BS: Well, that's my question.

VC: You know, you don't have to think to make art, which is great. But, I mean, you think around it, you think before it, you think during, but, you know, I mean, there are some other things that come up out of you that are maybe more profound than. You know, you think afterwards of the thing that you did. But I was collecting these images. I still wonder why. I started, you know, I think it was; wait; pardon?

BS: When did you start collecting these images, these war images?

VC: Well, I started, actually, when I was a little girl in Indiana. I had these – do you remember these playing cards that had pictures on them? They were actually picture cards.

BS: I do.

VC: And I had *stacks* of them. And of course, I just gravitated toward.

BS: The images you had just left.

VC: I had *stacks* of those. I had *stacks* of comics because I had sort of taught myself how to read, and so forth, because I couldn't speak English. I couldn't speak German. I only spoke Latvian, really.

BS: And you've got here, you were nine years old

VC: Yes, I was nine years old.

BS: And your family went to Indianapolis.

VC: Yes.

BS: Because there was a Latvian community there?

VC: No, no, no. There was no Latvian community. You had to have a sponsor, and the Church World Service is a service that sponsors refugees all over the world. I think they still do it. And different churches sponsor people and take them. And then they watch over them and get them an apartment and find them a job. We were the first Latvians that I know of in Indianapolis.

BS: Oh ny goodness. And what job did they find for your dad? He was a builder.

VC: No, he was, yeah, they got him a job as a carpenter, and I think my mother worked taking care of some children. Then she worked in the laundry in the hospital. And my sister worked in a factory. And I worked

BS: Went to school.

VC: at nothing. [laughter]

BS: When did you start making, (well, are we almost done?) I want to go back to this childhood. You started making art as a child, because I remember reading somewhere that you were listening to opera while you were making art?

VC: Oh yes, because, you see, in Latvian culture, when I was in Germany, I used to go to the ballet and to recitals of singing, because that was our entertainment, you know, from. You know, the people would put on plays and

BS: This was in East Germany?

VC: No, no, it was in West Germany, in Esslingen, where they finally set up the camp. Oh no, East Germany, the poor people in East Germany; my goodness. Well, we know.

BS: This was a refugee camp.

VC: Right, it was a refugee camp, and I went to school there, a Latvian school. And I was an ornery child, you know skipping school many times.

BS: Well, how much supervision could there have been?

VC: Not much. I tell you. The teachers were something, very,

BS: They were displaced.

VC: Very harsh, you know, but.

BS: They must have been terrified themselves.

VC: I was, I had my friends. We were a little gang of friends, and not hardly any supervision.

BS: Did you go out and play in the rubble? You must have.

VC: Played in the rubble, played in, had really no toys, but you know, you don't really. I don't want to make any

BS: Yeah, no.

VC: I don't want to make any big

BS: Children play with anything. They don't really need toys.

VC: I remember my childhood as relatively happy, I guess, because, maybe because I'm so much older now -- it seems like most people think of their childhood -- I mean, happy and unhappy, but I had a lot of freedom. And I used to play in cemeteries. They had *wonderful* cemeteries full of sculpture and trees and wonderful places. And we were extremely independent children. Because the parents, you know, there was no food, so the United Nations fed the refugees.

You had to stand in lines and get. So, you know, so that was my early first ten years, sort of

BS: In that environment

VC: in that kind of mode.

BS: And then you come to Indianapolis. [CREW DISCUSSION]

BS: We'll zip through Indianapolis.

VC: Yes, because, you know, I don't like the idea that every time I talk about art, we talk about, you know, the, I mean.

BS: But you brought certain images with you into the art, and so it's good for people to understand the history.

VC: Yes, I did; I did. Like, I was going to say, I have this little, a year, really. When was that?

BS: [0:24:30] Well, don't tell me now. [CREW DISCUSSION]

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BS: So. Opera, Indianapolis. You were doing drawings? You were reading comic books? You're finding, already, imagery?

VC: The thing that I find sort if interesting is, I used to love comic books so much, why I never really went in that direction, you know?

BS: Pop art?

VC: No, no; it's not just the Pop art. But I never really drew, maybe because; I don't know. I don't know. There was sort of like, like that was, I don't know. I don't know why I never really did that.

BS: You brought up [Jasper Johns](#). Let's move ahead a little bit here. So you go to art school in Indianapolis.

VC: Yes, I went to art school, a very kind of, you know, normal, conservative art school. And, what about it? I found my, I sort of found my home away from home.

BS: And you already were – How do I put this? – going through stores, looking at magazines, looking at books, finding images, then?

VC: No, never did that in Indiana.

BS: All right. So you found your home in terms of you found who you were.

VC: Oh, because I found a group of ...

[CREW DISCUSSION]

BS: So, at a certain point, you're in Indianapolis. You've gone to the art school. Were there teachers that had a heavy influence on you? Or, you found your home, so to speak, but what I'm thinking when you say you found your home is, you found your place in the world as an artist. You found yourself as an artist.

VC: Well, I think it was just being with other people that were – I was always obviously kind of an outsider. And then, in art school, we were all on the same wavelength, is what I meant. And I found my home, maybe, with a group of people that were – you know, I never really knew any artists. I never knew any. But you have to remember that I was always drawing. I mean, I was, like, the artist in high school that did everything. In fact, I don't think they even saw me, they just saw that I could do something they couldn't do. I printed out the whole paper in school by hand. I did the yearbook at my high school. I did all these ridiculous, bizarre drawings of happy people at school. I looked at it recently and thought, "Wow, who was this person?" And it must have been me. And I was always, I always had, or not always -- I sort of somehow developed that part of me. I just developed that. I don't know how it happened. I mean, it just, I was always – and then it was a way of sort of keeping away from my family. Like, I could just make things.

BS: But your father made things.

VC: Interesting, you know, how it starts. But I was always drawing and looking at terrible things, if I might say so. But still, that was my activity, so I think that the people at school always considered me, like, they kept away. It was like, I was going to be the artist. And they didn't know what they were going to be. They

were going to be, you know, this and that, or do this and this, but it was almost like, um. So, in high school, all the art teachers became sort of like second parents or something. Like, they, you know, my parents never paid any attention to – they had a different thing about raising children. They didn't pay attention to the children. [laughing] I can't explain it.

BS: They were putting food on the table.

VC: Yeah, yeah, they were putting food on the table, but, so, I had my own life. Yes, at a certain point, ha ha, I was, I had a room; I actually had a room. My sister was sent to college by, the church collected money and sent her to college, and I had this room that my father had started building a house already. You know, I can't really explain. It was a life of people who go to another country, you know, work real hard, and do all this stuff. And then, through it all,

BS: You had this room that was like your first artist's studio?

VC: I had this room and I did not want anyone in this room. And I used to play, I used to listen to the Texaco opera on Saturdays. Now I can't imagine anything more square now. I never heard any jazz, really. And then I began to listen to the radio. [laughs] I saw some parts of, American culture was seeping in. I really couldn't speak English too well in grade school, but by, in a couple of years, I was babbling along. So, after high school, of course, I went to art school.

BS: Who encouraged you to go to art school?

VC: Oh, everybody in the high school. There was no question.

BS: And when you're at art school, at a certain point, you decide to go to Yale summer school. Now, how did you know about Yale?

VC: Yeah, well, I didn't decide. It was like a scholarship to go to Yale summer school. And there, maybe, I saw another part of art making. It seems like, you know. I mean, I can't believe how square this sounds, actually, thinking now of kids who are so cool when they're twelve. It just seems like I had a very – but you have to realize that this was way back. I came in '48. '48, I mean, can you believe it? And in the 50s, a very square kind of time. A very repressed time. And a very bizarre, when I think of it now, gee.

BS: You went to Yale summer school, was that early 60s?

VC: I went to Yale summer school in '61.

BS: And you met [Chuck Close](#)?

VC: I met [Chuck Close](#), [Brice Marden](#),

BS: [David Novros](#), perhaps?

VC: [David Novros](#) is who I remember. A woman named Patty Tobacco that somebody said they saw; a guy named Fred Gutzeits who has some photographs that I want to see, that he took of me that Chuck [Close] had. And, let me see; who else was I really friendly? And also my boyfriend, Terry Conway, went, who I had all the way through school. And we had met when we were about 17. A terrific artist, really. And, you know, I met [Jack Tworkov](#) and Jon Shuler, this guy named Szeemann.

BS: What effect did this have on you? What kind of work were you doing?

VC: Well, you know, this was really my world, but it had a little pop-up then, because I was a square kid. I mean, Texaco opera?

BS: [laughing]

VC: And I never really thought I had met too many professional artists, really. Although, I guess at the school, there were really professional artists, but they, I saw a kind of a freedom and a kind of a more of a bohemian life. And there were some talented people there. [Brice](#), darn it; wow. You know, he was so, I guess it must be apparent now that I was a much more twisted up person, through my experiences that were so varied. And I was extremely hard on myself. And I had a lot of negative images in my early life, in a funny way. And I had picked up a lot of, I was very harsh with a lot of things. And I sort of maybe didn't accept what I did so much. Somebody who maybe, I don't know. I was just thinking, there was something there that made me into who I am, I guess, today, more of a

BS: Why negative? Why do you use that word?

VC: Oh I don't know. Because the whole experience had a lot of negativity and sorrow in it, and because my parents were so sorrowful to have left their country. They were only 44 years old, and they had to leave every little thing. And my

grandparents had died, and nobody even, you know. There was a lot of wailing and crying for, that has taken a long time to put back on the shelf, for me.

BS: Did you feel guilty about leaving them behind? You were entering a new, magical world.

VC: Oh, I don't know whether I felt guilty. I don't really do that kind of talking like that. It's [laughs]; anyway, so I saw kind of a lighter, I saw another kind of a life, that was maybe possible with these people that were taking drugs. I had some wonderful magic mushrooms there. It just was *fantastic*. I thought; then I met people that actually wanted my work. And I don't know; I had a pretty good experience there. It was in Norfolk, Connecticut. And I think Mahler's grandson was there at the time. And I don't know; I saw another kind of person beside just a working class person. Because my background was pretty much working class, even though there were a lot of Latvian women who were doctors, for instance, and many in my family that remained in Latvia were pediatricians and doctors and chemists. They all got education. I was the only artist in the family, and nobody paid much attention to it, and I didn't care.

BS: Interesting that they were scientists.

VC: I had many solitary moments, you know, of which I still have. I'm more of a;

BS: Insular.

VC: I left my life, sort of, so I don't really

BS: But I want to ask you, so, it must have been hard for you, but you made a decision to go out to UCLA. You got a scholarship there.

VC: Oh I don't know whether it was so hard; I wanted to get away. I wanted to get away, and then when I got away, I had to really come to terms with my art, with my whole life, with building a sort of self. You know, like everybody does. And I was 22. I was, you know, say, when I was at Yale, most of the work that I liked was abstract work. Like Brice, obviously, was a *fantastic* painter, even though I think Novros – you know, I can't remember what Novros was doing, but Chuck was doing Matisse, I was doing Morandi, and I was fluctuating between Morandi and some other kind of more surreal. Heh-heh. We were all doing our thing. And

when I got back, I had one more year at the art school in Indiana, and I wanted to paint. I wanted to be an abstract painter. I painted big paintings, over and over.

BS: Had you seen de Kooning?

VC: I had seen – what had I seen? I hadn't seen a whole lot of great abstract work, but I think I really liked de Kooning a lot for one reason. I think I saw that he had started out also being able to draw, and how he developed. We see the whole development upstairs there. And somehow, I learned a lot from him. I learned a lot about that art is really kind of maybe about itself. And that it has to be unified, and that the reality of the two-dimensional plane is something that is a big player. Of course, all of this started probably in Cubism, and maybe was present before, but never named. And the fact that the paint was maybe the major player, and that the image and the paint had to go together. These are all things that later became the essence of what I sort of do, like, I sort of use an image. But at that time, I was also doing a lot of strokes. I could *never* find the right strokes, believe me. I finally just decided that I couldn't continue in this direction. But that was not until I got to UCLA. UCLA, what was UCLA like? UCLA, you were totally on your own, so I had a lot of freedom, you know? But it was the first time I had really been away from my parents. I realized when I was thinking about it later, that actually, the first, maybe twelve years of my life, I slept in the same room with my parents and my sister, you know? So, I must have, I think there was a period where I stepped out of my family, bit by bit. And of course, I had a whole formal ideas about how to make a painting, and when I dropped this sort of semi-abstract painting that I had been doing, and started doing these very severe objects. They were like interrogation things. I was straight on. I was trying to throw away all the things that I thought I had learned, but not from my own doing, but that were from magazines, from other people's ideas. And I was trying to get back to some kind of a basic thing where I just look, and paint, and sort of an old-fashioned kind of way of starting out. When I did all those objects -- you don't have these here. The only thing you have really here is the gun.

BS: Is the gun, but there's the fan, there's the hotplate.

VC: Oh yeah, I had a whole section there. And when I had my first retrospective about – when was it? 25 years later or something, in the late 70s.

BS: Newport Harbor Museum?

VC: Yes. I started with those paintings, because I picked what to start with. And I started with the paintings because it seemed to me like somehow, then, those became something that were more unique to me and were not just mimicking other artists' work.

BS: Yes, I agree. Because the background and the foreground are beginning to merge, even then, in those.

VC: Well, but I still had a background and a foreground, which I never could come to terms with, really, until I dropped, sort of, the stage, which might be. You know, this, actually, this painting here [Gun, [MoMA 669.2005](#)] is extremely staged, because, you see, we didn't fire the guns. Somebody had given me the gun. That was my boyfriend. I had him pose with the gun. So I set it up, you see. Then I went out, and I was looking at gun magazines. And I *never* even thought of, that I would do something so goofy. And trying to imagine what it would be like when it was fired. And as you can see, this has an air of fantasy about it, because I don't believe that, say, that smoke really comes out like that. That gun might be exploding there. [laughing] You know? Because I put it together. So it's a very unusual piece in that way, that it's kind of a performance that I imagined. I also did this – so, you know, I was doing these objects and some of the objects, I always say, had fallen out of the two-dimensional plane. I did some objects, I mean, obviously influenced by, um

BS: Morandi? Jasper Johns?

VC: No, maybe not Jasper Johns so much. Jasper Johns was an influence in another *much* deeper way, but obviously influenced by Oldenburg, you know, the objects, which I had never really seen, except in magazines, and by, um, you know, who else? Maybe Warhol, and by the people that were doing, that started doing objects, that started doing photographs.

BS: Mm-hm, everyday objects.

VC: You know, I'm not an artist that's like a, I'm not a really innovative artist in terms of having many ideas. Like Warhol – how many ideas did he put out there, you know?

BS: Well, he had a factory.

VC: Many, many, many. The idea that other people could do your art better than you. The idea that you could silkscreen. The whole millions of things, the things that you know.

BS: But you loved making your art.

VC: Pardon?

BS: You loved making your art. That's the major part of your life.

VC: Well, I don't know whether I loved making the art. Do I love making the art? Hmm. Well,

BS: You did.

VC: Do I love making the art?

BS: Do you?

VC: Do I love making the art? I know I make things. I don't even think of them much. I guess it's art. I mean, you know.

BS: You've spent your life making it.

VC: Yeah, well, I've made my life making it,

BS: And it's a good life.

VC: But I don't really, I don't know whether I think of love. It's somehow, it's like a little tiny area that becomes a challenge, you know, to, and then, it takes care of time, in a certain way. And it's, I don't know what the relationship is there, but we have a relationship, these things and I. And then, you know, extended to other people, now.

BS: I have a question. So, you're in Venice. You find a studio. You use the objects in your studio as the subjects for these paintings.

VC: Well, I'll tell you what I first did. I first, when I got there, I tried to go out and sort of do what we could call now a very hokey name, like, semi-abstract landscapes, kind of landscapes that still had de Kooning-esque gestures in it, that gesture that he

made that, you know, sometimes I meet other artists and we all talk about having made those gestures. Chuck remembers trying to make that loopy kind of thing that he has, especially in the 40s in the black and white work, that loopy kind of shape, you know, with the little roundness. I mean, I cannot believe it. So, I was doing that kind of work, and then I got, I thought, 'This isn't what I want to be doing.' Then, I was left in my studio, and I started painting all the stuff in there. I had very few things in there. It was, and there was a community there. They had been trying to make the community interesting, and I guess it was sort of interesting. I was kind of isolated in a funny way, because I was very protective of my art. And, I don't know. What can I say? Ask me.

BS: Well, James Turrell, Doug Wheeler. Who were the people that you met during that time? Who were the artists

VC: Well, first of all, in school I met Tony Berlant, who was in my – you know, we didn't really have a class, but we had, actually, a thing like this, where there's work sitting around, different people's work. We would have crits, you know? Crits, crits. [laughing] And we'd look at each other's work and size each other up, and see who had a little talent and who didn't, and who was going to go somewhere and who didn't. Then we had people coming in to talk about the work. But I don't know, you know. And I was doing these, I guess, what was I doing? I was doing those sort of big, I mean, some of the landscapes were like nine feet. I'd get that roll of big paper, because I didn't have any money, of course, that you use in photography behind, as a backdrop. It's like a roll that's maybe about 40 feet long and nine feet wide, and I'd be doing things on there that I was trying to do, these paintings that I worked on continually. Big paintings.

BS: What were they like?

VC: They were really of strokes, a collection of strokes. Anyway, you know I was, I don't know what you could say. I mean, any artist looking at this would say, well, I've done the same thing. You know, you're in the studio. You make the painting. I think I was sort of like tired of inventing what my brain was thinking of. I was thinking, 'I'm going to throw away a lot of the ideas I had about making The Great Painting, and I'm going to see what's left.' Like, can I still paint some basic thing? And, of course, I painted all the objects. And I tried not to paint them. You know, I painted them life size. I had a lot of weird things that came out there. I tried to

paint them without a lot of theatrics, without a lot of artificial color, all those things that I had been doing without, really, without composing, you know? Just deadpan. Just the facts, man.

BS: You were examining them.

VC: Yes, and kind of trying to find some kind of a feeling that was – I was also maybe influenced a little bit by Magritte and that very deadpan way of painting, except Magritte paints very thin. He is not really a painter. He sort of colors in, and not really a great painter, but a terrific artist, really, a kind of a poet, collaging those images together in one painting. And at one point I made a comb, kind of a little homage to Magritte, which took me a couple of years. It was about 1970. I don't know when I began it, '69? '70?

BS: [0:32:52] Yes, I think it was finished in 1970.

VC: Oh yeah, maybe. And so, I was doing objects in the work and outside of the work. Pardon?

BS: What about this one right behind you?

VC: Oh yeah. Then somewhere in there, in my kind of quest of thinking, 'Do you want to be a painter of objects? Maybe not.' I was thinking, 'You know, there's something else in me.' And I had all of these clippings, which I still have some of the clippings from the 60s that I've carried with me. And what did I do? I did, I started drawing them. Here's a couple there. They were like object, too, like objects you find? These were torn out of, well, one was from the gun magazine, because I had the gun magazines to see how a gun might go. [[Clipping with Pistol, MoMA #674.2005](#)]

BS: [0:33:54] Yes. And I notice, it's a later drawing. It's about four years after you made that painting. It's a different gun.

VC: Yes, yes, yes; because. And then, the other one [[Bikini, MoMA # 673.2005](#)] was from a magazine somewhere, a bikini. So in there snuck this little period of war images. Now, when I think about it later, I was thinking, 'Well, probably the Viet Nam war.' We were so crazed about the war. It was everywhere, on TV, everywhere, every night you saw a body count, very similar to now, actually. And I somehow, you know, this was as close as I could get to anything that might be like

a sensational image. And then I painted, oh what was it? About ten paintings, which were now no longer objects, but were out to the edge, but still very much like the still life, you know, still a single image.

BS: But you took color completely out of the equation.

VC: Well, because all the clippings were black and white. That's really how it started. And then, I became kind of in love with the grays, and the black and white, but I never made a decision, really, to leave color. I did make a decision not to make things yellow, red, and blue. [laughing] You I never really- I think I left color as a big part of, as a big player in a painting. But it sort of slipped out from my other, I don't know; I think I wanted the work to be stiller. I didn't want it to, I don't know; I wanted it to be still. I wanted it to lie down more on the surface. I mean later, when I had the big break and started the drawings, that was really very clear. [0:36:12] But in these, I don't know; I had this feeling when I started doing any images -- which I hadn't really done since I was maybe in the second, third year in art school -- that I had a freedom, you know?. That I could paint bombers, that I could paint fire, that I could paint anything, you know? It was like a kind of a freedom; that it was a sort of a play. I painted all my food. Here we have a little painting that is in a puzzle [Puzzle, MoMA # 671.2005]. I sort of went back in my childhood, in a funny way. But of course, this is, I mean, many of these things, even this, seems sort of a little bit like a child, a childhood image, you know, an image that is not really scary but is sort of like, maybe, a kind of a toy. You don't think so?

BS: Well, I'm looking at it. It has

VC: Not to mention the Freudian implications. [laughter] Which I just mentioned. [laughing]

BS: Yes. But what's interesting to me is that it's a gun that's gone off. And there's a narrative

VC: But there's a kind of a magic to it. You see, I had never, even though I was talking earlier about hearing guns and so forth and bombs falling and whistling, I had never myself shot a gun, of course.

BS: Right. And you never

VC: Well, and I did later, much later, I had a boyfriend who had guns. And we went out in the desert and I shot cans, of course, that we put up on rocks. And I shot some cans. It was interesting. I can see the power of it, you know? But, and even, well, I can't say that that; I don't know. I think that the war things were much too somber for LA, first of all, which was much more of a pop-art-y kind of place. But it was more in the direction that I wanted to go. It seemed more correct to me. It was more controlled. It was more – I don't know; I like that painting. [looking at [Flying Fortress, MoMA # 672.2005](#)]

BS: I love that painting.

VC: It's a [hovering?] painting. It has some magic in it, because it's sort of one thing, and another. And yet it's – maybe that was one of the things that I made a switch, coming to think of it now, right here in front of you. Where, instead of having something that was very ordinary, like, in front of me, I went to events that were more than you could ever put in a painting. You know, more; that were bigger; that were not paintable, really; you know?

BS: Before the moment of destruction.

VC: Right, and then putting them in a very small space, and making them real in that space, you know? So that the airplane exists there. I mean, you have an image, an airplane, but where can you place it? It's placed in that space. So that; you know what I'm saying? [laughing]

BS: I do. What I keep thinking is, you're telling me this, and I'm saying, 'But that's a bomber. That's the bomber either that's just been hit or is about to drop a bomb.'

VC: Well you'd be sure that many people don't notice that that tail is coming off.

BS: I did, actually, so it's just been hit.

VC: Right.

BS: It's about to go down. The gun has gone off.

VC: Well, so, you know, you can imagine that as a young woman, I probably had so much stuff everywhere, and in me. I mean, obviously, there was the theme of disaster there, somewhere. But disaster sort of transformed, you know? And put into another context, like a painting, an art context, removed from, and sort of

sealed into another space. Which is, of course, what's wonderful about painting. That is has that kind of space, a space that's very still, and really has a sort of double reality. The reality is, it's a little flat area, and then, there's when you work with an image, you always have another idea in your head of that image that comes from a totally different world. On one point, this is like a photograph where I found it. That was my subject, the photograph. And then there's another subject, and another subject, and another subject. There's a kind of a psychological feeling of, a little bit, of disaster. And then there's a thing that there's an immense space that has been where the plane really was. Do you know what I'm saying?

BS: Yes, I do.

VC: Anyway, somewhere I got turned on to that.

BS: You're in Los Angeles.

VC: I'm in Los Angeles in this big, long wonderful studio, that is now just ruined, and seven blocks from the ocean. And I'm in there painting this World War II thing like, totally, like, I don't know, *not* from Los Angeles.

BS: And then there's the Watts riots.

VC: Oh yeah, and then there was Watts. There's always danger and horror around the corner, everywhere.

BS: And you do the painting of the Time Magazine cover.

VC: Yes, that just came out. It was like a one-time painting. I was quite moved by the plight and the, you know, like, I don't know. I just did the cover. And of course, you have to say that I liked the grays in that particular cover. [laughter] And I liked, I don't know. I just had this instinct to do it. I never did that really ever again. I did do a series of paintings then, in the – when was that Watts riot?

BS: Was it '64?

VC: '64 or '65, maybe.

BS: Around then; mid 60s.

VC: See, I never really pay, because I'm so image oriented, I never really pay attention to what the images are, that much. Except in that case, I don't know; I had the inspiration to do it. I sat down. Most of these paintings I did in about a week, a week of -- I was also, I think, teaching at Irvine, then, because I got out; I had to start making money. And I started teaching right away at the University of California at L.A., and then at Irvine. Then I would come home and then I would drop into my painting.

BS: What about, you talk about the stillness. And I remember reading that you would go for long walks on the beach; you would go for a walk out onto the pier, at the end of the Venice pier.

VC: Because I had a dog, you see.

BS: You had a dog. You were friends with James Turrell and Doug Wheeler, both of whom used light and had a very different approach.

VC: Yes, but I was friends with a whole lot of people, actually. I'm still very good friends with Doug Wheeler; we've remained very good friends. I liked certain things we had in common that I really liked. One was airplanes. You see, I started taking airplane lessons. And another was flying. The other was the desert, which became a great thing for me, really, like a great place that I never had imagined existed, when I got in tune with it. I just loved driving and I loved the desert. These were the California things that I really liked and missed so much when I moved to, you know, where are we? East Coast.

BS: Yes, New York City.

VC: And I moved for a different kind of art. I moved because I thought that, I don't know. I wanted to be closer to all these artists that I liked, and all the museums and so forth. But I missed the west; the desert, and the air, and

BS: And it's a very different ocean out there. I was looking at your work, and I was thinking, you couldn't have made, you couldn't have started those ocean drawings, you couldn't have thought of the kind of expanse and the light, and the desert. You talk about flying over the desert. All of that comes from the West Coast. You took that with you and brought it here.

VC: Yeah, I guess I did. Well, I started doing those, you know, I didn't bring it with me. I started doing these. [[Untitled, MoMA# 303.1970](#); [Ocean, MoMA# 585.1970](#)] I had this. Okay. So when I started doing the oceans, I made a few decisions. One decision was that I was going to go back to a more of an abstract kind of work where I really just sort of mapped out and followed the surface. And I laid down, I used the image to make you stay on the surface, to make myself stay on the surface. So that that kind of double reality, where there's an image, but the image is here in another form, and the image stays here in this form. And when you look at the work, you have that double thing you *should* have all the time, where you're looking at the making and a kind of a re-describing of the surface, and the image is interwoven with that surface. That was one of the – I really made a total break from the painting. I stopped painting, you know, for about 12 years, and just used a pencil. I can't believe I did something so

BS: Radical.

VC: Well, so destructive, really, because I *really* loved painting. But I found this thing. It was like I went on a journey and I pushed it and pushed it and pushed it. And I started out, you know, first I really started seeing these images of the moon. And I was so turned on by these scientific images, and I just couldn't help but redo them. I have all these words that it's like re-describing, or re-telling, or – I wrote, I have a little notebook here. [laughing] Retold, remade, in another context. So it's like I really got to know the image, and it sort of unfolded along with, like, the drawing, the image, the surface, the scale; everything, like, was made together. [[Moon Surface \(Luna 9\) # 1 MoMA# 584.1970](#); Moon Surface (Surveyor) MoMA# 676.2005]

BS: But I

VC: So that the image did not really – the image was, like, caught. Caught and held, and that's really where it existed. And that you couldn't see it without seeing the fact that it was made, and that it just stays in this kind of a space. So anyway,

BS: I'm curious, because I noticed with one of the moon drawings, it was so beautiful because part of it was out of focus. It was as if you had taken

VC: Well because the subject, you see, the subject was really the photograph [referring to [MoMA# 584.1970](#)]. So whatever the photograph told me, I did. I found a great freedom in this, I have to tell you. I never could stand composing. Composition one thing, another third thing, and then the painting was like a background. Not for me. So, you know,

BS: You've talked about going back to Italy and seeing the Giotto, the Arena Chapel, and wasn't that, that was the 1300s, Arena. I'm going to skip around a little bit here. But what I'm thinking about is, you have explored so many different mediums. You say, 'Oh, I went back to the pencil,' but then, you've done aquatints, mezzotints,

VC: Well, when I started doing the prints. I don't know; the prints are a nightmare, because they're so difficult. But I wanted to do all of the things that people have done through history with their hands. Sometimes I like to do three-dimensional things. There's something very humorous about three-dimensional things, actually. And I did these little houses as [[House #1, MoMA# 670.2005.a-b](#)], obviously, a memory thing, my god, and psychological, and so complicated. It's too complicated, now, to really discuss.

BS: Well, I love the [Méret] Oppenheim.

VC: Oh, yeah, yeah. Obviously. I had seen that little teacup [[Object MoMA# 130.1946.a-c](#)], hadn't I?

BS: Yes.

VC: You know, when you're – I'm sure this is true for all the other artists – when you're, all these things become like part of you. I have all of these images. You know, they may have only seen them in an instant. But I was, you know, they all become, like, they can all turn up in your work. And they do, in many artists' work, of course. Like, I don't know; so, in my work, a little bit Magritte, a little bit of a whole bunch of people, actually. But anyway, so the more – I think when I started doing the ocean images, I had this thought that I was going to do them for the rest of my life. And I was going to explore a different pencil, letting the pencil itself be a player. And I was going to explore the different sizes. But of course, you know, I got tired of it. And I'm just not the kind of person that can be that rigorous.

BS: [0:53:46] Except that you *have* been.

VC: And I was too attached, I guess. I started taking photographs of the desert floor [[Desert, MoMA# 627.1971](#)], and thinking, 'Well, this is just like the surface of the paper. It has an image, it has a floor, it has....' And I started doing other images which were also made out of little tiny parts, so they get very engaged, and they sort of account for the space in front of you.

BS: The space and the mark making. I was going to ask, I mean, the desert floor, the moon, the sky, the ocean, they all have

VC: All bigger and all condensed into another space.

BS: Infinity

VC: You know, a space that's very small, and often very tense, and often very restrained, restrained to flatness. And very kind of too restrained, Vija, but, you know, what can you do? I thought, I mean, part of it might be, you know, from my own nature, but I somehow think that I love that flatness, you see, and the plane. It's an essential part,

BS: It's the

VC: To the making. I didn't want to- I wanted to go with it. I didn't want to break with it. I wanted somehow to have both things, an image that was in your mind, that was vast, and the reality which was very restrained and flat and made, and that was actual.

BS: You went

VC: Maybe we should take a little break?

BS: Yes.

VC: Am I getting tired?

BS: Are you getting tired?

VC: Am I talking too much?

BS: Not at all.

VC: I think so.

BS: No, very articulate and very moving. We can take a break.

[tech and personal discussion to end]

END AUDIO FILE Celmins_T05 at 0:57:46

BEGIN AUDIO FILE Celmins_T06 duration 55:20

VC: Yeah, and then, he will know, maybe somebody out in the field that has done this for other artists, because I can't believe. Heck, I should really – it would be better to get it from them, a name. Because I've seen people have terrible lights in the studio. I'm very sensitive to trying to keep an even kind of outdoor light inside, because I like that kind of light.

EA¹ : Do you have a lot of natural light?

VC: I have lots of natural light, now, in my new studio. In the old studio, they built this ugly building in the back and cut off my light. I just about died, but I remained there instead of moving to Brooklyn. And then I had a guy that gave me some lights once that were early LAV LED lights, but they're fading now. But I hear that there are lights now that don't fade. And they stay for a long time, then they just go out. A long time meaning ten years. But they cost, like, some of them, \$400.00 a bulb. But some of them are about \$60.00 a bulb. Has everybody heard about the light problem? Those are the important things for the artist, you know, the light and the heat, mostly the light.

EA: So, how was Gattopardo?

BS: Delicious.

VC: Yeah, it was good. Do you guys go in there all the time?

BS: No, it's too pricey for lunch.

¹ Esther Adler Assistant Curator, Drawings; was briefly present.

VC: You've been in there.

BS: I've been in there. Marian Goodman always does her parties there, which is nice.

VC: Oh, she does?

BS: So, yeah.

VC: I should have gone to the last party for Gerhard Richter, but I was gone so much. And then I think I got there too late, and I was too tired to go. That's okay.

BS: It was probably packed.

VC: It was probably packed; they're always packed. You know, if you live out in the country, like now I think I'm going to hopefully do more of, then to go to a packed party is kind of nice.

BS: Yeah, whereas, if you live here, it's like, 'Oh my god, I have to go to another one.'

VC: Yes, yes, I know; "another one." Right.

BS: And it's too distracting and I want to do my work, but yes, that's what I want to get to. Because you don't have to go to all of them, you can say no. You don't even have to say why. 'Sorry, I'm busy that night.'

VC: I'm always saying why.

BS: 'I'm busy home reading.' You can't say that, so you can just say, 'I'm busy that night.' Too bad. So sorry.

VC: Yeah, well, they have a lot of people to pick from, don't they?

BS: Yes; you have even more people to pick from. But I think, this is my new thing. I don't want to go out more than like three nights a week. It's too time consuming.

VC: I know. You get older, you have a certain amount of time to do work. You know, it's very hard to get into it and stay. Of course, I don't really have a family, so I could really stay. But I need a little bit more help.

BS: I mean, I think it's good to get out, I think it's healthy. I think balance is always healthy. I'm always looking for balance. I never quite get it, but.

VC: But you're in a more social position.

BS: Yes, I know. I don't like it. Because what I really want to do is go home and read and write and edit. That's all I want to do. I'm completely happy in that space.

VC: That's nice.

BS: [laughing] It is nice. But, you know what I mean. You've got to come out to the studio,

VC: So you've met hundreds and hundreds of artists, haven't you:

BS: I've met a lot of people. You know, Brice used to be on our board; Brice used to be a trustee of Bomb, funnily enough. And Eric Fischl is now. But yeah, they were my buddies. When I first came to New York I met Gordon Matta-Clark, and he introduced me to everybody.

VC: Buried in Sag Harbor; I live right by the cemetery, Oakland Cemetery.

BS: For the longest time I didn't know he was buried there. And Ned told me he used to go walk his dog in the cemetery,

VC: Yeah, me too.

BS: And one day, he just happened to read it and went, "Ah." He didn't even know. With his mom and with Sebastian.

VC: See, I sometimes wish that I had come to New York instead of going to California. California allowed me to be much more of a, what do you call it? You know, an artist that you cannot place anywhere.

BS: A maverick.

VC: [laughing] No, no; not a maverick, the other way. Some kind of, you know, not really a maverick but someone that is outside of movements. Then, by the time I came here, everybody, as I said, I think, to Chuck, because he interviewed me for that little book, and he said, by the time I came here everybody was into real estate, and that was the only one thing to talk about.

BS: [laughing] It is true. It's still what everyone talks about because they're so frantic about where they're going to live and how they're going to sustain themselves.

VC: You know, for an artist like myself. Now artists just hold their work in their head and go around and talk it out. Or they perform it. Or they have somebody make it for them for a month, and then they move to another town. Which is not bad, but I'm from the former generation, and I'm like, you have to have a studio. I'm always making sure my studios are very secure, and that I feel like being there, and opening myself to everything.

BS: To worlds, really because that's what you can do.

VC: To the world, even though I have a very restricted sort of world, actually. And I do a very toned down kind of work, really. I kind of gave up big gestures for little gestures. And it's very hard to go back to bigger gestures. Sometimes I think I want to do bigger gestures. When I first moved to New York, I tried doing these big paintings like I used to. Not that big, six by six feet. And I couldn't get the scale right. But now I think I would be a little more – I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I couldn't get the image to work with that scale. I had to abandon these paintings. I sold one; I think it's in San Francisco. But I couldn't get the scale to work correctly for me, because I had scaled down everything so small, compressed it.

BS: But scaling down something and compressing it, you still have layer upon layer upon layer that you're

VC: Well, I'm doing the paintings which [they] don't really have here. After, when I started doing the things in graphite, I got really into it, you know? I was, like, obsessed. Which is not a word I used to like to say, but now, I just say it; that's what it was. I went one after another. Then I moved into other surfaces. And then, finally, the graphite became the number one, and I did all these night sky drawings, just with a pencil, of which, one of the last ones is over there [[Starfield III MoMA# 684.2005](#)]. That was one of the last three. That was before I said, "Never again. I'm going to paint." And then,

BS: But Vija you, we were talking over lunch, and you said, 'I've put things aside for years, a decade, and then I've come back to them.' And what's wonderful about having a long life is, you have been able to immerse yourself in graphite, in the night skies, in the desert, in these particles. And you talked to me about these particles. You were able to immerse yourself, and then move back into painting.

VC: Yes, I was able to move back into painting. It was tough. And now I'm painting, well, first of all, the paintings that I did, of which you do not have any, after I moved out of this heavy graphite. You know, painting is just more physical, more physical than any pencil can do. I got into the physicality of the whole thing, and I just had to quit. So the paintings I did then were very much like the graphite drawings. It's almost like an inchworm going from one thing to another, and I did a whole series of black paintings that were very layered. Because I was...

BS: Were they night skies?

VC: They were all night skies, coming out of the night sky drawings. They were all night skies; I'm up to maybe 22. I've now reversed them to reverse galaxies where they are white with black stars. I'm having a very hard time placing the space correctly. But the night skies that I did – and then I made some bigger paintings, too, became very closed off, very closed off, very interior. I was thinking that when I came to New York, the work became much more kind of intellectualized, and sort of more conceptual, and more sort of inward. And actually, those paintings were very closed off, like, I want to say, without nature. [laugh] You know, the kind of paintings that are really studio paintings. They might reflect something interior of yourself. I'm not sure, exactly, that that's what art does. I'm not a very confessional artist, you know. I don't ever reveal what I'm feeling in my work, or what I think about the president, or dogs, or anything. I kind of use nature. I use found images.

BS: You use

VC: It's an art for really looking. Okay, what do you want to say?

BS: It is an art for really looking, and that's what I realized when I was going over all of the beautiful drawing show that the Pompidou put together, or looking at the pieces that Edward Broida left to the Modern. And I was thinking, here we have the desert. We have the night skies. We have the moonscape. But really, these are all about the making, and the material.

VC: And the surface. And the here and now. Like, they don't exist, they exist here.

BS: They're very present.

VC: I tried to make them exist here, so that when you look at the work, you yourself, like, re-experience a kind of intimacy. If you scan the work yourself, close, and spend time with it, you actually are remaking it with me. That's one way of looking it. You can build a sort of an intimacy with the work itself. And hopefully, you get the thought in your head that this might be the only place that ocean exists. You know, that kind of feeling that something has been changed into another reality.

BS: Transformed into another reality. My feeling is that there's an intimacy with the ocean that I can get from looking at one of your drawings that I cannot get with the ocean itself.

VC: Yeah, right, where you have totally different things, of course.

BS: Totally different experience, and yet, I think

VC: But you're looking at art, you're not looking at the ocean. Or maybe art, I hate to use the word "art." Why is that?

BS: Well, let's go back to this.

VC: Oh, because I wanted always to do art with a small "a." But you're looking at something that's in front of you, that's been made by another human being, which is very different than finding something that is, exists.

BS: What about, *To Fix the Image in Memory* [[MoMA# 679.2005](#)]?

VC: Oh, I don't know whether I can talk about it, because that's a very, it's a little bit like what we've been talking about. I had a very fallow period where I was still doing those late, very heavy kind of graphite drawings, which took months and months, because it's all positive, no erasing, going around every, like, building a surface. I often think of that I should build, build the structure of the painting. And I was disgusted with myself. And I was going and picking up rocks. I had this idea that I was going to remake those, just like picking up the photographs is like picking up rocks. I pick up images. I picked up these rocks around the Rio Grande in New Mexico, and then I was going to put them, instead of putting them in a flat world of the painting or the drawing, I was going to put them in bronze, which you know means Art with a big "A." And [laughing] I'm just joking, you know. But, so, anyway, I had these casts, and then the pieces, the two of them together. So you also have the – and for me, it was a piece about spending, maybe, it took five

years to finish the work. But it isn't that I worked all the time. I couldn't *stand* to work on it. But when I returned to it, it was like a real observation of nature, for a long, long time, sort of a meditation. Also a kind of a test to see what my eyes could see; a test, I like to think, of imagination, that you can see and re-imagine it on another surface. And then, a kind of a meditation on the whole idea, and maybe making fun of it a little bit. You know, the whole idea that you could somehow touch the real heart of something, the real nature. You could really, you know, the pieces are left, the whole piece is, of course, is a found piece, and the main piece. And when you look at them, you of course see which one is made. It requires a little bit of looking, which is also a little kind of a humor, you know, looking at the piece. And then, discovering at one was made, and maybe having a revelation of you yourself making it and what it would involve. And these are not faked rocks, you know, done with spray paint. These are done like a Seurat. They're done point by point. So, for me, it was a piece that sort of seemed to wake me up out of some kind of stupor I was in, in the mid 70s. And I got sort of turned on to holding the brush, and thinking, 'Hey, you haven't done that for a long time, have you?' And I knew that I was going to go back into painting, which I did.

BS: Interesting.

VC: And then I did a whole series of drawings later, about ten years later. I haven't picked up a pencil since. What's that been? Long time.

BS: Whoa, '77 was when you did the, To Fix the Image in Memory [[MoMA# 679.2005](#)].

VC: No, what is this drawing here with the pencil [[Starfield III, MoMA# 684.2005](#)]? That's '86, I think, no, '83, maybe '81. When did I finish it? Maybe in '81.

BS: I'm sorry, I don't remember. But we can put that back in. But

VC: That was the last time I used a pencil for anything.

BS: So let's go back.

VC: So these are the weirdnesses that I have pushed myself into.

BS: But for you, and the pencil, it was a long relationship.

VC: A long relationship, right. I pushed that pencil.

BS: And I'm curious, you talk about the positive and the negative. With the woodcuts, you also talk about the positive and the negative, and I'm wondering if working with the woodcut brought you to charcoal and brought you to erasure and positive and indifferent.

VC: Maybe. What do you say? It seems like it.

BS: It does seem like it.

VC: I don't know. You know, it's hard to really, because I'm a kind of [an] intuitive artist that is always sifting images in my head and always thinking about things, it's hard to. I mean, I think so, because it was carving away; it must have occurred to me [[Ocean Surface, MoMA# 262.1992](#)]. And a mezzotint, also.

BS: Yes, I was going to say.

VC: And then I started using the eraser with charcoal, because charcoal is the most, sort of like paint, you know. It's very loose. And I of course repeated. And it has a little bit more air in it. You know, my paintings, those black paintings got so impenetrable and so closed off, and so, well, as I used the word before, restrained, and impenetrable,

BS: Didn't the charcoal

VC: that the charcoal was kind of a relief, because it was dustier and had more relationship with the support.

BS: I was going to say, the charcoal must have opened you up, because it's harder to control.

VC: Well, I don't know whether it opened me up, but it was a relief from those paintings.

BS: You said, at one point, you had a show at David McKee. Let's backtrack a little bit, though, because we haven't gotten you from LA to New York, and I need to do that. [VC laughs] You were in Los Angeles. You were driving your car on the freeway to go to Irvine.

VC: I was having relationships with guys that didn't quite work out.

BS: Right. You started going to Cal Arts. I don't know if you were lecturing there, or you were teaching?

VC: No, I gave a talk there, and then I was a little guest, and then I taught there for a year.

BS: And you met Ellen Phelan, the painter Ellen Phelan, Elizabeth Murray, the sculptor Judy Pfaff.

VC: Who else did I meet? These girls that they hired for less money.

BS: Elizabeth Murray.

VC: Yes. Less money than they would have to pay for guys that lived in LA. Ellen and I figured that out, you know, that they were paying them less because it was kind of fun to go to California and Cal Arts, which was kind of a heavy school then, you know, really in. I don't know whether it is any more, but it was sort of the thing to do. Oh, yes.

BS: You meet these New York women who were all artists.

VC: Well, you know, there weren't that many women doing art at that time. Now, of course, there's probably more women doing art and everything else, than men. But there weren't too many women doing art in LA that I connected with, really. I mean, they did have a feminist movement, which I think was terrific, but I'm not a real joiner, you know? We had a group and all, and did, but I'm just not a real person that likes to join groups, and I don't really – I like to stick to what I do. Somebody has to do it, you know? So I'm doing it. But the women from New York seemed much more hippity hop; I liked that. They were bright, you know, funny, they drank a lot, they told jokes. We sat around on the floor smoking away like chimneys, talking about guys, about art, about, you know, how to make a living. And I was like, in my forties, early forties, maybe late thirties, and so were they. We had a wonderful time. I really liked it. And then later I also met, um,

BS: Milton Resnick.

VC: Who married Bruce Nauman? You know, Susan Rothenberg, also, I met. And I got to know some women who I thought were pretty serious. So those are the people that I, well, I met a lot of people because later when I worked in Gemini,

even though I had moved here, I went back in the summer and worked on prints at Gemini, some of which you have here [Concentric Bearings, MoMA# 340.1987]. I met Rauschenberg and Rosenquist and all those people that they had there. And we all became quite friendly. Richard Serra, I think I met, actually, before that. I met a lot of people that would indicate move to New York.

BS: Right. You met Milton Resnick at Skohegan.

VC: Is what it really was. [laughing]

BS: And so you felt it was possible, there was a place for you.

VC: I thought it was possible, and then when Skohegan asked me to come. You know, they called me at the crack of dawn, because, you know, it's three hours earlier in LA. And I was in bed. I picked up the phone, and they said, do you want to come to Skohegan and teach? I said, yes, immediately. I had no idea what it was or anything. And then when I got to Maine, oh, the bugs, and I saw foxes, and there was a lake. And I thought, "Gee, this is l-i-f-e." I mean, LA is very bug free.

BS: Yes.

VC: And clouds are events to celebrate, because the sky is always the same, pretty much. It gets whiter with fog, or brighter with sun, but it doesn't – on a cloudy day, you grab a book and sit by the window and just gaze at the clouds, because it's so fabulous to see something, you know, the world animated above. So in Maine, it was great. I loved it. I loved, I sort of had a kind of a light bulb go on. Then I met Milton Resnick, who, I know he hasn't had a lot of luck, actually, in his career. He was a wonderful painter and a very poetic talker about his painting. He was doing a very kind of closed off, abstract painting that was very difficult, actually. He has a show. I haven't seen it yet, because I was out of town.

BS: I saw it.

VC: And I'm going to go see it. His earlier work, I think.

BS: Yes.

VC: And I met other artists and stuff, and I said, "Hey, I'm not going back." And I changed studios with Barbara Kruger, who is a wonderful person. And she went to my studio to teach at Cal Arts, and I stayed in hers on Lispenard.

BS: Yes, I know it.

VC: And I used to, you know, I was happy.

BS: And you started painting again during that period. Did Resnick

VC: And I started painting again. I finished the stone piece and I had a show at David McKee, but I started painting doing some smaller works, and I had a show at McKee. I don't think anybody really quite understood the stone piece. I didn't understand it myself. I still don't understand it.

BS: I still don't understand it, but I love it.

VC: But I can talk about it. Well, sometimes when I see it, I think, "Wow, what a primitive." It makes me laugh, you know? It's a strange piece.

BS: Why the need to replicate?

VC: Replicate is not exactly the word.

BS: What would you use?

VC: You would say, 'Why study the stone so long?' [laughing] Why? I don't know. Somewhere in there, I found something about making and about finding, about weaving the two together, which I did in my last show. I had a show where I got so interested in old things, because I've got a house someplace in Sag Harbor. I never was interested in old things. But now that I'm getting older, I'm getting interested in old things. It's sort of amazing. Surfaces that are old, things that are old. I thought these, I don't know; I guess once I started having that kind of – I began to think that the only thing for me that I liked was in the change of the reality in the making. And that that was the only thing that I could really contribute to this great history of art. And then, whatever comes out of it, you know, I have other qualities in the work. But I have a hard time talking about them. I mean, other people make the work live, really, obviously, for every artist. So they find all kinds of things in it, but I stick to that one thing. Well, then, wait a minute. That I have remade it through my instrument, through my body, my intelligence, my power of observation, my imagination, to see it, and to try to make a form that somehow rivals the form that I have found, but usually on a two-dimensional plane. Which is not as easy as you think it might be, to make it stay there and not appear as if it's

cut out. The one that I think appears the most cut out is that very early lithograph which appears to be like going out of the, out of its [Untitled, MoMA# 303.1970]

BS: Out of the frame.

VC: Out of its frame. Right. And then of course, I never, I really didn't mat my drawings. I like to see the paper, because the paper is a player. It's like I have a player, you know? I have the material; I have the support, the paper; like, in all those drawings I made, about a hundred drawings. And then, I have the proportion. I let it all show. I like to let it all show. So if you mat it, it kind of cuts off the paper-ness, and makes the work more conventional, really.

BS: Two things. I want to talk about two David McKee shows. When you first come here, you have a show at David McKee Gallery. It's like maybe 1983.

VC: Right.

BS: You've gone back to Los Angeles, done some work at Gemini GEL, some prints at Gemini GEL.

VC: They were wonderful, a wonderful print shop.

BS: I want to talk about that. But you said something which stuck in my mind. And that is, they were the night sky paintings, oil paintings, and the charcoal night sky drawings. And you thought that it was the best show you'd had. And I'm wondering if you still think that, and why you thought that.

VC: That was a later show that I had. The first show I had had the stones in it, and it had – you know, I can't even remember what it had. I think it had some kind of tentative -- it had these small paintings that were sort of almost square.

BS: And you said you didn't like the square; it was too heroic.

VC: No, no, yeah, well, no, it was off square. I've never done anything totally square. I couldn't do that, because it is not a space that – it's a space that stays extremely static, and I can't manipulate that space. I could never do anything totally square.

BS: What is it about the rectangle?

VC: Well, the rectangle, the rectangle. Now I'm doing everything up and down.

BS: Vertical.

VC: I switched the rectangle now, so it's up and down. I don't know. The rectangle has some movement. You go from here to there. You go from here to here. It's a little bit more productive so that you can go all over. So you sort of explore the space. And it goes along with many of my images, you know? Because they have a slight bit of perspective in them, and they're sort of a kind of a clinical, strange landscape, although I don't like to use that word. Because I like to use the fact that I've *borrowed* an image.

BS: I didn't want to use that word but I think what they suggest is a horizon line, even though you don't have a horizon line in them.

VC: No, I don't have a horizon line because I want you to, I want to place the work in a wall, you see. I don't want to make a pictorial picture where you might imagine a horizon and what's over the horizon. I want to keep you in that rectangle, you know? I don't want to make a pictorial painting that describes the sunlight and various things. I just want to keep you there, keep you in that rectangle.

BS: Let's talk about the latest acquisition that the Modern has made, and that's that very beautiful world. What materials went into making that?

VC: Well, because I was telling you, you know, the East Coast is old, o-l-d. The West Coast is new. When I got here, I'm not an antique person or anything, but I got sort of involved because I was putting together this tiny house, which has given me a *great* amount of pleasure. I've got a dog, a house, a garden, the whole works.

BS: In a whaling village, an old whaling village.

VC: An old whaling village, right. [laughing] And I was thinking, old, old, old, maybe me too, old, my friends old, old surfaces. I began to see all these old surfaces. So I found this old French map in a store actually on the North Fork. What's the name of the store? Bell and Beal or something? And I liked it. I think I kind of liked it because it levitates. Maybe it reminds me of my airplanes. It sort of levitates, this ball. Anyway, I liked it, and I had it for ten years or so. And then I was also collecting tablets, probably because I liked black. I was so into black. I love black. I really did a lot of black paintings, very damned difficult to make those things.

BS: Haven't you said, "Black is a palette"?

VC: Pardon?

BS: I think you said, "Black is a palette."

VC: A palette? [laughing]

BS: A full palette.

VC: A full palette? Of black. Right. Various blacks. I always make the blacks out of browns and blues, you know, and greens, and sometimes a little red. Anyway, so I got into blacks, and I saw these blackboards – black, black blackboards. I'm getting a bit too animated. And then, I used to love the blackboards when I was little. It's magic, you know? You write, you draw on it. So then first I tried to paint a blackboard. I *couldn't* do it. It just looks stupid. Because I was kind of thinking, 'Maybe I haven't done an object for so long.' So then, the easiest way to do an object is to do it in 3-D, which is a sort of a relief, because the two dimensional world is stressful to deal with..

As we know, de Kooning had his fight with that whole world, a great heroic fight, of course. So anyway, I made some tablets. No, no. I had a friend who is actually a sculptor make some tablets. Ed Finnegan, quite a wonderful sculptor, but sort of hidden in the art world here. And he also made furniture. And I asked him to make some tablets that I gave him, so that he would participate in this obsessive thing of making something

BS: Out of what material?

VC: From the get-go, that already exists in what I call the other world, the real world. And so he made some, and then, of course, I set to painting, because I love painting. And I painted them. And then, of course, I put them both together, because there was a certain invitation to look harder than you would look, normally. Like, you go by and you think, 'Oh, two tablets.' Like, people would go by and say, "How did she find two rocks the same way? Let's go have lunch." You know? [laughing] They would go along and say things like that, totally cuckoo. And, I don't know, my dealer told me that people would say, "How did she find two the same way?" and totally missing the point. And anyway, if there was a point, really. And so, you know, I left them together, and it gave me a kick. So you go by and you see, you see the artist at work, actually. I don't know, it was- it's like a little

diversion. I don't know if there's any art in it, I have to tell you. But it was a diversion for me, and it kind of gave me a kick, like, it was sort of fun. So I'd have this little tablet, and then I made this little tablet, and when I was making it, I got to do and invent all these ways of making it. And of course, I always pick the objects, so I'm already composing and picking and making my own kind of a poem out of it all.

BS: What materials are you using?

VC: Wood and paint. I just gessoed the thing first, and then I painted it. I made a couple in bronze, and then I made some in wood. And now I'm working on another one that's a little bit bigger. And it's sort of like painting, but not painting, which is a relief, because the whole thing is totally painted and you have to make it be really present. You see? You have to make it right so that it feels really terrific. And so, somebody goes by and has a double-take on it, and maybe a little smile comes out of it. And then they can go on and look at something else.

BS: You mentioned de Kooning

VC: But I have, you know, I don't know why. I just fell into this, and it seemed somehow that it was a way of engaging somebody in what you have done. Because when you look close, of course you see how the thing is made. It's like you can see the lines and you can see – maybe it's a way of like trying to get you to look at something.

BS: Aah.

VC: You know how you run through a gallery, and

BS: Yes.

VC: And you're waiting for lunch all the time.

BS: Right, and you don't stop; you don't really stop to look.

VC: You don't even stop. You're gossiping, and, you know. [laughter] Well, I've seen people do that, so. I'm kind of joking around here.

BS: No, I unfortunately have done it myself, probably just last Saturday. [VC laughs] So you come to New York. And you said a little while back, that one of the reasons

you wanted to come to New York was because of all of the museums here. So here we are in the Modern. You come to New York. I'm assuming you're sustaining your friendships with [Elizabeth Murray](#), [Ellen Phelan](#), and [Judy Pfaff](#), who were all wonderful.

VC: Oh yeah, and the people in my gallery I got to know, and Jake and

BS: [Jeanne Silverthorne](#).

VC: [Jeanne Silverthorne](#), and I became pretty friendly with Terry Winters, and people down. You know, then, I did a lot of work. I have a certain amount of friends, although I always had the feeling. Joel and Ellen were fantastic, because they invited me, they lived right down the street in Soho, then, on Lafayette.

BS: Right, yes.

VC: And they invited me over twice a week. I would go over there and eat, and we would all be drinking and fighting. And they often had a lot of friends over. Did we ever really talk about art that much? I'm not sure. I think you were going to ask me about shows. I was remembering one show that was *really* terrific, that was, the Pollock, [Jackson Pollock](#) show that was just so fantastic.

BS: I was going to ask you when you started thinking about him in terms of the overall.

VC: Well, I didn't start thinking about him. You know I thought about it, looks- I mean, obviously, but all the abstract expressionists sort of worked the surface all over and made a very strong physical presence. And it was just that. Often there was no imagery at all, even though [de Kooning](#) has a lot of imagery. And I never saw a lot of Pollocks. I really saw a lot of Pollocks and I thought it was a *gorgeous* show, a really, a really heart-ticking show [thumps heart with her hand], of a kind of pathos, of this guy, fighting. Who also came out of imagery and may have gone back to it. I could never

BS: And a little bit of surrealism, too.

VC: I could never do – my gestures became very small. But not picayune, but small gestures. Their gestures were big, obviously.

BS: You met David McKee when you had your retrospective at the Newport Museum in the 70s?

VC: No, I met him just before. Because I had never had enough work to have a show in a lot of different places like people have. I don't know how they do that. They make work and they have it in five cities. But maybe it's the same work; I'm not sure. Anyway, I had wanted to have a show and I tried some other galleries. I was with Irving Blum and Jo Hellman for a little while, and then I was thinking about Castelli; they had some interest. But, you know, I felt, this is an old man. What did I know? I'm like probably his age now, he was then. I don't know. I met David McKee then, and I liked David. He seemed to be tuned in to my complicated sort of angst about things. And he was very patient. He seemed to have a kind of a great feeling about art. And then, I had just noticed, actually, [Guston](#). Because when I was in school, back in the late 50s and 60s, it was all [de Kooning](#), de Kooning, de Kooning. I was not a Rothko fan or, I did not like any kind of religious quality to the art. I'm a very -- I don't like that, even going in that direction. So, I didn't like [Barnett Newman](#) too much either, although I like sometimes the paintings, just the joy of so much blue, you know. But for instance, I never really noticed much of [Guston](#) because he didn't have so much PR, and I got most of the information, along with everybody else, through magazines. I think it was *Art News* or something at the time.

BS: And David McKee showed him.

VC: Yes, and so, well, but I didn't really know that. I didn't really know David McKee. Somebody recommended him, said this is a very decent dealer, you might like to show there. And then when we met, I decided to do it. And then I did a show there.

BS: Well, it's interesting because, and we had this conversation earlier, Edward Broida, who started buying up your work in Los Angeles, actually was buying up Philip Guston's work from David McKee.

VC: Right. I think David took him to my first retrospective, way back, '79, and I think he bought the work from the people who owned it. He bought about three or four things from me over the last 20 years.

BS: But tell me about that

VC: Most of the work he bought from other people.

BS: Because his collection, a lot of his collection and certainly a lot of your pieces here at the Modern, came from Edward Broida, the early pieces, certainly.

VC: Because he had a terminal illness, and he really wanted to put his work somewhere, so he gave it to three museums, and I think the Modern was the first.

BS: But when he was in Los Angeles, did he go to your studio? You said he was calling on people.

VC: No, no; I never have people in my studio. I don't like to have people poking around in my studio. I used to have, well, now sometimes, people do come in my studio, actually. But when I was earlier, most of my time I was very reluctant to have people break in while I was working on something.

BS: Right.

VC: I'm just not that kind of gregarious person who has people sitting around while I'm painting a portrait or something. I would never paint a portrait, of course.
[laughter]

BS: Of course. But Edward Broida started tracking down your work.

VC: Well, he did, but I didn't really know him. He was a wealthy businessperson. I really didn't know him. I had dinner with him a couple of times, but I never really got to know him. He stayed away, and I stayed -- you know, we didn't really have a relationship. He was just a person who, I think he had a relationship with David McKee, because I think he

BS: That's where he got all of his [Gustons](#).

VC: Well, that's where he got, I think, because [Guston](#) left the estate to McKee, so he had a lot of [Gustons](#).

BS: [Guston](#) died about a year before you got to New York.

VC: Oh, I *know*. I wish I had known him, because he was such a terrific painter. I mean, here's a guy who sort of told stories out of paint, and then he made up these weird figures that were, those heads, those shoes, the light bulb, the endless studio. Just a fantastic, fantastic artist, really, I have to say. And I like his earlier work, where there are like sores or sunset sores, you know where there's that-

those little shimmering insides, the totally abstract work. And then I like the gray period which are so kind of 'fuck you' like, 'I'm not going to spell out what this painting is.' Like he threw a gray blanket over the painting, and there are these objects that seem to be wanting to come out. And then, the next thing you knew, there were these objects. [laughter] And they were the Ku Klux Klan riding around in cars, with their cigars and their pieces of wood, ready to hit somebody. Just, but all paint, you know? I mean, I like that idea, which I think is a real American take. Because I see European abstract artists and even the artists after the 40s, they seem to be more decorative. Or they use the two-dimensional plane more as a stage on which they put their play. But the Americans, the stage is part of it. Maybe that's my theory because I kind of followed that line, that the work is right there in front of you, and it's not just the stage, it's all united. And in [Guston](#), they're paintings, they're stories, they're images, they're paint. But it's kind of insistent, always, on the paint, you know it's like they're- oh, a fantastic artist, really.

BS: I still think of him as an Eastern European, even though he grew up here.

VC: Yeah, and well, he's really Canadian; he was born in Canada.

BS: He was born in Canada, but his parents were Ukrainian.

VC: Yeah. I think his parents, were his parents from the Ukraine?

BS: Jewish and Ukrainian.

VC: Jewish from the Ukraine that moved to Canada, and then they moved to Los Angeles.

BS: Yes.

VC: Right. Well, they were

BS: But in his storytelling, the way of

VC: Oh, maybe the storytelling

BS: From the pogroms

VC: Well, I don't know. You know, maybe.

BS: From the pogroms to the Ku Klux Klan is not like a huge jump, to me.

VC: Yes, that's a point. But you have to realize that when he was making these really entertaining paintings, that even when you don't know what they are, they are, I mean, I could never do that. But he, that's what he did. And he also was kind of enamored of the objects. Remember those small paintings where it's just the object itself?

BS: Yes.

VC: I was thinking of doing something in remembrance of his paintings. I got so turned on to that painting, you know? But I'm in a totally different direction. But I liked him a lot. But why were we talking about him? Oh, because he showed at David McKee, and he died just before – so tragic; tragic, tragic.

BS: I don't know how he died. Was it cancer?

VC: I think he had a heart attack, having dinner with his doctor.

BS: Oh my gosh.

VC: So the doctor was not able to save him, either. You know, I mean, all those guys did die in pretty tragic ways, maybe everybody does, but I would have loved to have seen another ten years of his work. He died when he was in his sixties.

BS: Yes, me too; ten, twenty years. We really lost a big one there. I want to go back to Gemini GEL, because you said this is where you first discovered printmaking. And I want to talk a little bit about your printmaking. I know [Sound cuts off]

[CREW DISCUSSION]

END Celmins_T06 at 0:55:20

BEGIN Celmins_T07

BS: You're in New York for a year. You go back there to make prints.

VC: But I think I started before. Didn't I start already before?

BS: I don't know.

VC: I may have started and gathered some things, and done something before I moved to New York. And then I went back to do the most of the work. I can't remember now. At any rate,

BS: You became so masterful -- in so many different techniques.

VC: No, no it just appears like that because there aren't a lot of printmakers now, left.

BS: Well it's such a medieval craft. But there's -- you used dry point, aquatint, mezzotint.

VC: Well, because I didn't know how to do it, so I had all these little clippings. And I thought, well I'd do each one in a slightly different technique just to learn it. I guess I have that interest, you know. And then I tried different, you know, I tried like, for instance, you know, there's a mezzotint. Never did a mezzotint in my life -- weird thing to do. The whole printmaking thing is the most irritating thing you can do. They're all backward, you have to turn your head backward to the -- because when you print it, it goes the other way. When you draw it, I'm a real "right there" person, you know, so it's very hard for me to be right there, but upside down, inside out, whatever.

BS: And you started having these juxtapositions, which you had, I noticed, in two earlier drawings, but here.

VC: Yeah, I think I started really doing, you know I've had it my whole life. This is a weird part, it just occurred to me, because I had these two little black boards next to each other in my last show. Isn't that something? And then when I was, when I used to be, like, as I say, re-describing these images and laying them down like you would lay down a tablecloth or something on the surface, you know flattening it, but still adjusting it so that it would stay there, and was powerful, and went back a little, but not too far, all those old things. And, you know, when I had the other image beside me, I think that's what got me to do the doubles. It was some kind of a relief from the singleness of that image, you know, because I'd been doing that single oceans over and over. And then I did the doubles and the stone piece, too. So I guess that is sort of a strange thing that runs through my work. And then I did the same thing over there. I just stuck 'em together in various ways to kind of -- it's a kind of a composite. [referring to [Concentric Bearings, MoMA# 340.1987](#)]

BS: What was the strategy? Here you've got a [Duchamp](#), a Night Sky, which is a constellation.

VC: Well the strategy was very loose. It was all kind of about space, descriptions of space. That little airplane is spiraling down, going down. There's a little Night Sky there, I'm sure things are going every which direction. [referring to [Concentric Bearings, MoMA# 340.1987](#)]

BS: I'm sure stars are falling...

VC: And the little rotary device², which I've always loved, but of course, I saw it only on the photograph.

BS: Did you see the Duchamp here – in the Modern?

VC: No I saw the Duchamp -- do you have a rotary device like that here? No I saw it at Yale, I think. And the Yale Gallery has it, I believe. Is it Harvard? I think it's Yale. But I saw it, of course, in a book, 'cause I have no, I just take those images wherever they are in books, magazines, on the floor.

BS: I have a question. Are there printmaking techniques that you took back with you into drawing or painting?

VC: Well I think maybe when you were saying the negative, when I started doing the eraser drawings of the night skies in the eighties.

BS: It occurred to me that that was possible.

VC: Yeah, that that was probably because I had done this already on the plate. You know I like that somehow I have a thing about the physicality of the art, which is, of course, opposite of having a video or a film. You know, you don't need electricity, but it's -- I like it when the material sort of plays a big part. Although I never liked caking paint on too much. Some artists cake a lot of paint on. Actually Brice puts a lot of paint on because he puts on the wax, but I like his work a lot.

BS: Oh, that encaustic is so beautiful.

² Rotary Glass Plates (Precision optics), Yale University

VC: So, you know, the etching, I did some, actually, I had a teacher who started Tamarind Garo Antreasian with June Wayne. And he tried to get me to do lithographs in Indianapolis. And I did some, but boy were they bad; but I did some. And then I did do at Tamarind, that ocean that's in the corner there, which is a lithograph [[Untitled \(Ocean\), MoMA# 303.1970](#)]. But, I don't really care for lithographs 'cause they're too illusionistic; the wonderful part in a lithograph is on the stone – I like the stone.

BS: Do you use a brush on the stone?

VC: No, no, crayon, because it has to be waxy.

BS: If course.

VC: I think you can use -- I never really got too into it, the lithography. But in the etching there's something real happening, you're digging in copper; it's sort of exciting. And it's like you're; it's sort of exciting. And then the print afterwards is like, it's either a present or a big disappointment, because you never really know how it looks until it's totally done.

BS: But, aren't you working there with? For the first time, you're out of your studio and working with other people.

VC: I know, with people around.

BS: Yeah! What was that like?

VC: And that's where I started getting this kind of gregarious personality, to deal with the people around.

BS: [laughter] But they're printing for you and showing you the results.

VC: Pardon?

BS: They're printing these stone tablets or these copper plates and showing you the results, so it's never a complete surprise.

VC: Oh yeah, it's a real collaboration. I'm only joking around. It's a real collaboration, and I found some people I could collaborate with, because you have to say, "I like this, but not so much." And then the printer says, "Oh I know what you don't like."

I say, "Well, that area over there is too dark, can I lighten it up, and how do I do it?" And they'll say, "Oh, I'll show you exactly how to do it." So it's a collaboration. And then when they print it, you know, they have to have the knowledge to make the image really be there. You know, I think printing; I don't know. I know the idea, but I myself have not -- well I printed some in Los Angeles. I made some of my first etchings. But you know, there's something kind of bookish about printmaking that irritates me.

BS: Tell me about this

VC: I shouldn't talk like this, really, because I think the prints are pretty strong, and when we're talking about material, like, for instance, that woodcut [[Ocean Surface \(Woodcut\), MoMA# 262.1992](#)], it's obviously wood, cut, with ink, and it's an image, but it's flat. It's, not bad.

BS: Not bad at all.

VC: You know what I like, I don't like fussing with, I don't like smearing and erasing and manipulating the image. I sort of like to, as I've been saying in many different ways, I sort of like to lay it down so that it's clear that there's a material that has been laid there by somebody, and made, that it made this image, and that it's there for you. [laughing] Something like that.

BS: Tell, me about the erasure in the night skies.

VC: Pardon?

BS: Well, you do use eraser.

VC: Well, then I used the eraser, because, you know, charcoal is just a mess. I just put it on with my hand, you know, put it in? And then I take, I get various erasers, very soft erasers, erasers that are harder that I make to a point, and an electric eraser., Some of them were extremely -- I don't think I have a drawing like that here. No, I don't.

BS: Extremely sophisticated erasers.

VC: You know, different, and then, I don't know, that's what I did. Those are the eraser drawings.

BS: So you're drawing negative space?

VC: I'm drawing by removing the black. Kind of hokey really, but it makes some terrific surfaces. I was sort of interested in making it a very -- some of them are very kind of abstract. And when you come up really close and put your nose in it, you can see the whole thing is revealed. You know the fact that it's made -- I hide the making, even though things are very made. I don't, you know,

BS: Well they're sanded back, or they're

VC: I don't leave my handwriting, because I put it all in the image, see? But when you get up really close, you can see that the whole thing is made, of course, by someone. I mean, big point, I don't know. I'm not a very expressive -- I like a cold image. I like a cold image that stays back. I think it helps you stay around the art. You know when things are popping out of the art and, I can't *stand* it, I feel like I'm --I keep backing away.

BS: It's too aggressive.

VC: Even though we were just talking about [Guston](#), where things are all moving, but he makes such a closed off, fabulous world. I don't know. At any rate, that's sort of what I do. I do a very, I mean, that's sort of how I fell into doing this very constrained sort of image.

BS: Well, I was just going to say, yes. The constraint is in the density, that doesn't even pretend to pop out, but is *so there* and so present that you understand the passing of time.

VC: Well, maybe. Some do, some don't. We would hope that, you know, I mean, I don't know; they're kind of contemplative. I think a lot of work now is maybe more active in some way, more demanding about one thing or another. About- there's a lot of very political art now, and a lot of art that tells, maybe, stories, or that it doesn't even have a physical object. I don't know; this is what I fell into, and I somehow felt that this was the way to deal with the image, in this very bizarre way that I am still really not able to talk about so well, myself. And I wouldn't want to explain it, 'cause there's nothing. I just talk about it the way that I've sort of considered it.

BS: Let's talk about this book that you made with Eliot Weinberger [[The Stars](#)].

VC: I made this little book because, mostly because May Castleberry asked me to. I did a book also for the Whitney, with Czeslaw Milosz. And this book was with, you know, [Eliot Weinberger](#). Neither person did I know, but her job in both museums was to put people together. I was thinking of how I put images together that don't really go, but because they're in the same area, they *have* to go. It isn't that I illustrated anything. I had been to Japan and I found a series of old books. This was in my period where I was beginning to warm up to old surfaces. And I found this book that was, I mean, I found this book also out in the street and that had this old cover, so fantastic, and this beautiful blue. And, I don't know, I decided to make a print out of it. You know, you decide to make a print, just like that globe there [[Amérique, MoMA#1000.2011](#)]. It's for the printer to figure out how many plates, and *many* plates. It took a year of nightmare back and forth, like a dance. I would go up and do something in her shop; then; she was Upstate; and then she would come down.

BS: Was this [Greenfell?]

VC: No, no, no. This was Doris Simmelink, Simmelink/Sukimoto. She did both of the prints. She did that print too, which probably has about eight or ten plates all lined up. And I did each plate. A horror story, really.

BS: What process was this?

VC: And this is an etching [holding up: [The Stars](#)].

BS: Etching? Oh my god!

VC: It's an etching. So then Eliot wrote this wonderful collage of poems, really for the event, called The Stars, of different people's ideas of the universe. And, of course, then we printed them in all these different languages. You know, Japanese, Chinese, Hindi -- really kind of wonderful. I can't remember whether that was his idea or not. And then I was thinking about those scientific books, because I like science and I like the image. And I was thinking, would they fold out, you know, the images [demonstrating]. And we made a print. This is also an etching with about three different colors, on a Japanese paper, and made a little fold-out, sort of a little reminder of those old books, I don't think they make them anymore. You know, where they used to have

BS: Gatefold.

VC: Yeah; different things in there. And I think, what's the last language in here? Maori. So, even though I was not too happy with the cover, and I could have spent another year on it, somebody had the heart to stop me, because it was not worth it to do that. It's sort of an interesting nice book, kind of a beautiful object, but a diversion, you know. Really a diversion in printmaking. It involved a lot of people: the designer, I think Leslie Miller designed the book, and Doris did the etchings inside and the cover, and I did the work for the- and then Eliot Weinberger, an extremely amusing and intelligent person, really a true intellectual, did this wonderful thing that I guess you would call it a poem, but it's really a collage of different peoples' ideas about the universe – very, very beautiful really.

BS: Yes, he goes all through history, from Hindu times, early Greek.

VC: Yes, yes, yes.

BS: So, it's science, it's history, it's mythology, it's what the stars were called by various different religions, and

VC: So I just put it in this cover, because I liked the cover. It has nothing to do with the stars, you know.

BS: But everything to do with the work.

VC: It was sort of a diversion and I thought, well, I can do anything, maybe, but maybe not.

BC: What was it diverting you from? What were you working on?

VC: Oh, because I don't really make books, and, you know, I'm really mostly a two dimensional painter, but occasionally I do three-dimensional things. And I did this little book and I thought it was a nice thing to do, and I kind of did it for the Modern, you know, and for the people. They have a group of people who support that sort of work. And I really enjoyed working with- or even if I didn't work with Eliot, or Czeslaw Milosz either, just butting against them. Like the prints sort of, like, one thing against another, and just to think that you could kind of, like, two different worlds really, writing and vision, sort of leaning against each other. I enjoyed it, really. This book, both of the books were a lot of work, but a lot of work that

somehow seemed not to be truly my work, but work I did with somebody else. But it was interesting.

BS: You know you said something, when you started, you had two major retrospectives, four years apart.

VC: Oh, I've had a lot of retrospectives now.

BS: You've had a lot of retrospectives, but I'm remembering the first two. One started at LA County Museum, and the other started at...

VC: No, not at LA County. In Orange County. Where was that?

BS: Oh, in Orange County, and The Newport Harbor Museum was one.

VC: Yes, that's where I think it was. And then I had one that started at ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art].

BS: Oh, at the ICA in Philadelphia, of course.

VC: In Philadelphia. And then I had one that started at the ICA in London, which went to the Reina Sofia and to the Frankfurt Museum and to the Winterthur Museum. And then I've had a lot of shows. I've had a lot of shows in museums that have been sort of -- I had a retrospective of drawings at the Pompidou that went to the Hammer then.

BS: But you said

VC: I haven't had any real big shows here, because I've had, I don't know; I've had some gallery shows here.

BS: Right. But you said something that I thought was interesting: it got you out of the studio. So I have two questions. One, looking at that range of work over those years, what was that like? Was it like, 'Oh my god, I've got so much more to do'? Or was it, 'I'm pretty satisfied with what I'm doing'?..Or was it something in between?

VC: I don't know -- neither one. I don't know. I have a- there's always a certain amount of anxiety about seeing the show up. And then there's a certain amount of surprise that you're so removed from the work. You know, you're so removed now: I've

seen these, I've seen another time when I was totally into this, and I am no longer. In some ways it's sort of a little destructive, because you begin to think of yourself as somebody that is not you, kind of. And it is a little distressing. You think, 'Why did I go in this direction at this point, instead of another?' And then, just to see; I don't know. It's a little distressing to see all your work laid out. And of course I'm always still working on it a little bit.

BS: So, the work for you is really in the making.

VC: Well yeah, it's never really in the; oh yeah. I mean, you have a show, and it's a sort of a reckoning of where you've been, and sometimes you see some parts about yourself. But when you have a retrospective that covers a forty-year period, there's not much you can change by going back. You just have to celebrate it, I guess would be the word that you would use. I have a little hard time sometimes celebrating myself, or my own, uh, I don't know what to say, you know. I mean I tend, I don't know, it's part of work. I tend to be kind of detached. I guess when I first saw, the first time I saw the work together that I had never seen together, in Newport, way back in the 70s, I was sort of shocked that I had had such a long development, and that the things that I had done when I was so young were still able to hold their space and be something. You know, it was, I guess you might say it was sort of pleasing.

BS: And that was almost forty years ago.

VC: Yeah, right. So, but I don't really dwell on it. I usually go, and my job is to try to make the whole thing develop right. And I think I still would like to do a lot of work. There have been times where I have been very ambitious about my work, and other times when I am just sick of it; very hard to get going. And my most pleasant time, I must say, is when I'm in the middle of working. When I'm in the middle of a long range of things, and I'm in the middle and I can be there, but be flying; have memories going through, but still pay attention. It's one of the big pleasures, I would say, that most artists would think that, I would guess.

BS: Well, most artists, if they

VC: It's not the pleasure -- when you see the work in a magazine or in a show, you always think, 'I should of hung that a little bit higher;' and 'This is too close, this is more how;' you know. And we didn't have the right combination. That's usually

how I work at a show. But the best pleasure is when you're in the middle of working, and you're really there, you know, and going.

BS: You had a period of time where you studied, Buddhism, you practiced Buddhism?

VC: No, I fell in with some Buddhists with [NAME?] when he was out in California. A really terrific person, I thought, as a person. And, of course, the Buddhism came with him, because he was a high guy. And I went and meditated for a while, very useful. Very useful to quiet down and try to imagine the world without you in it, without your ego, letting things go. Interesting.

BS: I thought it would be helpful in the studio in the studio practice, just in terms of focus.

VC: Well, yeah, I think that when you're really involved in something; you might be in your Buddha nature.

BS: And you also have, you usually have an animal in the studio, with you, right? A dog.

VC: No, not usually, but my last dog, who I miss so much, Vito, he used to be in the studio waiting. Yeah I like to have animals around. It shows -- it's a great way to live.

BS: It's the natural world.

VC: Yeah. I wish I had chickens and geese. And I also like goats. And now I have a new studio that has polo ponies around it, in the fields, and I've been taking pictures of them, just to kind of study them. And they are beautiful animals, small, beautiful ponies. Haven't looked at a horse for years, you know, and there they were. [It's] very interesting to see- beautiful ponies.

BS: Now, are you working now? I mean, you've said you've left certain mediums behind. You left graphite behind. You left painting behind.

VC: Well, I left graphite. You never know. I'm trying to be, in my old age, more open, so.

BS: That's my question.

VC: Well, I think I started a bunch of paintings. I'm in the middle of finishing paintings that I didn't -- the white paintings, the white galaxies. I have a piece of sculpture going. And I'm wanting to see if I can be a little less rigorous and have -- I'm getting into more color paintings.

BS: Color paintings?

VC: I'm not really wanting to do prints, but might do a few more prints.

BS: Color paintings?

VC: Well, I mean, I've been, you know, the last show

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BEGIN Celmins_T08

BS: Because in a way they all meld into each other, and I know you're tired, but, what do we do? Are we rolling? [CREW DISCUSSION] OK, as soon as we're rolling, I do have to ask you something about your relationship to curators at the Modern. Do you have?

VC: I don't what to say about the curators at the Modern, I don't know that much about curators at the Modern.

BS: So, never mind. Can you say *something* about the Modern, like a show here, or when you saw your pieces in the show that they did for Edward Broida and his collection?

VC: Oh, I don't know. Well, didn't I say something good about the Pollock show? That was a fabulous show that Kurt Varnedoe did -- just a wonderful show. And, I think the Modern has been a [CREW DISCUSSION]

VC: Yeah, but I mean what can you say? You know I'm trying to think of other shows that were really great here, but I'm like

BS: Oh there were any number, but the thing is that it all melds into....

VC: What else did I see that I really loved? I saw, you know. You mean like contemporaries? [Richard Serra](#)?

BS: Not necessarily.

VC: What's his name, [Martin Puryear](#). Those were nice shows, but I can't remember. Oh, and Elizabeth's show.

BS: Yes!

VC: Which was really great. You know, she [Elizabeth Murray] did a totally different kind of art, but we liked each other very much. Mostly because we were down home kind of.

BS: Let's just talk about that. Are we rolling yet? [CREW DISCUSSION] OK, we have to wait.

VC: But did I see; oh, and the collection. Well, you could have had me walk through the museum. I can't remember a thing. What can I remember now? It's true. What was up there? I haven't been up there for so long. You notice, "Up there."

BS: Yeah, we'll go there, 'cause that'll feed into what we're doing, anyway.

VC: How about, what is that white painting of

BS: Ryman.

VC: Oh, I think that's at the Met, the white painting of De Kooning's. Did you have, not Attic, you don't have Attic, do you? No, that's at the Met. And, how about [Jasper](#)? Well, how about Jasper's show [MoMA Exh. #1754]? I liked Jasper's show. Jasper had a show here that was really fantastic.

BS: OK, can we just talk

END Celmins_T08 at 0:03:10

BEGIN Celmins _T09

BS: about that then? Two friends of yours, Jasper Johns and Elizabeth Murray, had shows at the Museum of Modern Art.

VC: Well I liked the shows, what can I tell you? Elizabeth was so, at the end of her life, it was so moving, I could hardly stand it. [MoMA Exh. #1955] I think everybody was so overwrought with trying to think of how to keep her around, and knowing

that it was not possible, and to see this work that was just so *strong*. And she just followed -- we used to talk about it. Like, she said, "I just take off and I go where the work takes me." And I agreed, I agreed. I liked it; "I like it; that's right; that's the way to do it." The work takes you someplace and then you follow it, and you give something to the work and pull it back. She didn't really pull back. She really went out, she found those shapes. She said, "I don't know where they came from," but she had to follow them; she followed them. She's a fantastic artist. She was really terrific.

BS: There was such exuberance to that show.

VC: Well, and it was a little, the later work was sort of like bone, something like dancing bones or something. And very full of rhythm, and kind of -- really terrific work, strong work. And she was somebody who had a sampling of cartoons left in her work, a kind of a jive. You know that world that -- I don't know, I never really knew that world so much. But when I came to the U.S., I remember liking it. I was telling you that I never really went into that kind of drawing. Anyway, that was a great show. And, of course, I loved Jasper's show because Jasper is so all encompassing, he's so intelligent [MoMA Exh. #1754]. I shouldn't really say that, maybe he'll hear this now. Anyway, he's been a great inspiration. The fact that he did the objects, the fact that he left his touch everywhere, the fact that he did things that were already out there, like it was taken in another world: the flag taken into the museum, from the world where it lives and all different aspects, and the way he gobbles up his older work and takes it out. He's a fantastic artist, the way he changes all the time, changes the whole thing, that goes to different period. And then the later period, which was sort of thin, and I think people thought, "Ooh, thin;" and about his past. I loved it all. He's one of the great artists in the history of American Art. Also, I loved that show, too. And then, I liked the Pollock show, because it was so darn physical and so, in a way, joyful, and yet, it had that darkness. You've had some terrific shows here. I know there are some other shows that were really big shows here. I can't seem to remember, that were really great. What were they?

BS: The Richard Serra?

VC: Yeah, the Richard Serra. The contemporary artists. Richard's Serra's show was really good, and so was Martin Puryear's show -- I loved the big ladder in the

middle. It sort of seemed to be made for that, didn't it? The ladder climbing up. And Richard, of course, is a terrific sculptor, just like he should be: heavy, strong, man, [BS laughs] but really dealing with weight, and, you know, a terrific sculptor. But, who else did I see here that I really loved? I can't remember. Can you remember shows that were – you know, when I came here earlier, I remember always going up the steps and seeing the gypsy, the Rousseau gypsy with the lion, you know, [the Sleeping Gypsy \[MoMA# 646.1939\]](#).

BS: Oh my gosh, yes.

VC: [Henri Rousseau](#), the professional amateur; wonderful. Somebody who -- it always seemed kind of magical. It used to be in a stairway, when I came from Indiana to look at the paintings. And who else? Well, of course, I always liked the Picasso leading the horse. Is that in here now? And the Guernica used to be in here. Then it went to the Reina Sofia, where I saw it when I had my show there. It had just been just installed.

BS: Full circle.

VC: And then, of course, the Matisse show. I'm not a big [Matisse](#) fan, but there were some great shows. John Elderfield has done a terrific job. And, of course, Kirk was wonderful. So, this is a terrific museum. So there you go. And I feel proud that you have some of the work here. And what else did you want to ask me?

BS: Oh, I wanted to ask you, just in closing, three questions; one of mine. I've been glancing at, I can't say I've been reading it, but I've been flipping through it for my own purposes.

VC: What is that?

BS: Heidegger's *Being and Time*. And "being" and "time" are two words that sort of came out at me when I thinking about your work. So I started looking for fragments from Heidegger that I thought fit. And this is, "Being cannot outstrip the possibility of death; it's fleeing in the face of it." And this is something I remember having read in Heidegger; it might or might not be there. "Being involves itself in all kinds of projects and plans for the future, but there is always something still outstanding, because as long as being exists, it is dying." And this is what I thought about in relation to your work. "That every mark you make is a bulwark against and

revelation of the inevitable moment when all of us have to return to that seemingly infinite space from which we came. And who is to say

VC: Oh, I don't know

BS: And who is to say that that that, too is not the home that we long for."

VC: Well, that's so -- both of those are very poetic, but I don't know.

BS: When I look at your infinite space, so contained.

VC: Well, but it's not infinite, it very,

BS: It's so contained.

VC: It's very right here.

BS: Right here in the now.

VC: I guess that long space is to entice you to look at the art. [laughing]

BS: And that's it.

VC: Well, yeah, I don't have any -- I don't have any infinite space longings, or any; no.

BS: Yeah, OK.

VC: But I think that; no. But I think the thing that probably nobody ever really says but kind of knows, is that art is ambiguous. It isn't one thing or another. It has different aspects to it and different people bring different things to it. It's not like it is one thing only.

BS: Right.

VC: It is; I just don't think it can be one thing. It either grows or it collapses. It lives in people in different forms, and I sometimes can't stand to hear about 'em. But, I acknowledge that it's part of making an image, which is basically mute and open to all kinds of interpretation. Like, I talk about it the way that I think about it.

BS: Colm has a question. "Vija said something interesting one day when we talked. That she had no real interest in the sea or the sky..."

VC: [laughing]

BS: This is the opposite of what I was saying. "...but, much more in the materials, the pencil, the paint, the paper, the canvas, erasure." In which case, why the sea and the sky and the desert? And is that true, what Colm remembers?

VC: Well I often say that, because people go in the other direction and they think they're looking at the ocean when they're looking at a woodcut or something. And I often emphasize that part of it, because I think that that's a part that is the evidence. And then I used -- yeah, I'm not so interested in a particular -- I mean, I'm interested at certain times. I don't know, now at this point, I can't say whether I'm interested. I mean, I'm as interested as anyone in the ocean. But I would not say that I'm saying, really, things about the ocean. I can't really explain it. I think it's -- I mean, I'm interested in the ocean there, maybe. I can't really -- it isn't like I'm presenting things that I have liked. It's more like I've used an image which fits into my idea, really, kind of like what Colm was saying. But, I realize that using an image, an image is in every other person in different ways. So, it's a way of putting some kind of space in a work that is really extremely organized, as my work is, to the surface of the, say, the paper, because I'm looking at these Oceans as we're talking. And it gives some kind of space, but it's a mental kind of -- It's your remembering, it's your ocean, it's your views of the ocean. I've just taken the image of it. You know what I mean?

BS: Yes.

VC: I'm a little scared of swimming in the ocean. It isn't like I picked the images because I am, like, selling the images or something, or that I think that the ocean means something in art. I don't think so. But an image is a big, old, traditional part of art, and I tried to deal with the image in a way that I could stand to deal with it. Like, I could never do portraits, or things that are too psychologically alive in the real world. I do an image that I can sort of neutralize and make into something else. But it still retains, it still is an image that beckons you to investigate it.

BS: Last question, and then you're out of here. And this, I have to say, is the toughest question.

VC: OK, what?

BS: OK, it's from your friend, Ellen Phelan.

VC: Oh, I bet she gave me a tough question.

BS: Oh she did. "Do you think that God chose you to be an artist and follow the path that you've taken?"

VC: Absolutely not. That was an easy question.

BS: [laughing] That was an easy question. OK, whoa, Ellen where is this coming from?

VC: Yeah; no; sorry.

BS: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

VC: No, I think we've covered way too much. I think it's time to go home.

BS: You brought a notebook.

VC: It was a – it was. I hope that this was good for you.

BS: it was great.

VC: Thank you very much for giving it a try, here, to figure out what's happening in a work.

BS: It was a pleasure for me, Vija.

VC: Great.

BS: Now, I go back to Bomb, you go back to your studio, and the Modern is going to make this into something that will be enticing.

VC: Okay; very good.

BS: And thank you for being so articulate, and so honest, and so moving.

VC: Well, I don't know whether I was too articulate...

BS: Yeah, you were.

BS: We didn't hear the names of your parents.

VC: Do we have to have the names of my parents?

VC: Well, you know, what do you think? OK, well is the doodad running?

BS: Yup. [laughter]

VC: Oh, OK. My name is Vija Celmins. I was born in Riga to Milda and Artus and I have a sister named Inga. And we came to the United States in 1948, and I started doing work and I consider myself, really an American artist now, because this is where all of my ideas have really matured. And that's it.

BS: Nice.

[tech discussion]

BS: No it's good. Thank you for all this hard work. Thank you all.

VC: Thank you, thank you, thank you, let's go.

[tech discussion to end]

END Celmins_T09 at 0:16:17

END OF INTERVIEW