THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**JOHN SZARKOWSKI (JS)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Tell me where and when you were born, and just something about your background.

JS: I was born in 1925 in Northern Wisconsin, in a town called Ashland. I grew up there and went to college at the University of Wisconsin.

SZ: Is it empty, Northern Wisconsin? What size town was it? I always think there's nobody there.

JS: It was a big city in the immediate neighborhood. It had 11,000 people in it; it doesn't have quite that many anymore, but it did then. But it had Chequamegon Bay and the Apostle Islands and a few vestigial remnants of the logging industry on the lake shore. But it looked like a great metropolis, and it was a railroad center. I think when my father came in the '20s — he was a postal inspector and he was transferred to that territory so he could be closer to his widowed mother — I think there were thirty-six trains a day into this town, all different lines.

SZ: That's a lot.

JS: Absolutely. Eight or ten different lines.

SZ: Was it an industrial town?

JS: It basically had been a center for various kinds of operations more than industry. It had been a railroad center, it had been a logging center for shipment, and to some degree sawing. Iron ore — when I was growing up it was still a very active iron-ore port. It had copper, and fishing to some degree. It had to do with mining the things that eventually ran out rather than being very creative actually about manufacturing something useful. I majored in history of art at Madison.

SZ: You were interested in art, since you majored in the history of art, so what in your background....

JS: I wasn't really interested in art. I was interested in photography.

SZ: As a young boy?

JS: Yes — tabletop height.

SZ: How did that happen?

JS: It was simply one of the things one did in that epoch . . .

SZ: There was nothing else to do?

JS: No, there were a lot of other things to do, many of which I did — model airplane building and trout fishing, etc., and playing the clarinet. Playing the clarinet was the basic decision to make, whether I was going to be a photographer or a clarinet player. I didn't think I was smart enough to be anything else.

SZ: So you were a good musician, then?

JS: Pretty good, yes. Better than I am now, surely, although I now and then decide to

practice a little bit, reclaim a little bit of...no, when I was in the Army I played in the Army dance band and got to be quite good.

SZ: You should play in groups now or something.

JS: In the past I have, some, but there's too much to do. I'm trying to rebuild my barn at the moment, not to mention photographing. I certainly did not know enough about the history of art to be interested in it, until I went to the university. They had a very interesting art history department there, though it was small. The head of it was Oscar Hagen, who was Uta's daddy, and also as a young man was Max Reinhart's stage manager. He was one of the few art historians who was interested in the art history of the theater, and I was very much into that. Also, as you can imagine, the head of my department was a student of [inaudible]. Did you realize time went that fast? I could hardly believe that when I first heard it, because I didn't know that until quite a bit later, and I had assumed that [inaudible] lived not long after Goethe. He was an extraordinarily interesting, widely cultured man. When Siegfried Praeger was the conductor of the Madison symphony, Oscar Hagen would take over the rehearsal and he would know exactly what one had done wrong, just as Praeger did.

SZ: The University of Wisconsin was, at that time — this was the '40s, the early '40s?

JS: Yes, I started in '43.

SZ: I assume, because I know this was true in the '50s, that it was really sort of a special school — progressive...maybe that's not quite the right word.

JS: It had in most ways a very progressive tradition, going back to the La Follette days, if indeed not earlier. Old Bob La Follette had...but it also was a school of extraordinary quality. There were still marvelous people there during the '40s. There was a rich cultural life there, also. The [inaudible] Quartet was the quartet in residence in the early '40s, and schools did not have string quartets in residence in those days. There

was a very good theater program, an excellent student theater program but also very good touring companies would come, both literary theater or whatever you call it, and also dance, ballet. I suppose Uta Hagen, maybe because her father was there, seemed to come every year when she was with [Paul] Robeson and was working all the way through whatever repertory they did together, with her whole big company. The first time I ever saw ballet was there — [inaudible] I remember leaping from the wings. I never saw anything so astonishing in my life — this body slowly sailing out of the wings and onto the stage, as though he was moving in slow motion. Anyhow, it was a very interesting school. The other art history professors were Jack Kienitz, who was a very interesting, young doctor with a special interest in Oriental art and also architecture, especially American architecture, which I'm sure had a good deal to do with my later developing interest in it. And Jim Watriss, who was one of the great print and graphics — one who is still with us, and was regarded as one of the great graphic arts people in the academic world. So that's where I got interested in pictures other than photographs. And at first there were no...intellectual ambitions, but just because I liked the pictures, and I thought if you looked at enough good pictures it might help you make some yourself, and that's what I was...I was a photographer. I worked as a photographer my first two years there, before I got in the Army, in a studio run by a woman named Frederica Kutcheon, who was remarkably advanced for a commercial portrait photographer at that time and place.

SZ: Did you know that at the time?

JS: I had been to Madison once for a high school journalism convention and I had seen her shop, and it was a modern-looking shop and it only had one portrait in the window instead of a billion, and it was done with artificial light instead of the old tradition, commercial north light. It impressed me, the whole sense of the place impressed me, and I kind of liked the picture in the window. So when I went there to school, the first day I went there with my portfolio under my arm and I said, "My name is John Szarkowski and I'm a photographer and I'm looking for work, and I thought maybe you needed help." She looked at my portfolio and she said, "Okay, I

can use ten hours a week and I'll pay you 75 cents an hour," which was a fortune. My friend Joe Mellie -- or was it Joe Mellie's brother? -- organized the students who worked in the student union that same year and took them out on strike and got their pay raised from 20 cents to 25 cents in meal tickets — it wasn't real money. So 75 cents was pretty good. She was great, and she gave me a key to her studio. I could use it in the evenings. I shot pictures of all my friends, girlfriends, etc. She was just great. She was, as I remember the pictures, not an uninteresting painter. She studied some in France and painted in that kind of a Post-Impressionist manner that was like muddy Impressionism, but bigger, bigger pieces — muted, not muddy, gray colors. I don't think the world made a mistake in not counting her a major figure or anything like that, but she knew something about pictures. She knew something about how a picture was put together.

SZ: What do you think she saw in what you brought her that made her sign you up?

JS: Basically good mechanics and some feeling for the same thing that anyone who knew anything about it would have. I was a good technician for a seventeen-year-old kid, and had some sense of lighting and composition, that's all. What do you want? You don't want a genius to work in your darkroom. So those were her good years, because the town was sort of full of servicemen — [inaudible] Field was the Air Force base, and there was a Navy training center on the campus, and various kinds of military installations around, so her business was virtually all servicemen. They were young and they were adventurous and they had uniforms, and she liked them and they liked her, and she didn't have to worry about retouching wrinkles or anything like that, which she didn't like at all. It was during a period of severe rationing of almost everything, including film, so she would shoot two proofs of each sitter, and you could have your pick — 1 or 2, A or B — none of those 24 proofs, or 36. And she had a very good average in this manner of working. Saturdays would be madhouses; they would come in in gangs, a dozen at a time, and want to have their portraits made — they didn't make appointments — so for a while she would have them sit in the outside waiting area, where the office was, and bring them in one at a time. And

then she decided that we better bring them all in at once, and they'd be standing around behind the camera and full of horseplay and teasing of whoever it was that was photographed at the moment, which turned out to be a wonderful way to do it because it broke through all kinds of nervousness or self-consciousness. She made terrific pictures, and, I think, after three or four months she said, "I'm tired. Do you want to shoot some?" So I began shooting on crowded days too, and it was great, it was just great. So that was what I did there, and then I went into the Army and played...in a couple of dance bands.

SZ: Did you get drafted?

JS: Finally.

SZ: Right at the end of the war?

JS: Right at the end of the war — summer of '45. I had been called up earlier, I think, and twice had gone for my physical. There was a classification called 1A; 1A meant you were ready to be drafted. And then there was a classification called 1A-L, and they would draft you but for limited service, presumably not for combat, though once you got in I don't know how they managed to maintain these distinctions. But they didn't apparently always need these many people who had bad eyesight and without glasses, so that it took almost two years before — a year and a half, something like that — before they...I think they let you finish the year you were in college, and then I would have gone after my freshman year except that I was classified 1A-L for limited service, and so I completed two years and then went, and by that time it was summer of '45. So I had a job I didn't like very much so I went over to the band barracks at Camp Grant.

SZ: You were allowed to do that?

JS: Sure.

SZ: Because I guess the war was over — the war was over in August.

JS: I went over to the band barracks and went in, and there was this...he was tired of being in the Army, had never gotten overseas, so he had been in the Army and head of this band since I think 1940, when the draft began, the year before America got into the war. His name was either Howard or Harold Barlow [Harold Barlow], and the other one was the director of the NBC Radio orchestra. Anyhow, this was the other one.... He was absolutely going stir-crazy. And I went in and saluted, or whatever you were supposed to do, and I said, "I wonder if you need any clarinet players." He said, "You got your clarinet with you?" I said no, and he turned to the master sergeant and he said, "Have we got a clarinet that will blow?" So the sergeant found a clarinet. The warrant officer gave me this piece of march music, and it was, I think, the third clarinet, and most of it went oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah, dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah, oom-pah, oom-pah.... It was not at all a demanding task. And I said, "Is this what you want me to play?" And he said, "If you would be so kind." "With the repeats?" "With the repeats." So he hired me on the basis of this idiotic test, but actually I was quite good. But I'd never played jazz before, I'd never played dance music.

SZ: What had you played — classical?

JS: Yes.

SZ: But you obviously could sight-read.

JS: I could sight-read, but basically I was a straight clarinet player and in dance bands you play sax and you double on clarinet, and I'd never played sax. As long as I was at Camp Grant I didn't do anything in the band, nothing. We had reveille in the morning at ten o'clock, and then we were excused until the next day, for reveille at ten o'clock. That didn't last very long. We were transferred to...Battle Creek,

Michigan — Fort Custer at Battle Creek, Michigan, and the warrant officer there interviewed his new men. When it came my turn he called me and he said, "It says here you are a straight classical clarinet player," and I said, "That's right, sir. Sorry about that." He reached under his desk and pulled out a tenor saxophone and he said, "Take this to the day room and don't come back until you can play the C scale." And I did. It turned out it wasn't very hard. I think the next day I began playing in the dance band, the big dance band, fourth sax, which wasn't most of the time enormously demanding, and I got really quite good at it. Then I got promoted to fifth sax, which doesn't sound like a promotion, but that's baritone, and that's a much more interesting part to play..., because it's optional. The standard dance-band arrangements are written so that you can play them with a flexible number of people, so that if you've got three saxes — lead alto, second tenor, and third alto — you've basically got the fundamental chord. Then, when you put in the fourth..., which is a tenor, then you're probably in most cases just doubling the tonic or something, putting a lower note in it. But when you get to the fifth sax you're not just playing harmony anymore, you're kind of a roving infielder. You're playing all over the band — sometimes you're playing with the saxes, sometimes you're playing with the brass, sometimes you're playing with the rhythm, so it's great fun.

SZ: And was there any improvisation with it?

JS: No, I'm just talking about the notes that are written down. I never got very good at...in fact, I never got very good at all, to be frank about it, at improvisation. I'd spent too many years playing the notes written on the page, although I might have in time...after I got out of the Army.

SZ: That's what you did in the Army? Three years?

JS: No, it was a short two years. When I got back to Madison and went back to school I sat in with a good band there a couple of times, but basically I was what was called in the trade a "side man," not one of the stars — second sax, fourth sax, fifth sax,

etc. I don't mean you don't have to be good, but those are not among the improvising chairs. So I went back to school and I did the art history thing, then I went to the Walker Art Center. I graduated in the middle of the year in '48 — that is to say, I graduated in January '48.

SZ: So you graduated early.

JS: I was supposed to be class of '47, but I took a summer course, so I came back and I did three semesters, including summer semester -- I did spring semester, summer semester, fall semester -- and then took some veteran's credits and graduated.

SZ: Were you a good student?

JS: Yes — not fantastic, but I was an honor student.

SZ: When you graduated you got a degree in art history?

JS: Yes.

SZ: Did you know what you wanted to do?

JS: No, but by this time I was interested in art and I considered myself a photographer, so I thought there were probably some ways of combining photography and an interest in a history of all the arts.

SZ: So you went to the Walker. How did you get to the Walker?

JS: Bill Friedman was the assistant director at that time — not Martin. This was years and years before Martin. It was years before Harvey Arneson. [Inaudible] came to Madison as one of a jury, to jury a show, and I was on the gallery committee; I think I was in the show, too. There was a woman there named Anne Foote, a very bright

woman, who was the faculty advisor of the gallery committee, but the committee was basically pretty independent, within whatever. Presumably, there were rules, and presumably there was a budget and so forth, but as I recall it, the committee had a lot of authority, or she gave them a lot of authority at least. And we had shows from here [The Museum of Modern Art] I know...astonishingly, it seems to me, a little traveling Kandinsky show.... No security, no guards; the gallery was in the student union, it was open twenty-four hours a day. Those pictures weren't wired down or anything, and I don't think anything was ever lost.

SZ: It was too new [laughter].

JS: The little things, the little works on paper...anyhow, so I met Friedman and told him what I was interested in, and he said, "Maybe we can do something." So I went to Walker as museum photographer, basically. It was such a small staff that I got involved in a lot of other things, too — a little bit of writing....

SZ: Did that seem like a very lucky thing at that time? Was it hard for a person in your position to find a position in a museum? Was it less hard than it is now?

JS: I was awfully young [laughing]. I was offered a job by another woman, whose name I cannot remember. She had a string of portrait studios in Illinois and maybe adjoining states...and she offered me the studio in Peoria or someplace. I said, "Can I think it over?" And she, "Yeah, you better think it over. It's a tough town" [laughing]. She said, "It isn't one of the great garden spots of the world."

SZ: But it's a job.

JS: It's a job. And then this other job came through. I can't remember how hard it was. Of course it was hard — anything is hard if you've never done it before. How do you know whether it's easy or hard. I had no basis for comparison. I was quite exceptionally dumb about ambition. I wanted to be a photographer and you had to

find some way to support yourself, but I didn't expect to support myself well. So I went to Walker and I thought I was supposed to get $50 a week, but when I got there they decided, "To begin with? We meant eventually" [laughing].

SZ: That was your first negotiation with a non-profit [laughter].

JS: So I think it ended up $180 a month to being with, but then after a while it was raised to $200. In hock to the bookstore. I remember when the scandal about the post office began to surface, it seemed to me altogether rational, because all we were doing was borrowing until... [laughing]. Turns out it was a little bit different than me and the bookstore at Walker. I was there for three years, and it was terrific, terrific. Bill Friedman's wife, at least I think, was a woman named Hilde Reiss, and she was German, she was from the Bauhaus. She was a lady with a lot of substance, and she ran what was called the Everyday Art program, which was design...basically it was the equivalent of Edgar Kaufmann's department or program here. Actually, it really included architecture, too, but most often it had to do with design — furniture, fabrics, textiles, industrial design. She posted a quarterly magazine, which was then called the Everyday Art Quarterly, and then later on it was changed to be just the Quarterly. I was made some kind of associate editor of that, so I got involved in a lot of other aspects of that, aside from straight photographing. It was an extremely interesting place, because it had no collection. When T. B. Walker died and at least the semi-professionals started to get in [laughing], it turned out that he had not been treated very well by whatever experts were recommending stuff to him. There was still a little catalogue surviving from the mid '30s, I think, that listed nine Rembrandts and six Leonardos [laughing]. The nine Rembrandts turned out to be one really good Fabricius, and a lot of stuff that was really pretty bad. So by the time the fakes and school pieces and so forth were weeded out, there really wasn't an awful lot left, so the museum really didn't have much choice but to decide to emphasize contemporary art [laughing], and other things, like architecture and design and so forth. So it was very lively, and I saw all of the leading avant Americans there who were around from 1948 to 1951. That's where I saw my first [Barnett] Newman. It

was on the floor, leaning up against the wall, ready to be hung, and it was horizontal. I just loved it — a scrofulous black picture, maybe about that big, with a white line that was supposed to be running down the middle of it vertically, but when I saw it, it was running through the middle horizontally. I told Newman this story — actually, it was the night of the dinner of his opening here — and it turned out he was really quite interested in photography. I said, "If it's horizontal, it's an absolute photograph. It's a horizon." That's what photography's really about, just surrounding, with a frame. But he was, at least pretended to be, quite tickled by the fact that I had thought it was horizontal and continued to remember it and thought it should be horizontal [laughing]. It went from Newman to [John] Sloane, who was still alive. I think they bought a Sloane, some picture that cost maybe $2500, and it was a tough acquisition because that was an awful lot of money for a painting by an American, and an American who was still alive, though not very by '48, '49. They had all the contemporary painters — [William] Baziotes and [Adolph] Gottlieb, and Knaths — the whole thing. A beautiful Maurer; that came from Hudson Walker — I mean, that's historic. In any case, after a few years I decided that was long enough to be there, but I'm very grateful for that opportunity. It was a wonderful opportunity.

SZ: What about in terms of your own craft?

JS: I did a lot of good work. I had an exhibition there. I think my first exhibition was all portraits of artists and people.... A couple still look good.

SZ: For the museum, did you photograph the objects?

JS: It was a lot to do for the Everyday Quarter, and then there was a newspaper or something that they did, so there was a certain amount of reportage, parties. They did an exhibition, big. They did a number of ambitious big exhibitions while I was there, one of which had to do with the etcher Lazansky, who's in the collection — he has a big self-portrait that from time to time is on view — and his students at Iowa. I did rather extensive reportage, kind of documentary, of what was going on there for

various...so it was not just shooting paintings. They also did what was in theory a collaboration with the Whitney, but Walker actually did the show, with Elizabeth McCausland as the guest curator, an exhibition on the painting of Alfred Maurer. She sent me a great cardboard box of old snaps about Maurer's life....

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BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1

JS: ...please make copy negatives of these, and I thought, Oh boy, isn't this something. Here I am, one of the most talented, artistic photographers of my day, and what am I doing sitting here in this dungeon making copy negatives of these stupid snapshots? So I began to make them, and I got so interested in them. First I got interested in him. I got interested in this life that the pictures obviously didn't define, but they alluded to these fragmentary little elliptical suggestions as to what somebody's life might have been about. And then I got more and more curious as to how they worked: what could you see in them, what couldn't you see in them, what did they actually demonstrate, what didn't they demonstrate, what, really, did they amount to? I think it was an educational experience. Dealing with this rather substantial body of imagery about somebody that I didn't really know anything about; I wasn't even interested in him as an artist, because I hadn't seen the paintings yet — just this big cardboard box of unexplained clues. And that taught me something. Then, in the fall I went to Albright Art School to teach — I got a job teaching there. I didn't have the job when I quit at Walker. I decided that I'd done enough of that, and quit — obviously not having prepared for a life of leisure on my $200 a month; it might have gone above the $200, a little, by the end of the three years.... I know one thing: I'd gotten interested in Louis Sullivan. I had a good friend at Walker, who wasn't on staff but who came to design a couple of exhibitions on architecture, from Chicago, named Arthur Carrara. He said, "What! You've never read [inaudible]?" I can't remember whether he said that or not. I can't even remember whether or not I had read it at that point. In any case, I read it or re-read it and got very interested in Louis Sullivan. You

can't read that stuff after the age of thirty, except if somebody edits it and pulls out the good parts for you. But it's pretty intoxicating when you're not twenty-five yet. So I knew that there was the Prudential building in Buffalo, so I thought that would be a good place to go because I could photograph the Prudential building. I also thought that the...great Wright-Larkin administration building was there, the predecessor of the Johnson Wax [building].

SZ: Had you been east before?

JS: I don't think so.... 'Course, Buffalo isn't exactly the east [laughing], but it's further east....

SZ: I know this very well, because I drove to Rochester last weekend [laughter].

JS: Rochester is even further east than Buffalo [laughing].

SZ: Not that much.

JS: No, not that much. Spiritually, it's all part of Ohio. Buffalo was a really interesting city then. It was already really in decline, but nobody knew that it was permanent, or terminal.

SZ: This is '51?

JS: Yes. There was still a little local mining there, but it didn't really run anything except the cultural life. It didn't any longer own the mills or the [tape distortion].... But all those things at least still ran, and it had real working-class neighborhoods and the people in them had jobs. It was quite interesting and corrupt in a very...I don't mean people were on the take. I mean it was my impression that the people who one might regard as intellectuals or interested in the cultural life of the city and the real economic life of the city were totally unconnected with each other. But the cultural life

of the city was quite impressive; not as good as Minneapolis, but it was impressive. The museum and the symphony, the schools and so forth.... So I went and I photographed the Prudential building and a few other things. I was there for two years. I taught photography; perspective drawing, about which I was about as well-qualified to teach as I was qualified to teach German, and I don't have any German at all; and some art history; and one semester, of course, in product design, which was rather fun. So I knew something about most everything except perspective drawing, which I had to learn one lesson at a time ahead of the students.

SZ: Who were the students?

JS: A very interesting group. It was a very interesting time. It was the tail end of the old art school days, which was basically brought down after the war with the GI Bill. Colleges and universities suddenly became persuaded by the idea that they should teach everything, even baton twirling, even photography. Terrible idea; it was a great mistake [laughing], but in any case, this is what happened. It was also the beginning of education as a growth industry in this country, so the universities either formed their own art department — Iowa was probably the most obvious, most impressive early example, and Minnesota and all those other schools — and so the old private art schools that were designed to train people to be painters, and you didn't get degrees or anything as dumb as that, you went and you learned how to do it, or else you didn't learn how to do it, at least you learned how to act like an artist or to drink like an artist, etc. So the old professional art schools basically disappeared or became very marginal, or were taken over by formal educational institutions. Albright was in the process of all of those things happening to it. So there were three student bodies. One was the old hard-drinking, staying-up-all-night, old-line art students who weren't interested in anything except whether or not they'd get to be Rembrandt or, alternatively, rich commercial artists. There was another third who came from what was in those days called New York State Teachers College, now University of New York at Buffalo — SUNY Buffalo — but it used to be Teachers College, and they were terribly nice, really nice young people and very sincere, and they wanted to be

teachers and they didn't necessarily feel they had to be extraordinarily good at it or talented but they had to be understanding and nice. And then the third group was from the University of Buffalo, and they were sort of the intellectual aristocrats, probably social aristocrats, too, relatively speaking, and they were basically art history people but they would come over to Albright for their studio courses. The girls were better-dressed and a little more sophisticated and they knew the names of poets.... So it was really an interesting mix, and I enjoyed it a lot. And I photographed the Prudential building for two years.

SZ: Were you a good teacher?

JS: I don't have any idea. Probably not. I tried again this past spring in Florida. I think I'm better now.

SZ: Did you enjoy it?

JS: Up to a point, but I was also trying to be a photographer, and at that age you're not as patient, or as tired, as you are later. I don't know if I produced a single artist. Who knows? I didn't follow them.

SZ: And you have a lot of photographs of the Prudential building.

JS: Yes — fifteen good ones, something like that. I had a portfolio and began sending it...I had a show at George Eastman House at that time, too — drove over and showed my stuff to Beaumont Newhall, first time I'd met him, and he said, "Yes, indeed, I would like to show this material." So he did.

SZ: You walked in to him cold too?

JS: Yes. I wrote him a letter and said my name is John Szarkowski and I teach photography, and can I come over. And he said yes. Then I figured I was done with

the Prudential building, so I quit my job. I would go to Chicago...because I wanted to continue this Louis Sullivan job. So I said I'll go to Chicago, I'm very good, and I'll get some commercial job that will pay me adequately and I won't have to pay too much attention to and I'll continue working on Louis Sullivan in my spare time. That didn't work out too well [laughing], though I went to Chicago and got a job working in a commercial food photography [studio]. Chicago was the Paris of food photography in those years [laughing]. I worked for a guy named Ed Van Brule for a couple of months, and then I got canned by his secretary or his office manager. Friday we went and got our checks, and she said, "Mr. Szarkowski, you needn't come in on Monday." I said, "Columbus Day, already? That's terrific." She said, "No, you don't understand. You needn't come in on Tuesday either." It began to sink in, and I looked at her. She said, "You don't have to come in anymore. We don't need your services anymore." I was really crestfallen, not to mention the fact that I've got about $5 to my name, and that week's check, which was $75 or something. I was working my way up.

SZ: This had nothing to do with your talents as a photographer?

JS: I called Van Brule, because he wasn't around, and said, "What went wrong? I thought I was doing fine." He said, "You were, you were doing fine. My secretary just took a real dislike to you. What did you do to her?" I said, "I didn't do anything." He said, "Maybe that's the problem." In any case, he said, "You were doing fine, but she knows how the office runs, and I can do without you but it would be awfully hard to do without her. I tell you what I'll do. I hear A. George Miller is looking for somebody. I'll call him up. Take your portfolio, go over in the morning." So A. George Miller was the king of food photographers in the Paris of food photography [laughing] in those years. So I went in the morning, and it's true, he gave me a job. What a horrible, horrible, horrible winter. Funny, looking back on it, it's like being on the Army. You could go to dinner on those stories for a long time, but at the time it was awful. One felt lost, as though one had stumbled into some ludicrous story that was just so...but you didn't call me here to hear about my life in food photography.

SZ: Actually, do you have anything from those days that you still think is decent?

JS: Photographically? Goodness, no. The whole thing was comic. I don't mean to suggest that I was making the photographs. I wasn't making the photographs. I would spend mornings in the darkroom with two or three other guys, grinding out 250 identical copies of...which was not so bad, actually. I learned a little something there. There was a kind of 8-by-10 printing machine there that I think was manufactured in Chicago called a McIntyre printer, and that was a great, great machine. If I knew where there was one, I might almost be tempted to become an 8-by-10 photographer just so I could print on that machine. So you kept from going absolutely mad by trying to get one really perfect print of this idiotic photograph, which would be a photograph of a bowl of oatmeal on a plate, and around the edges of the plate would be halves of hard-boiled eggs. And then you'd make 250 prints of this picture, and then it would be sent out by somebody, by the Quaker Oats people, I presume, to a lot of weekly newspapers, and it would run in an article that would be captioned, "How to feed a family of eight on $1.06 a week" [laughter]. And that was the stuff that the high-priced customers didn't even get to know about. That's not true, because there were different people...Quaker Oats was also doing the center-page color picture for the double-page spread in the middle of Life and Look and Ladies' Home Journal and all that, and those were billion-dollar...I mean, to make that photograph of a bowl of oatmeal with the milk splashing down on it in color was like making Gone with the Wind. The kitchen was bigger than this room — maybe about as big as this room or a little bigger — and it had two of everything, two freezers and refrigerators and stores, and the reason it had two of everything was there were two head economists who came from central casting in these white starched uniforms and the hats, all dressed in white, looking like the head nurse in Dr. Kildare. One was from Quaker Oats and one was from the advertising agency that wanted to keep the Quaker Oats account, and they would make these huge vats of oatmeal, the theory being, if you took a huge vat and took just one bowl from the middle, the texture would be better. So this young man would carry in the giant-size tubes of Quaker Oats like cord wood, and cooking away and cooking away, constantly. The real point had to do

with, and that's what [inaudible] van Veblen taught in old Chicago, if you wasted that much oatmeal, it ought to be important [laughter]. So luckily I was snatched from the jaws...no, I quit. I got another job with an architectural photographer named Warren Reynolds in Minneapolis who went up and down the Mississippi River twice a year photographing for all the home magazines — the architectural magazines, too, but the home magazines paid better. Sort of like Sherman, he dragged up one side of the Mississippi and back up the other side in this station wagon full of photographic equipment. I only made one trip with him. You'd have this whole list of assignments to do: the new modern farmhouse of so-and-so in some town in Iowa.... He'd go in and look it over, say "very nice," and he'd say, "For photographic purposes it's useful to be able to change a few minor things." People would say, "No, no, not at all" — they'd be so happy that their house was going to be in House Beautiful or something. So he'd drive to the nearest nursery and come back with a truckful of potted geraniums, and drapes — I think he carried drapes with him — and he'd sort of quick, make over this house, photograph it so that I'm sure people's friends wouldn't recognize it, then put it back to its original condition and be off to the next assignment. But luckily, I got a Guggenheim, which I had applied for, which I suppose I had begun to apply for after Albright, because I had the portfolio on the Prudential building. And I got to see [Frank Lloyd] Wright, somehow, because I was too stupid to write in time. I thought, “It's too late to write now, I'll telegraph. No, telegraph doesn't sound right; I'll wait till I get to Chicago and then I'll telephone him from there, it won't cost so much” [laughing]. And of course I didn't do anything, and I just kept driving there, drove into Taliesin. I had nothing, no letters, no introduction, no nothing, just this stupid portfolio under my arm. Have you ever been there?

SZ: No.

JS: The buildings out closer to the road are the Fellowship buildings, where the students and the apprentices work and live. So I was all kind of embarrassed with myself for being more idiotic than usual perhaps. Then I got out my camera and began photographing, and I photographed the Fellowship building, and this nerdy

apprentice comes out and says, "Excuse me, do you intend those photographs for publication?" I said, "No, I'm just photographing, that's what I do." He said, "All right, because if you had any thought of publishing them you'd have to speak to Mr. Wright." "Oh, I might want to publish them! How do I talk to Mr. Wright?" He said, "Frank is taking a pickup back to the house now, you can catch a ride with him." It was on the other side of the farm, and he dropped me off and said, "In there," and I went in there, and Gene Masilink, who was his secretary for many years, was on the phone dictating a 10,000-word telegram having to do with that big mosque or whatever it was that he was going to do in the Middle East that never was built. I waited and waited and waited, and he's still on the phone. He saw that I was there, but he paid no attention to me. So I began looking around. There are no real doors in Frank Lloyd Wright houses; they've just got little narrow openings, though it's not as though I actually went through what you'd recognize as a door, but I saw this model of the Unity Temple over there, so I went over and I was looking at it, and this voice said, "Yes, and who are you?" I turn around and it was Wright! I'm standing in the middle of his studio without having been invited. So I somehow managed to spit out who I was and what I was there for, and he said, "Well, let me see them." So we went over to his board and he put down my portfolio and he went through, and about every third one he'd put up here and I thought, “Dear God, these he's going to burn it publicly” [laughing]. So we went to the end. I think he went all the way through and then he shut it and went through again and took out six or seven pictures out of the portfolio, and he said, "I'd like these" [laughter]. I said, "Take the whole thing!" He said, "No, just these." I said, "Thank you so much." He said, "These are the best photographs of Mr. Sullivan's buildings that I've ever seen," or something like that more or less, so I quit, got up, ran home, and then wrote him a letter and said, "Can I use your name to apply for a Guggenheim?" I'd also shown them to [Edward] Steichen — at the end of the year at Albright I'd shown them to Steichen.

SZ: You didn't talk about Steichen at all in this.

JS: I'd come to New York at the end of the Albright year, the second Albright year, and I

can't remember if I'd sent them ahead — I don't think so. But I'd sent them to Edgar Kaufmann, who wrote back very generously and graciously; he went on and said he thought they were great and yes, he certainly would write. And Newhall, which he did. Then I came to New York and I showed them to Steichen, and he said he would write. So that was a pretty high-powered group. And so I got it, in the spring of '54. And my life was saved. I think maybe it was. You know, sometimes a little help at the right time, before it's too late.... I don't think there was any raise in salary -- 4,000 or so. So I did that, I did that book.

SZ: And where did you do that?

JS: On Louis Sullivan?

SZ: Where were you headquartered, because I guess you had a place to live.

JS: I left Chicago and I moved back to northern Wisconsin, and I had a darkroom there in my parents' house. So then I was there for a few years, on and off. It wasn't a complete survey of all the work. It was called The Idea of Louis Sullivan, and it only had six or eight major buildings and a couple of little pictures of minor things, in passing, but basically it was about six or eight major buildings. It was partly an attempt to see whether one could photograph architecture, and it weighed different on one hand when professionals did it to try to make the building look good and snappy, or be the way the academic historians wanted it done, which was to make it look like a Renaissance drawing, which always seemed to be beside the point to me — a Renaissance drawing meaning always in effect on a gray day to show the maximum amount of detail all over the building without reference to the kind of light that might normally fall on it. Also it was an experiment about how to do a book with text, to try to relate them so they wouldn't be two different things. And I think it was quite successful on both those scores, actually. It was well-received, when it finally got published. Nobody wanted to publish it, of course. Everybody claimed they wanted to publish, then said, "Oh boy, expensive, not much of a market," etc. So I

was almost ready to give up on it for the time being, put it back in the trunk and go back to Quaker Oats and Aunt Jemima pancakes or something, God knows, but something, I had to do something; the Guggenheim was long since gone. I was packing things up, to put it aside, and I wrote a letter to a woman who was the head of the University of Minnesota Press who was at that time Helen Clapesattle — great woman, later married the director of the University of Chicago Press, whose name was Roger Shuge, so she became Helen Clapesattle Shuge. She said, "Sure, send it, by all means, send it, I'd be happy to look it." So I sent it out one more time. She wrote and said, "I think it's terrific. We want to publish it." So I unpacked [laughing], found a few photographic odd jobs.

SZ: You couldn't have made any money on the publication of it.

JS: No. Oh, I made $3,000, I think; not quite. It was a $10 book, in those days rather expensive, and they printed 3,000. It was reprinted once, after she left. So it was in the process of being done, I was free-lancing, I had jobs here and there, a little of this and a little of that, drinking cheap wine. Actually, I still drink cheap wine [laughter]. So I worked rather closely with them on the book except for the designer. But I was in the Twin Cities a fair amount, and she took me out to dinner one night to a very good restaurant named Harry's, and she said — when was this? It was '56 before the Sullivan book came out. Can that be true? Yes, '56 when it was published, and when it was pretty well set to go she took me out and said, "In '58 Minnesota's going to celebrate their centennial as a state. How would you like to do a picture book on the state of Minnesota?" Wonderful! I said, "More than anything, Miss Clapesattle." She was a very interesting woman. She did a book called The Doctors Mayo on the history of the Mayo Clinic, which was, I think, the third after the Bible and the Boy Scout handbook on the bestseller lists for a long time, and a very interesting, as I remember it, piece of cultural history. So she found the money for me to do this. She went to the [state] legislature, to the guy who was commissioner, talked him into it, got a kind of generous statement, at least it seemed to me, a rather generous stipend to do this book. Then they published it. That was on the New York

Times bestseller list. And that was reprinted.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2

SZ: ...the Minnesota book. You've said before something about "being saved," and what you meant, I assume, is that that was a real turning point for you.

JS: When I got the Guggenheim, sure. There are a lot of turning points.

SZ: The success of the Minnesota book, was that a surprise?

JS: A surprise? I was pleased. I may not be surprised easily, about bad things or good things. I thought it was pretty good. It had some flaws, but more fun to do than anything I've ever done. The year and a little bit doing it was just a ball.... I had no itinerary, there was no assignment. "Do a book," she said. She said, "Try not to do it all in one place" [laughing].... At least then it was terrific fun to browse around in a Chevrolet and talk to people at lunch counters.

SZ: It had text also?

JS: Yes. A lot of it was edited from existing historic sources, but quite a bit of it was written. In quantity it was more writing than I had ever done before up to that point. But it was fun. It's got some good photographs in it, except that the color was the chief disaster. It was printed in a shop...both those books were still done in letterpress, including the color, by quite a good letterpress printer called North Central Publishing. They were a little new at color and they only had a two-color press, so you put down the red and yellow first and then the blue and black the second time. But the plant wasn't air-conditioned and it was printed in the summertime. It was quite a big run — it was 15,000 books — and so you'd do all the color, and then by the time you'd started putting those sheets through again, the

sheet isn't the same size as it was when you started, because it got damp and got bigger or got dry and shrank. So all the colors got terrible registration problems, which isn't so bad if they're bright colors, because then they don't come together properly. If they're relatively true colors, just the kind of registration problem that you have in comic strips, where the red and the blue don't match, don't quite meet. But in the complicated colors, it just results in the most awful, awful, muddy, ugly purple-brown-yellow mud colors. But aside from that, I was really quite happy with it. Then — this is very short — I had met a terrific guy.... After I left Walker in '51, I decided to take my total savings and go visit a sister I liked in Houston and her husband and the beginnings of her family, and I thought, I'm going to do it right: I'm going to take the Zephyr and I'm going to have a sleeper and I'm going to spend all my money by the time I get there. So I got on the Burlington Zephyr, and went from Minneapolis to Houston. I got on at Minneapolis and the train pulled into St. Paul and picked up people there before crossing the river. I looked out the window and I saw this man standing there with about a 1905 model Brooks Brother suit or something with white hair and rosy-red cheeks, a big Duluth pack sack on his back and a violin under his arm. I thought, Boy, that would be an interesting fellow to meet sometime. Then I went back to my martini and writing a letter, whatever I was writing. I was in the club car, the dining car, and twenty minutes later the steward said, "Excuse me, would you mind if this gentleman joins you?" And here's my violin player with the 1905 Brooks Brothers suit. it turns out that he was a man called Ernest Oberholtzer, who was a great figure in the American conservation movement and one of the past presidents or early presidents of the Wilderness Society, and a guy who was probably the leading pivotal figure in the whole Quetico/Superior wilderness area conservation activity virtually since the beginning of the century...when he got the suit. He graduated from Harvard I think the same year my father graduated from high school, and my father was 100 years old in 1987 - dead, but nevertheless, 100 years old. Oberholtzer came to visit me here once sometime after '64, because it was in the then-new building, the East Wing, with two wonderful elderly ladies kind of holding him up. He was considerably diminished by then, but when he was 70 he would carry his canoe over the most miserable portages and in October wade in

those ice-cold streams.... Anyway, I met him and we got to be friends. He lived on three islands up in one of the large border lakes called Rainey Lake and had in 1912 made what was certainly one of if not the great heroic canoe trips, at least after the time of LaSalle and those fellows, and rediscovered the inland Eskimo up in the Northwest barren lands, the ones that Farley Mowat wrote about later after the war and who he called the People of the Deer — migrating Eskimos who followed the caribou. He was very important to me because he got me interested in a lot of things, including conservation and ecological ways of thinking about things. When I was at Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold was there, but I didn't know it until my senior year. Somebody said, "You heard about the [inaudible] campus?" "No, what's out at the [inaudible] campus?" "Aldo Leopold is out at...." You know who he is. So I didn't know about him then. So then I got very much interested in that and I decided I wanted to do a book about the Quertico wilderness area, and I got another Guggenheim.

SZ: That was in '61?

JS: Probably. Sixty? Sixty-one. I don't know. If you got it from me, I wouldn't count on it [laughing].

SZ: I didn't get it from you. It says '61.

JS: That sounds right. But I'd been working on that project on and off for some time.

SZ: What is that whole area, you say Quertico, but there's another term for it, isn't there? The very northern part that borders Canada, is that what we're talking about?

JS: No, Quertico is in Canada. It's called a lot of things.

SZ: This is Minnesota you're talking about, right?

JS: Minnesota and Canada and Ontario. That's Ontario over there, do you believe that? You win a lot of free drinks in bars, if you know that. Ontario goes that far west, it goes on forever. It doesn't go all the way to the very end of Minnesota; I think then you get into Saskatchewan or Alberta, one of those two. Who knows? Alberta, I think.

SZ: Manitoba?

JS: Manitoba! That's right. But Ontario goes way over and is north of...the way to phrase the bet is "What province is north of Minneapolis?"

SZ: And bet a lot of money on it.

JS: Bet a lot of money on it [laughter]. Or at least the next round. So that's what I was working on when I came out here, and I haven't finished that book yet. In fact, I've lost a lot of it. You give away the prints and you lose your notes. But I may do it.

SZ: You're still interested in it.

JS: It certainly won't be the same book I would have done then. I've been thinking of looking at that stuff. There are some good pictures — not many; a few. Thin books, that's the wave of the future [laughing].

SZ: Books on computer screens. How is that ever going to work with photography?

JS: It'll work fine, depending on what you expect it to do. I don't have to make this speech to you.

SZ: I don't know if I know what you're going to say. I know what I think about it.

JS: A computer's a computer. I don't think I write any worse or better. In some ways it's

easier. It's just another way of...in publishing, as part of a system of reproductive techniques it has a lot of uses.

SZ: I was thinking more as a presentation....

JS: What is that out there? Oh. He jumped. I thought...there was a bird out on the.... [Laughter] No, no, I'm sorry. It's true, it was a bird. There was a bird on the rail and then he jumped. I think he probably flew before he got to the bottom. It looked green to me. Green birds at this latitude are rare.

SZ: I know almost nothing about birds. I know what a hummingbird looks like. I have one in the country that comes.

JS: You have a lot of birds in the country. You should get yourself a Roger Tory Peterson.

SZ: I have one.

JS: You do? And a pair of glasses?

SZ: No.

JS: Get up early in the morning, especially this season, when all the leaves are out, you have to get up early.

SZ: You know when they really sing? A couple of weeks ago there was that huge storm? When the storms are over they just talk to each other. I guess they're sort of saying, "Are you okay?"

JS: Sure. That's why they sing in the morning: "You get through the night all right?" [laughter].

SZ: So the Guggenheim fellowship was about a year and you went traveling and took these pictures, and then...just get me here [to the Museum] and then we can stop for today.

JS: It probably was '61. In the Quertico area you travel only by canoe, so you don't go out for a year you go out for ten days, two weeks, then you come back and develop your stuff and wash your clothes. So I got a letter from Monroe Wheeler, who was, as you know, at that time Director of Exhibitions and Publications.

SZ: Did you know him?

JS: No. I didn't know anybody from the Museum — except Steichen, a little.

SZ: And you had met Newhall.

JS: Yes, but he wasn't here, of course, for many years.

SZ: But you knew Steichen, and I thought you had mentioned one other name.

JS: I knew Kaufmann, but he wasn't here either.

SZ: So you really had no real connection here.

JS: No. I'd met Steichen I think just once and he bought a couple of pictures at some point, $5 each, $10 each — the standard price. So I got a letter from Monroe which said, "Dear Mr. Szarkowski, I am sure you are aware of the Museum's plans for its photography program" — typical Museum of Modern Art letter, you know. Why would they think I was aware of the stupid plans for their photography program? [laughing] I could probably find it somewhere. It's probably in the Archives. But it said in effect that I probably knew of the Museum's plans for its future photography program and if

I happened to be in New York — another typical Museum [laughing] expression — he would be very happy to talk with me about it. I had not the remotest clue what he was talking about. But I wrote back and said, "Dear Mr. Wheeler, I'm sorry, I've been sleeping in the woods a lot lately and I have not read about the Museum's plans for its photography program, and I have no plans to be in New York. In any event, I couldn't come until the ground freezes in western Ontario" [laughing]. I didn't know Monroe. I wonder what he thought that meant: What is that, is it some kind of poetic.... [laughing] "When the ground freezes over in western Ontario...?" He wrote back and said, "Of course, that would be just fine after the ground freezes and if I didn't make it clear in my first letter of course we expect to pay for your...." Hah! So I came out, and it was World Series time — I think it was the Yankees in St. Louis, so it must have been '61...right, had to be.

SZ: Must be, because you started in '62.

JS: Right. I met René [d'Harnoncourt]. I didn't even speak to Monroe. I don't know what that red herring was. I spoke to him eventually, but I came and spoke to René.... Did you know him?

SZ: I didn't, no.

JS: He was the most charming and, I think, admirable man, in addition to which he was without any doubt the greatest Austrian diplomat since Metternich. I never saw him lose his temper, lose his patience, be in any way abrupt or gauche, even during the '64 building business and all, all those prima donnas' problems. Fantastic man. Anyhow, he had a desk that was quite big on the ends but narrow in the middle, so he could be closer to the people he was talking to, lean over.... And he said, "I assume you know why you're here." I said, "Mr. d'Harnoncourt, I have no idea why I'm here." And he looked me over for a minute or two, and I think he was deciding whether or not I was stupid or lying [laughing]. And then I sort of had the sense that it didn't make any difference; either was just as good [laughing]. So he explained, and I

said, "No, I'm very flattered and pleased, but...." I had no idea why I was coming, but I'd done work for museums. During those years when I was free-lancing I'd worked on a big show in Chicago, the Louis Sullivan show, and I'd looked at a big show at Albright some years after I was there teaching, on a big twentieth-century design show. Also, my work had been shown here and there, so I thought maybe....

SZ: I read somewhere that you came to the attention of Steichen through Henry Allen Moe.

JS: No, but of course I'd met Moe because I was here when I was looking for a publisher for the Sullivan book. I was in New York and met Moe and liked him a lot, and he liked me, I think, and he liked the Sullivan book.

SZ: So there were reasons why you were here.

JS: Well, presumably, but I still don't know what they were. Whether the initiative came from Steichen or from Moe, I don't know. But when I came, I thought it might have been some kind of project that the Museum wanted me to work on, because I'd done that. Or, I thought, conceivably something to do with my work. But when I found out the truth I said, "No, I don't want the job. I'm a photographer and that's what I do and I don't think I could be a photographer and do your job because I'm sure it's a very demanding job." He said, "You're probably right. I think in most cases that's proven to be the case. Philip Johnson managed to do both for a while. But that's a sane way of approaching." So we talked for quite a while, then he said, "Since you're here, let me take you to lunch." So we went to lunch. Such an impressive and good man that one would have liked to say what he wanted you to say, if possible. But I said no, and we met again the next day and he said, "Look, there are these processes and they go on and one doesn't expect, necessarily, to get the person one wants, but on the other hand, you shouldn't feel that you need to give me a definite answer. Why don't you go home and think about it for a few days, a couple of weeks?" And so, "No, I don't need to think about it, I thought about it. It took me about a second and a

half!" But you say, "Of course." And then you begin thinking about what you might do if you did take it, and you sort of get interested in that — what you think you would do; of course it ends being totally different in the end [laughing]. Who could imagine this place? But that's for next time.

SZ: I was just going to ask you one thing. Had you been here much in those years?

JS: No.

SZ: Had you ever come to see the "Family of Man" show, for instance?

JS: I never saw the "Family of Man" show in any of its original versions.

SZ: So the Museum as a magnet for you didn't really exist that way.

JS: No, no, no. However, it was very important to me because not only the shows that it sent out but, as I say, when I was in Wisconsin, way back then, I would help hang shows that came from the Museum. Half the slides that were there...if you bought slides for a lecture on photography or on the history of photography, half the slides came from there. But most important were the books. It was absolutely central to my education, such as it was, as a photographer, one might say my higher education as a photographer. My little library when I was, what, twenty-five, as late as that, or a little earlier maybe, but not only technical books but books that really had to do with what photography was about, there was Newhall's history, there was Walker Evans: American Photographs, there was the first little Paul Strand monograph, the first little Edward Weston monograph, the first little Cartier-Bresson monograph, and a great book called Edward Weston: Fifty Photographs that was not published by the Museum. But five out of the six books that I had that really had to do with what photography was about were from the Museum. Among people who were interested in photography I don't think I was an exception. I had an enormous sense of obligation to the Museum, even though I wasn't a visitor, and, of course, before I

came [to The Museum of Modern Art], I was very much interested in film — not to make them but to look at them — and I was quite knowledgeable about film until I came to live next door to the Film department. So I was also in debt to the Museum because of the Circulating Film program.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **JOHN SZARKOWSKI (JS)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **NEW LEBANON, NEW YORK**

DATE: **SEPTEMBER 6, 1994**

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1

SZ: I think we got you to New York and we got you to the Museum, the letter from Monroe, and I think the last thing was I asked you a little bit about the reputation of the Museum and the Photography department and why that was appealing to you, and I think that was where we left off. We talked a little bit about René also.... So you arrived at the Museum on....

JS: It was the first of July in '62....

SZ: Maybe we could just start with the department itself. It had been shaped by Steichen.

JS: How does one put it? It had been shaped by poverty, I think, more than anything else. I do just a little in the piece I wrote for the magazine on The Family of Man, so if what I say here contradicts what I say there, that is probably more likely dependable. In general, the Museum, especially those departments other than Painting and Sculpture — but Painting and Sculpture also — was poor and its ambitions were much larger than its means. I think the people in charge, I think Nelson Rockefeller understood — I think he was in a good position to understand — that if the Museum was to grow and was to be able to deal with its high ambitions, it was going to have to find a broader base of support and it couldn't continue to be a sort of Rockefeller family fiefdom, which people tended to regard it as and which to a considerable degree it probably was in the early days as far as financial support was concerned.

So the board, led by Nelson — I can't document that part of it, but much of what I've heard and read makes me think that Nelson was a leader in insisting on the notion of every ship on its own bottom, especially the more newly formed departments had to make sure that they understood that they had to find the resources to execute the programs that they had projected. When Steichen came, a large part of the impetus of that appointment derived from the belief that Tom Maloney managed to sell to the Museum, including, I think, probably first to Henry Moe, who was a member of the board and a member of the photography committee — I don't know if he was a member of the photography committee then or if he became one later — the idea that if Steichen was made director of the department, money would flow in from the photographic industry and that it would be possible to undertaken the program that was in fact projected, and it was extremely ambitious. I think in the beginning perhaps Maloney was suggesting half a million dollars, which at that time, in the '40s, was a substantial amount of money. But even so, in retrospect it's difficult to imagine the department doing all that was projected even if they had gotten half a million dollars, but they didn't, they got virtually nothing. And so Steichen came and the upshot of that was, Beaumont Newhall, who had just recently come back from the Air Corps and who was curator in the department....

SZ: Because Steichen was put in as director of the department.

JS: Yes, and because Newhall was not satisfied that he would have the kind of freedom of movement that he had been accustomed to. But in fact the money never came, and so the poor department was just as poor as it had always been, and it was sort of Steichen and his secretary and once in a while an assistant for this and that, and when I came it was Steichen and a secretary, Pat Walker, and Grace Mayer was officially on staff as something, assistant curator or something like that, curatorial assistant, perhaps, even, at a salary that was invisible to the naked eye. She had come originally as a volunteer and of course made herself indispensable.

SZ: This tape recorder doesn't record facial expression [laughter].

JS: Kathleen Haven was in and out of the department but was I think in fact attached to Graphics or Publications, wherever the design function resided in those days. I don't think she was in fact a member of the department, although she did work for it. There was a temporary person, Davis Pratt, who was doing research for a show that Steichen still had coming up called The Bitter Years on the Farm Security Administration photography group. So it was precious little department. Rolf Peterson was down in the darkroom, but he was still being paid also a picayune salary, but he was being paid by Steichen at that time still. So there was virtually no department. In consequence, the program was very intermittent, but of course it had had a very high quality program and it had had its very great public successes, most obviously The Family of Man, which of course had been a terrific triumph. The great strength of the department was Steichen, who was in many ways not a conventional museum person and his priorities did not necessarily conform to traditional museum priorities. He was never very interested in the collection, but, on the other hand, he had a terrific eye for talented new photographers, and his judgment on that score seems to me to have been remarkable, pretty close to infallible — not quite infallible, but pretty close. With all the photographers, photographers who were younger than he but still middle-aged or better, or worse, I think that he recognized basically all the best photographers who were working. One of the differences between his attitude and mine was that he tended to exhibit those important photographers of the time within the rubric of some kind of generalized philosophical idea, so that [interruption]...he would exhibit photographers within group shows using a rubric that tended to emphasize a certain kind of encompassing philosophical or quasipolitical idea. So it was my sense that they were not seen fully enough or deeply enough or objectively enough to demonstrate who in fact they were. That's not quite true. That's putting it a little too strongly, but in terms of trying to make a distinction...there were no one-man exhibitions, photography exhibitions, at the Museum during Steichen's tenure, except his own at the end, at the time his retirement was being announced. It seemed to me that that was a limitation that should be addressed. I also think that from his early days as a collaborator with [Alfred] Stieglitz and part of the whole attempt to secure not just admiration but acceptance of photography as a fine art,

that that whole frame of mind had never entirely been expunged from the attitudes of the people who worked at that time. Certainly I think Stieglitz did not in all ways rid himself of that perspective, and I don't think Steichen did either, so there was a certain sense of being photography's champion and protector and advocate. In a sense that I don't think that seemed necessary to me. I think you just showed it: you showed the best stuff you could find and you showed the best stuff that you could, but that it was no longer necessary to defend it or as far as worrying about defending it or about making it where it would be accepted and appreciated, I think that begins to color your judgment a little bit about what to show and how to show it and how to explain it, and encouraged in some cases a certain kind of caution and defensiveness about what is necessary.

SZ: So those were essentially...that was the situation as you saw it.

JS: I got off your question, didn't I?

SZ: I did want to go back to part of it, I think which was about Steichen....

JS: You asked whether the department had been formed by Steichen, and yes, of course, it had, to the degree that it existed, but it was also very much a product of the nature of the Museum's condition. The Museum was much smaller, and I think it also can be said that Steichen was interested primarily in exhibitions.

SZ: You said that...that he had not paid much attention at all to the collection.

JS: No, with some exceptions. He did some very good things for the collection, but I think it was largely out of a sense of perhaps duty and occasionally probably repeated nudgings from Alfred Barr, who, of course, considered the collection to be the center of the Museum. But for the most part, most of the collection grew more or less like Topsy.... There was no place to show the collection, finally, even in the last of those years there was one little bit of an alcove not much bigger than this room where one

could show thirty little pictures perhaps. He was also not interested in publications. I think the only publication done during Steichen's time was The Family of Man, which was not a Museum publication to begin with. Mason and S&S [Simon & Schuster] did it; S&S did the hardcover and Jerry Mason did the softcover. I think the first copy didn't appear until three or four months after the exhibition closed, so it was in a sense kind of an afterthought. I don't think the Museum ever thought it would fly.

SZ: Which is particularly funny in light of....

JS: ...what happened, yes. I think if it hadn't been for Jerry Mason, who was kind of a pirate but an interesting man in some ways, I don't think there probably would have ever been a book. So Steichen was primarily interested in exhibitions and not fundamentally interested in the collection, and not fundamentally interested in publications. My sense of the Museum, since I had only very seldom been in the building on occasional visits to New York — very occasional — my knowledge of it had been acquired primarily from the books done during the Newhall years and earlier, and also the traveling exhibitions in various earlier tenures, going way back to when I was a graduate at Wisconsin and we got Museum traveling exhibitions and hung them in the gallery at the Wisconsin student union, with no security [laughing]. I don't think we ever lost anything, but the place was open twenty-four hours a day and there were no guards; it was a room in the student union, with Kandinsky watercolors and Klees.

SZ: Given this situation and your coming to the Museum, what did you feel you wanted to address first, and also, was there a mandate from the Museum in terms of the department or was it articulated by you?

JS: I could probably dig out stuff that I sent to René. I know that it included a much heavier emphasis on publication, because Museum publications had been extremely important to me as a young photographer. More than half, at that point, of my serious library of how-to-do-it books were Museum books. There was American

Photographs, the first great Walker Evans book, and the Newhall history and the little Paul Strand monograph and the Cartier-Bresson monograph and the little Edward Weston monograph. I had a book by Berenice Abbott that was not from the Museum, but most of what I knew about photography had come by that route and also through traveling exhibitions. So I was interested in books, traveling exhibitions, and I thought that both the history and the formal character -- plus investigations -- of the major figures in the field had to be addressed in a more coherent and systematic and continuous way, but I don't remember any of those things word for word.

SZ: Where are your papers, John?

JS: Here and there. The Museum probably has that stuff more easily accessible than I do. And of course there was a good deal of pie-in-the-sky to those plans, because I didn't understand the nature of the situation at the Museum: how things got done, and how much one tends to assume that there is sort of a trunk of money somewhere and you go get your share and do your program. But, in fact, it didn't turn out to be quite like that. But in general it seems to me that the nature of the program did change in those ways and in those directions, and in fact we did begin to concentrate a good deal more on the traveling exhibitions, on publications, on both one-man exhibitions and also on exhibitions that investigated certain kinds of formal or critical issues, such as The Photographer in the American Landscape and The Photographer's Eye and Once Invisible, etc., which were not about generalized philosophical issues but rather fundamentally about formal or traditional issues, traditional meaning questions that had to do with the forming of photographic ideas.

SZ: You really started out talking today about part of the expectation, perhaps, of Steichen was a certain ability to pull in money, and clearly that was on some level an expectation they had of you. As you say, once you realized how things got done, you had to start thinking about that. I'm thinking at the same time the Museum was undergoing a building project, so that you were going to have somewhat more space.

JS: Of course, we did have some success in getting contributions, it seems to me, relatively generous in what was quite a limited amount of time. I came in in the middle of '62 and the new Museum opened in '64, in early spring, I recall. So by the time I knew my way to the men's room and some of the names of the more important secretaries, there was not a great deal of time but we did get some money, and I hope we put some use to that, and then we began to get corporate support for exhibitions and publications. The sums, of course, were pretty small by current standards; we didn't realize how serious the problem was. I can't remember those numbers. I can't remember what the first corporate grant we got was, but it involved a book. I think there were some before the Bill Eggleston book, but I can't remember which ones. One has a program, but you're not the only game, although in the beginning we were more or less close to that. I remember among the things that I told René I wanted to do, I remember two that I didn't do. I wanted to do a Paul Strand show, which I never did, because Philadelphia did it before we got around it, and I wanted to do a Gene Smith show that we never did because I never managed to come to terms with Smith, about how the show would be done and who was in charge, what the ground rules were. That show was finally done at The Jewish Museum. Then, increasingly, as other institutions became active, a lot of things that one would have liked to have done one didn't do because other institutions got to be smart too, which I regarded as a great thing. [Tape interruption]

SZ: You had just mentioned how other institutions began to do a lot of what the Museum was doing, and I was going to ask you when, in the course of things, the galleries became an important part of that.

JS: The galleries were late. I think the first photography gallery that actually stayed open, that didn't fold, that made a living primarily selling photographs, was Lee Witkin. I'll tell you when that was if you'll give me one second.... [Tape Interruption] Light probably started in the early '70s, and others around the same time. Of course, there were also increasingly frequent photography shows in painting galleries. But I think earlier...an interesting situation was, people who were interested in the contemporary

arts were by and large perfectly willing to grant that photography was an art of sorts and an interesting one and that it had on occasion been practiced by artists of considerable stature, but it was not part of the art business. But it was not unique, really, in that. Everyone admitted that architecture was an art, and everyone admitted that some architectural drawings were not only historically of extreme interest but aesthetically extraordinarily beautiful. But they weren't part of the art business either until...you need at least two people who want them. Phyllis Lambert and a few of the collecting museums finally established that architectural drawings were objects of substantial monetary value simply because more than one person wanted them at the same time, and therefore the price got bid up to the point where it was practical for galleries to deal with them. Of course, it's like a lot of other things a two-edged sword, but when Witkin managed to stay afloat, that was an indication of the fact that people had begun to have adequate interest in photographs as objects, so that not only could photography be regarded as a legitimate art but that photographs were regarded as art objects. When I came to the Museum, Steichen had normally been paying $10, which was a raise from $5 for a print by a young, coming photographer, not for an old master, which was negotiated on some other terms but which was also very low. I thought that was pretty low, so I raised it to $25 as the standard price [laughing]. For years we had a Harry Callahan traveling exhibition that went anywhere to anyplace that wanted it, and with some regularity one of the nude Eleanor photographs would be gone, missing from whatever college gallery it happened to be hanging in at the time. The traveling exhibition department would call up Harry and say, "We've lost another print of Eleanor number, whatever," and Harry would say, "Terrific" — I think they were insured for $40, perhaps $35, $40, and that was fine with Harry because those were the only prints he was selling. So that began to change about 1970. As photographs began to acquire more substantial monetary value...that created a world of collectors and galleries and a different attitude, of course, on the part of museums. When I came to the Museum there was one acquisitions committee, and it really was very interesting. Jim Soby was chairman of the committee, and he really did his level best to be meticulously fair about dividing the time among the various departments, but, of course, the acquisitions committee

itself was composed primarily of people who collected paintings [laughing], so when Arthur Drexler would get up with his free poster or a six-pack of Pyrex glasses [laughter] that you could buy at the corner housewares store for a dollar or something, everyone was terribly polite and both Alfred and Soby were terribly good about educating the committee, but, nevertheless, sometimes you'd be up making your speech about the $25 photograph and look out the window and see the cars lined up, in those days perhaps even with their motors running, and you couldn't, no matter how fast you talked, there was no way you could spend money fast enough to pay for the salaries of the chauffeurs or not even probably for the gasoline. So there were some interesting, ironic aspects to this fact that the Museum considered all arts equal.

SZ: And yet did not.

JS: The Museum did and yet they weren't in certain terms equal. Of course they weren't — not only in cost but often in...but that was also inherent in the idea of trying to deal with recent and contemporary work in any medium. It wasn't going always going to be equal to something else that had really established it.

SZ: I assume what you're saying, certainly in the example you gave with Arthur, that it was more difficult for members of that committee to know about and appreciate what you were interested in than other things that came before them.

JS: I think it meant a number of things. It meant that those of us who had to defend work that was not of personal interest to the committee as collectors maybe had to make better speeches or be more diverting, certainly not more diverting or entertaining than Alfred, of course [laughter]. But it was kind of a challenge, and it was an interesting challenge. Arthur at his best and in his good moods was just terrific at finding a way to illustrate to people how interesting these objects were, even if they came with relatively little or no preparation.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 3

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 3

JS: I think Dick Griffith would come to only one meeting a year and he'd give a kind of a generalized thirty-minute lecture about the films that had been acquired — extremely interesting, very entertaining. But it finally proved simply to be too cumbersome, so after the expanded Museum was opened in '64 and each department had its own acquisition committee, which was of course much more practical and enabled the Museum to acquire many more works and to have many more people on its acquisitions committees, therefore more support, more interest. But something surely was lost. Much was gained and something was lost, because the collegial quality of the Museum, which I think still exists, although not, perhaps as in as pronounced or as clear a way as it did, the collegial quality of the Museum was perhaps more clearly evident in meetings like that where the departments were competing, not so much for money, because the money did tend to be locally acquired and in a sense kept; but the competition for the attention of the Museum's governing body was very clear and fascinating and I think in general healthy. I'll just wander aimlessly unless you provide some structure to this conversation.

SZ: I enjoy your wandering, but. . until '67 when Barr retired and then René left in '68, there was that triumvirate of....

JS: Barr, of course, didn't leave.

SZ: I assumed that by the time you came he was already....

JS: No, no, not at all. When René accepted the job as director — now you have these dates in your head more clearly than I — he had been at the Museum as part of this troika.

SZ: In one sense, yes, but there was no director until he actually became director in '49.

JS: But before that he was the first among equals of this coordinating committee. When René was asked to become director, one of the conditions that he made was that Barr be reinstated to a position of authority commensurate to what he had meant and continued to mean to the Museum. So Barr was made director of the collections, which was a position of very real power. It was not a figurehead position at all, and, in effect, even after Barr retired I think he continued to exercise great authority over the formation of the collection, specifically the painting and sculpture collection, because if Alfred didn't think it was a good idea, it would never get through the committee.

SZ: Even after '67?

JS: I'm sure. And I'm sure that Bill [Rubin] was smart enough to realize that. Have you interviewed Bill? Doesn't that correspond to what he said? When I came, most of the temporary exhibitions were being done by Bill Seitz and Peter Selz. Too bad Bill is no longer with us. My sense of those days was that Bill and Peter would spend a year or whatever devoting themselves to some temporary show — an oldie, or Bill's...Responsive Eye, and Hans Hoffmann — a series of major shows at that time that Seitz and Selz did, and they would pull all these pictures together from all over the world. But when they wanted to buy something for the collection, they really came as supplicants. The fact that they now could be presumed to be among the world's leading scholars on this particular painter by no means meant that their proposals would simply walk through the committee unscathed. Alfred maintained very firm control over the P&S collection.

SZ: Which had its disadvantages in a situation like that, with people who presumed that they should have had more of a say in it.

JS: I'm sure they did, regardless or without reference to...I'm not suggesting any lack of

respect for Alfred but simply that they are the ones who happened to have spent the last year of the their lives on it. Ask Peter. But it seemed quite clear to me that that was the case. And of course Dorothy [Miller], that was a different kind of relationship anyhow, and Dorothy probably would not have...the disagreement would have been ironed out much earlier. So Alfred was in a position of great authority, and I suspect that René and Alfred had problems, but they were never visible in public. René was such a great diplomat and such a great man, a superb man, who understood Alfred's greatness -- not only his greatness but his value and his centrality to the institution -- and he recognized his abilities, and that his abilities were not adequately made use of and if his spirit and vision weren't adequately recognized that the Museum really couldn't prosper and advance as it should have. And then René, of course, didn't intend to go away and evaporate, either. He made it very, very clear that the new director would be sort of the inside man, dealing with the staff and with the day-to-day operations, and gradually, presumably little by little, dealing more and more independently with the board and the outside. But it was, I think, anticipated that René would continue to deal at least equally with the new director. It sounds as though this would never work, but with René it would have worked because of his diplomatic skills, but also that he would be sort of the outside man, and he would be the person who would deal to a very large degree with foundations and to a certain extent with industry, because it was understood that the Museum needed money after the '64 expansion — not only that it needed money but that it needed new sources of money; it needed money of a new order of magnitude. Two days later, René got killed, so poor Bates [Lowry] — Bates and the trustees both — were put in a situation that no one had anticipated and that probably nobody would have expected could work. That wasn't the job Bates was selected to do. He wasn't expected to be thrown in there without any help, without any guidance, without any buffer between him and the board.

SZ: I guess he had come in January of that year as director of Painting and Sculpture, and I guess René was killed in August. That's right.

JS: I'd even forgotten that Bates came in as head of Painting and Sculpture, and I don't remember how much time he spent there. Was he still finishing up in Florence?

SZ: You mean Brown? I think Florence was finished.

JS: I don't think so. Whatever. I'm sure that's all part of the record somewhere. But if he was there, he was dealing with plans and ambitions and etc., but he was not extremely visible as far as the running of the Museum was concerned. If he was the director of Painting and Sculpture, he was presumably locked up in that department. Obviously, it did not go well. I think it might have with a little more patience. I think he was beginning to learn what the nature of the job was, and I think he might have been very good.

SZ: Because? I guess what I'm asking is what did you see in him that could be classified as....

JS: A) He was smart; b) I think he was genuinely interested in art; and c) he was his own man and he had a taste for leadership. But he was a little isolated, a little insulated from the real world, and like a lot of people who are academic successes, he was a little arrogant — you might even say he was more than a little arrogant in the beginning, because the Museum is a much different kind of a place than an art history department, and somebody who thinks they're going to come in and run it is in for a big surprise. You don't run it. It's more like a garden: you tend it. But you try to get rid of the weeds without killing the good stuff and you try to condition the ground and you try to help provide the fertilizing elements — money and talent — but Bates was young and he had never tried to do anything that complicated, and so he thought you ran it. He was only there a year, and he was beginning to learn that you didn't, that that's not what you did, but it was too late. I think the trustees were impatient.

SZ: He was handicapped, too, by the fact that in different ways these very strong

presences had...René was gone and Alfred was essentially gone, although you say he still played a big part, and I think Monroe was getting ready to retire, too. I was thinking of him as well.

JS: I don't know what Marga [Barr] thought of Bates, but Marga could be mercurial and her opinion surely would not have been insignificant. I don't think it would have been insignificant to Alfred and perhaps elsewhere, also.

SZ: How did all that upheaval -- or did it -- affect your department and what you were doing?

JS: It affected all the departments, I think, enormously, because it was the beginning of a time of bad trouble that continued until well into Dick's [Dick Oldenburg] tenure, until Dick finally managed to bring a kind of peace and a considerable degree of tranquility, stability at least, to the Museum. But surely those problems, the problems of the period of Bates and then John [Hightower], and the little troika, certainly contributed to and exacerbated the problems of relationships with the staff, including PASTA [the Professional and Administrative Staff Association]. I think it was a period where there were very, very difficult morale problems in the Museum, on all levels.

SZ: Did you feel it?

JS: As a department, I think our department managed to maintain good morale throughout as a department. It was a small department and I think everybody was interested in what we were doing, and maybe because I was such a bad administrator, everybody felt responsible for everything [laughter]. I don't think anybody ever felt like a hireling. I don't know why that was. There was so much to do that hadn't been done yet and there were scarcely any highly trained people then, so it was natural to give pretty remarkable levels of responsibility and opportunity to people who had never really done anything. It didn't seem so strange to me. I'd never done much either, frankly, in the Museum, in a traditional Museum context [laughing].

So I think that as a department we managed to maintain good morale throughout, but it was nevertheless a drag, because it was a tension that should have been going to the real issues and kept getting diverted into what seemed to me to be secondary issues, peripheral issues. God knows I resented all the time I spent on those negotiating committees. I thought that was a desperate...although I guess it's one of those things somebody had to do, so I'd do it, and you try to do it as best you can. There was, I think, a pervading sense in those years of wheelspinning. That doesn't mean that excellent things didn't get done.

SZ: No, I was looking at your exhibition list.

JS: No, I meant the Museum as a whole.

SZ: The place of that union [PASTA] at the Museum — how did you view that?

JS: I was against it, I was unsympathetic to it, because I thought it was absolutely the wrong unit. Do you know what that means in labor?

SZ: You mean that the teamsters were the wrong...?

JS: No. That too, but I meant that the group of people eligible for membership in that union — the unit — is the wrong unit. I think it was mischievous to allow curatorial assistants and assistant curators and...I can't remember now whether associates are in or out. Some, I guess, are in and some are out of the unit — associate curators. Anyway, to split up the teams that are actually doing the Museum's most central work and say that some of them are in a union along with receptionists and clerks, and others of them are management. I understand that for strategic reasons on both sides, on the union side and on the management side, I can see why both sides thought that was a good idea. I've always thought it was a terrible idea, not only a terrible idea but mischievous. It creates a totally artificial barrier in the middle of groups of people who should be working together with the maximum of cooperation

and trust, openly and without secrets and without security worries. So basically that's what I think. I'm not sure that it has been advantageous to the younger professionals. I think it has made it more difficult for younger professionals in the Museum to rise to higher positions in the Museum because it encourages secretiveness, it encourages split agendas within departments, and it encourages "us and them" thinking. I rather doubt that it has had a real...there probably is no simple across-the-board answer to this, and in what was my own department I doubt very much that there was an economic advantage to people in the union. I know that in the prior period, of course starting from a base that was probably pretty ludicrous, but the increase in salary base to people in my department, somebody rose much more rapidly before the formation of the union than after. Like I say, that's probably a skewed statistic, because it started so low [tape interruption].

SZ: I think we finished with that topic.

JS: What was it?

SZ: PASTA, and the "troubles."

JS: I think it's probably fair to think of those two issues as part of the same issue. I think it's quite likely...understand the Museum is not a universe unto itself, and certainly at that time there were sources of pressures that produced unrest that certainly were going to reflect themselves in the art community even earlier than elsewhere. But I think it would have been easier to handle them in a less destructive way if it hadn't been for the fact that the Museum was already in a time of troubles, that it hadn't managed to...after Bates, John.... [laughing].

SZ: John was certainly caught up in that, right?

JS: Sure. And such a nice man. I think he was really a very decent man, and I think John, too, was beginning to learn. John was also beginning to figure out what the

Museum was for. I think Bates knew what it was for but didn't know how to go about...he knew what a museum was for but he didn't know how to go about running one when he came. John was maybe a little more sophisticated in some ways politically, but he didn't know what a museum was for. But he was, I think, beginning to learn, too, when his time ran out.

SZ: Just to finish it, from your point of view, how did you feel about the Museum's place in the political world in that way, which was something that John was trying to....

JS: I think that art has political content — all art has political content. Some art has more obvious and more direct and more active political content than other art, and I think that's obvious, as it should be — inevitable. Times when I would have questions or doubts or problems with the Museum's relationship to political activity, it had to do with who was differentiating the art — the artist, the curator, or the program. In my view, I was an artist a long time before I came to the Museum. For close to twenty years, that's what I thought I was, and I resented it if, in a museum context, I felt my work was being used to promote somebody else's agenda, or to promote an idea that was distinct from or separate from or contradictory to what I thought the work was about.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 3

BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 4

JS: If you're a photographer, at least in those days, you were working to promote other people's agendas, whether you were photographing a bowl of Quaker Oats splashing down on it or somebody else's architecture or somebody else's wedding or somebody else's portrait, hoping to make them look like, as they choose, Napoleon or Nehru or Mahatma Gandhi or Albert Einstein — whatever model they have in their head. You're always doing that. That's commercial work; that's illustration. The idea comes from someplace else and you execute it, so that in a Museum or any other

kind of serious, disinterested context, if you feel the same things happening as happens in the commercial world, you dig in your feet and resist. So that when I came to the Museum I felt that it was very important to maintain, at least in my mind important to maintain, a distinction between what the artist's role was and what the curator's role was, and not to confuse them. I think that the department showed a lot of work with very powerful political content, but it had to do with the clarification of the intuitions of the photographer that did the work, not with some other issue. The first show I ever did at the Museum, actually, was called Five Unrelated Photographers, and the title and the choice of the photographers were meant to spell out that these were individual people, as opposed to a title like Always the Young Strangers or Diogenes with a Camera, the point being that they should be looked at as individuals trying to make their own individual sense out their intuition of what the world looks like. This is a slightly indirect answer, but what I'm saying is that I never objected to the political content of any work that I thought was interesting work at the Museum, but I sometimes was made nervous by the idea that the Museum was betting on the [inaudible], so to speak, in a way calling the shots, saying, "We are available to this." Further, I don't think this happened much and I don't think it happened to any substantial degree, I'm simply saying that if we're talking about curatorial worries....

SZ: Right.

JS: Also in the case of works which are not really formed at the time when the exhibition is scheduled and the space is not ready, it seems to me that it's very important to spell out as clearly as possible, at least conceptually, who's in charge. On what grounds is the curator responsible and on what grounds is the artist responsible, so that a) the institution's prerogatives are respected, and b) so that the artist doesn't become the tool of the institution or of the curator. The reason I never was successful in doing a Gene Smith show was because I could never get Gene to agree on any kind of ground rules as to a) what the exhibition was going to consist of, how big it would be, what its position was [inaudible] the space. I think that's basically pretty much how The Jewish Museum show was done, not that it wasn't

nearly as good as it should have been, but it also meant that the Museum really has very little idea of what it's announcing to the public, what it's suggesting the public should see, what it's raising money for, or what it's putting its name on. I finally said, "Gene, look: you design the show on paper. I won't have anything to do with it. You say, 'These are the pictures, these are the sizes, these are the sequences.' Tell me what you want to do and I'll look at it, and I'm confident that, even though I'm sure I would have done it differently, but you design it and show me what you're going to do, and I'm confident that I'm going to think it's good enough so I can to take it to the Museum and say, 'This is important, we must do this, I stand in back of this, I've formed a critical opinion of it and we should do it. It's maybe not the way I would have wanted to do it, but I know what it is and it's good enough and we should do it.'" And he said, "Okay, we'll do it that way." But of course he didn't because it was too much work or because then he would have committed himself to something he might have later changed his mind about. So it's a problem, especially with art that doesn't have to do with discrete objects that you make and then you put in a storeroom somewhere. But I think that it's a problem that's got to be dealt with recognition of the fact of certain institutional responsibilities that just can't be ducked, and on other hand, certain artist prerogatives that the museums, institutions, should keep their hands off of. So those are the areas in which I was sometimes a little troubled about the changes in the natures of questions and political content and political action. But basically I think the Museum has done very well and has acted responsibly and has not usurped the artists' prerogatives. The Family of Man, of course, also had political content. I don't think it was Steichen's aim, but [inaudible] whether that's your aim or not. He was in a sense trying to do the world's greatest photo-story, and the idea sort of gradually worked itself out of what I think he considered the formal potentials of the materials he was working with allowed. The story kind of came with the solution. In other words, you worked out the formal problem and the only way to work it out was with a certain kind of building blocks that I believe held within them the nature of the political content. Folks is folks allover was the political message, and it's maybe the kind of message that you're going to come up with if you try to put together a lot of good Life magazine photographs in a coherent way, in a more coherent way than

the magazine ever managed to do — Life magazine photographs and a lot of others that were similar in their basic vocabulary. And it was terrific. Also, it was put together by a terrifically talented artist. Steichen was extraordinarily talented, and I think this was one of the best things he ever did — I don't just mean exhibition, but as a work of art. But whether or not museum curators should do works of art is....

SZ: ...still a question?

JS: Yes. I think the answer is no, they shouldn't, basically.

SZ: You certainly are in a position to have thought about it.

JS: Yes [laughing], but that doesn't mean I'm right.

SZ: But that's what you think.

JS: Because you can't, without revising the meanings of the works of art that you're using as component parts. Obviously, you can't put two pictures in the same room without one affecting the other one, but if you do that knowing that that's true and trying to put them together in such a way so that the individual pictures maintain as much as possible of their integrity, their individuality, then I think you're doing what...without leaning on each other any more than is inevitable, without redefining each other, without making each other invisible or without making each other look stupid or ugly, to allow them their own living space as much as possible. Even if you're dealing with Post-Impressionism in some country, of course you're talking about connections that exist within the pictures, but beyond that, you want to make the pictures visible individually, not simply part of a quilt.

SZ: So this goes back also to what you saw and what you thought about when you came in, because it's really not what Steichen was doing.... Maybe just to finish this part of it up -- the "troubles," -- how, if at all, did the struggle between the two Bills affect life

there?

JS: That's too hard a question for me. I don't know, I can't remember — other than the level of Museum jokes [laughing].... On one level, of course, it was amusing, and on another level it was aggravating and tendentious. I think that our museum has operated very much more on the basis of a kind of collegial concept than other museums. Basically, in our museum it always comes as a great surprise to me that in other museums this isn't true, but during my time, at our museum, ideas consistently -- probably with two or three exceptions one could think of going down the whole exhibition calendar, probably chiefly if a trustee with a good collection dies or something, the department is going to be much more likely aware and ready to act than the Museum. With few if any exceptions in my years at the Museum, exhibition ideas started at the department level and they worked their way up and they're discussed in committee, and then finally the director makes some kind of tentative decision and it's taken to the trustee committee and hopefully during times of peace it's rubber-stamped. But the ideas start at the bottom. The advantage to that kind of collegial method is that, if you have good people, and if you have good people who are capable of arguing in a socially acceptable way, there is a healthy and fruitful competition that proposes new ideas. The disadvantage of a collegial system is that it can lead, perhaps, to a kind of hardening of certain patterns, whereby, for instance, Drawings or Prints and Illustrated Books, however one has divided up one's table of organization, there is a certain expectation, like dividing up the city budget among budgets. There is a certain expectation, even though in most cases it doesn't have to do with money, it has to do with space, it has to do with attention in the Publications department, attention in the Public Information department, whatever, these things tend to get a little codified, because departments have their own staffs, they have their own committees, they have their own friends. Finally, 2,000 years later, one finds one still has a Roman coin department, even though the amount of interest in this question may be considerably, that is, the amount of authority and power yielded by the department of Roman coins may be in excess of the proportional amount of public interest that seems to be being served, or scholarly interest. Part of the whole

Bill and Bill business -- Bill Lieberman was made head of Painting and Sculpture; and then it was felt that it wasn't working out so well, so Bill Rubin was made head of Painting and Sculpture. But in the meantime, Riva [Castleman] had been made chairman of Prints and Drawings. So, in order to make room for everybody, Bill [Lieberman] was made director of Drawings and Riva was made, so that she didn't have fewer words in her title, director of Prints and Illustrated Books. Now each of these fiefdoms remains...except there's an additional fiefdom now, because Illustrated Books were already in there anyhow, so a new department has been created, and not because it made any real functional sense. It probably should be the Department of Painting and Sculpture and Drawings. I'm not saying what should be, but I'm saying that if one sat down with a paper and pencil, Prints is a little more questionable, but maybe even you could throw prints in there too; they could have a special area, because certainly more often than not, people who are interesting as printmakers also draw and paint. And it might make it easier to design a coherent exhibition program if you didn't have one department responsible for Picasso's prints and one department responsible for Picasso's drawings and one department responsible for his paintings and his sculptures. You asked what was the influence on the Museum of the differences of opinion between Bill [Rubin] and Bill [Lieberman]. Well, it was not so much the differences of opinion between Bill and Bill, but those fiefdom problems, especially when you begin splitting fiefdoms so you can add more chiefs, I think obviously the reason why it was done is very clear and rational and responsible, but it's difficult to un-do. It is exactly the same reason why it is difficult to really wholly amalgamate Harvard and Radcliffe or Columbia and Barnard. Perhaps because there's not any inherent logical reason why Radcliffe students and Harvard students cannot be considered as the same thing, but because Radcliffe has got a president and Harvard has got a president and they've both got alumni associations and they've both got fundraising departments. They've both got supporting interest groups, so that's what makes it difficult.

SZ: The choice of Dick — was it an obvious one when it came up, or were you surprised?

JS: It wasn't obvious. It wouldn't have been obvious except for the fact that...in principle he's not an obvious choice, but he came as head of the Publications department and he obviously was very smart, he obviously was a very good diplomat, he obviously had the interests of the Museum at heart. He was not a free lance, and that's enormously important. I didn't realize how committed he was until much later, when he went through terrible times, a long strike and so forth. But it was obvious to me that he was the right person. I was on some kind of committee to advise the trustees.

SZ: Another one of those time-wasters?

JS: I didn't think this one was so bad. Who was on it? Betsy Jones and Dick Palmer and me and I can't remember who else. I remember that I was very much persuaded that he was the right man, and that it was the right time. It had to be done. I can't remember how many people we looked at at that time, a lot of whom were good people but a lot of whom, in a political sense, simply weren't available because they didn't have either trustee confidence, staff confidence — not that one didn't think they were terrific people and they might have been perfect if they'd been the first one chosen after René, but at this point the feeling was that one needed someone that one knew and trusted. The fact that he wasn't an art historian, that's minor in comparison with what one sensed was required at the time, which was somebody who was sane and intelligent and who had the Museum's interests at heart and who was a diplomat who could work with people. I don't think it was equally obvious to everyone, but it seemed obvious to me. I don't mean that it made any difference, don't misunderstand me, although I think I was perhaps persuasive on the staff committee. But I think the important thing was that [Bill] Paley was convinced, so I think it would have happened [anyway]; he was a very persuasive fellow. He certainly carried the board.

SZ: I guess it was right.

JS: There's no question in my mind. I think he's done a terrific job. I think it is, as it's being demonstrated, it's not easy to replace him [laughing].

SZ: What is it, two years now?

JS: It's getting there. I think the original schedule was that he was leaving at Christmas, and no news in sight, apparently.

SZ: You might know more than I.

JS: I don't know anything, but I gather that Anne [d'Harnoncourt] turned it down again.

SZ: There's just nothing. That's a whole other discussion, how things have changed [tape interruption]. Why don't we just finish up the institutional part and I can come back to you and your department. There's just so much, I don't know quite how to do this. Let's go back and talk about...I don't know whether you said this or somebody else did this, but that the first big, important show you did was New Documents.

JS: No, I didn't say that.

SZ: And it's not true.

JS: I don't think it is, no. I think The Photographer's Eye was an important show, and I think it had very substantial effect on the way people thought about...I'm talking about those relatively modest numbers in relation to the entire three billion population, or whatever it is, of the globe who think about photography and what had went before and how it might be used, but in that world I think that The Photographer's Eye had some effect on the way people thought about photography and the way they taught it and the way they criticized it and the way they came to new work. It was an attempt to deal with the...one could say it was an attempt to deal

with the formal issues of photography, and I think that would be true, but I think I would prefer to say that it was a way of analyzing the kinds of decisions that photographers inevitably make when they're working. It seemed to me that if you understand the categories of decision that photographers must inevitably make, whether they think about it or not or ever attempted to analyze them or not — in fact, I don't think anybody had ever analyzed them before — and I really think that show, and subsequently, the book, persuaded a lot of reasonably intelligent people that...the definitions made in that book comprised a new, interesting way to think about the analysis and criticism of photography, and I think that might have been the most important show I ever did at the Museum.

SZ: And one of the earlier.

JS: Sixty-four, yes.

SZ: What about New Documents?

JS: It was an exhibition of three photographers who I thought were photographers of exceptional and original virtue at that time and who in retrospect I think probably were the three most original and most influential photographers of that generation. They were Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand and Diane Arbus. Arbus had at that time — that was '67 — and her first mature work, the work for which she is remembered and revered, didn't really begin, I think, until about '63, a picture or two in '62. That was absolutely the beginning of it, and also because she was quite secretive...not secretive, she was hesitant about exhibiting her work, because she knew she was doing something original and interesting and she also knew that it was superficially work that could easily be imitated. So she wanted to get it to a point where she thought she'd really accomplish something before having it degraded by idiot imitators who only knew the surface of it. She continued and her work got...it may be hard to say it got better, but it certainly became richer, and she continued to do extremely interesting work until she died in '69 or '70, when she killed herself.

Which was an astonishing surprise. I had no inkling of it. She seemed to me to be a non-suicidal type and full of a kind of intellectual gaiety; no hint of self-pity or anything like that in her at all. In any case, Friedlander has continued to get better ever since. I think Friedlander is the best we've got still, twenty-five years later. That isn't exactly what I meant to say. I meant to say that twenty-five years later his work is still changing and still growing, and that now and for several years he's been the best photographer working, if that isn't by nature idiotic to say, that somebody is the best. And Winogrand, everybody knows what I think about Winogrand, because I've written it down. But they were three really astonishing young artists, either in their...young. Lee was in his mid-thirties and Garry was maybe forty and Diane was probably more than forty by a year or so. But they were terrific, and you pick the best work and you put it up and people look at it and they're changed, so what's the big deal? It doesn't seem to me...you either recognize it or you don't recognize it. The rest is just bureaucratic busywork.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 4

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 4

JS: I was talking about what a curator does, or what I think a curator does. If you spent some substantial portion of a life usefully in a certain medium and are reasonably alert and reasonably open-minded you should be able to recognize new work when it comes out, which has nothing to do with personal expression, except incidentally. Everything has to do with personal expression, so that's not an issue. Do you know anybody that has managed to avoid personal expression in their life?

SZ: Maybe one or two.

JS: Really creative people [laughter]. But basically, that sort of comes with the territory, and everybody achieves that, it's just that some are a lot more interesting than others. Some people in their work manage to suggest new possibilities, new

openings, potential new positions to occupy which are interesting and which in turn promise to open up new vistas and succeeding new possibilities. And that's tradition, that's what the lifeline of the species of endeavor is about. And that's what I'm interested in. So, assuming that you're prepared and assuming that you're reasonably alert, it doesn't seem to me that it was so difficult at that time to say, "Okay, these three people are really extraordinary and they're better than X, Y, and Z, who are doing related things." And yet, they are all significantly different. Any one of them doesn't explain the moment as well as the three of them together. That's not hard. I don't think that's hard. And then, depending on how persuaded you are of the validity of your own judgment, how much energy you put into it, the difficult part is then maintaining enthusiasm and continuing to try to tell other people, "No, it can't be done. It can't be done in one little room on the fourth floor. The scale is not right and I'll need the east and the northwest and the far west in order to really...." The story of that book is fascinating, an interesting story. Maybe I should tell you. After Diane died, her great friend Marvin Israel came. I think it was a platonic friendship, a good, close friendship. Marvin said, "Do you want to do an exhibition on Diane?" And I said, "Of course." He said, "Good. Normally, I'm sure you'd also want to do a book, but let me explain to you, her children are penniless. Not only are they penniless, but if the IRS finds out" — because Diane had just begun to sell a few prints, and the prices were not high; maybe they'd gotten up to, she'd probably sold a few prints for $250, but she had a closetful — "if the IRS finds out she's got a closetful of prints, valued at $250 a piece, the children are going to be stuck with a bill which will mean they are not only penniless but deep in debt. I think we should try to make some money for the children from the book, so if you will let me do the book, I know a French packager who says that he can sell billions." I said, "Terrific, I think that's a great idea, and one can do a special Museum edition. When your packager gets the publisher in hand, tell him to come and I'm sure that he will make a proposition that would be attractive to Carl Morse," who was head of the Publications department then, "and the Museum will do its own edition and the children will make a lot of money, and you're right, if the Museum did it the children wouldn't make any money, nobody would make any money. So it's perfect, it's great." So this fancy French

packager took the book and he apparently took it to all the European publishers, and everybody said, "Fantastic, wonderful, never seen anything like it. I don't think anybody will buy it." Finally, more than a year later, the French packager gave it back to Marvin and said, "I'm sorry, I gave up, I can't sell." So they tried to peddle it themselves, and everybody said the same thing: "Marvelous, great. Can't sell it." So the exhibition I think opened maybe Thanksgiving time, sometime around that part of the year. Marvin came and said, "We've struck out." This is about fifteen months or something after the original conversation. I said, "I'll take it to the Museum, but they're going to laugh at me at this point. It's four months before the exhibition opens." So I went to Carl and I clearly was asking him to do something that flew in the teeth of the Museum's rules and regulations and policies on deciding how to do books. He said, "Well, let me see it over the weekend, I'll talk to you on Monday." On Monday he said, "Jack, I think maybe we can do a sixteen-page checklist with a few illustrations, but that's it." I said, "Never mind." So I think it was the same day, I had a lunch date with Michael Hoffmann, the publisher of Aperture, and he said something to the effect of "You're looking very glum." I said, "I'm not up to my usual high spirits. We're doing an Arbus exhibition, opening Thanksgiving time, and I've finally struck out. There's not going to be an Arbus book, and if there can't be an Arbus book when there's a one-man, retrospective, posthumous exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, there will never be an Arbus book. If there can't be one now there will never be one, and now it's too late." He said, "It's very late. I wouldn't say it's too late, but it's very late." But he said, "I don't really like the work." I said, "Michael, never mind that, but you said you didn't think it was too late?" He said, "Well, it's very, very late, but it might not be too late." I said, "All right, Michael, let's have a nice lunch and then we'll go back to the Museum and I'll bring you into my light on this." So we did, we had a nice lunch and he came back to the Museum, and by the end of the afternoon he said, "You're right: it's got to be done." That didn't mean that there wasn't still a lot of negotiating. Then Michael went and sold Carl Morse maybe 3,000 sets of sheets for a special binding, a special edition, and Carl thought he was virtually handing Michael his head in his hands. He figured he'd never get rid of 3,000 of these books, that it would be another dumping job. The 3,000 books were gone, I think, in the first

five days of the exhibition. Nobody knew. I didn't know. I just thought it had to be done and the work deserved it. But suddenly, between '67 and when was this, '71 or whatever, there had been a real tidal shift in sensibility and what before just looked strange and exotic and unusual and maybe even slightly perverse had come to look tragic or normal [laughing].

SZ: Which might be the tragic part.

JS: Right. People went through that show in silence. They didn't talk about lunch dates; it was as though people were in a line waiting to take a step to the next picture and then a step to the next picture. But once in a while things work that way and one happens to do an exhibition or a book or something at a time when people are ready to take it seriously. It doesn't have to do, necessarily, with whether it's good or bad. It's just a kind of confluence of things. The same thing could have been done, or equally good work could have been shown. That work could have been shown earlier and not have that kind of effect, or it could have been shown then and not had that kind of an effect. There are certain moments when....

SZ: There's a sort of a serendipitous.

JS: Yes. Serendipitous in terms of timing. I had a terrible time getting the Eggleston book done. We sat on that work for years trying to find support and finally found enough money to go forward with it, and it was still too soon [laughing], as far as the public response was concerned. I think Hilton's [Hilton Kramer] review was the most memorable, because he writes well and his insults have a kind of ring and tang to them that most people don't achieve, but in content it wasn't much different than what almost everybody else said about that show. It was a total, total mystery. Including opinion shared by a lot of people who I think are good photographers, who regarded it as kind of meaningless — meaningless, random snapshots — who now regard him as brilliant, great, a master pioneer of color photography. There isn't any doubt in my mind very much that what is the best of color photography done since

then owes an enormous debt to his discoveries. But if everything you do is immediately met with public approval, you must be too late. That would tend to suggest that everybody already knew that that was good.

SZ: Or else you're a total genius.

JS: I don't think that's the issue. I think whether you're a total genius or whether you're an everyday nudnik, if everything you do is greeted with applause, it means everybody understood it before you did it. That doesn't mean it can't be done with a little extra panache or little individual mannerisms, but that's what popular art is about, I suppose.

SZ: This is kind of belated, but what about your position, the power that you had. I know that you were attacked for it and also praised for it, and I guess I'm asking you if you felt you had that kind of power and how you dealt with that.

JS: You do have a kind of power. You have the power to make certain decisions about what you think is really good, and then, if you have the patience and the tenacity, you can maybe eventually bring these things to public visibility. That's a kind of power. Once you've brought them to public visibility, your power is over, it's spent. Somebody, say, working in Public Information, or even a curator using Public Information techniques, can, if they're willing to invest the time and energy and effort and a certain percentage of the budget for good lunches and so forth, can get a certain amount of momentary attention for whatever they're trying to sell, and certainly within the art world generally, the art world is rich with examples of the fact that it's possible to get temporary attention for most anything. Maybe that's putting it a little strongly, but certainly there is an amount of temporary attention for a lot of stuff that I might suspect will not be of great attention three or four years hence, and that in fact, in the case of stuff that was promoted three and four and five years ago, that is no longer of interest, or of much interest, today. So that in the short term in the art world as it works, you can get attention for most stuff you might want to get

attention for if you're willing to put enough energy and time and money into it. But only in the short term, because basically the importance of the work is only measured by what subsequent artists make of it. Anything else is just public relations. So that once one uses one's authority or power to say, "Okay, I want to show this and I want to show that and I want to show that," then, assuming one has the tenacity to work to get it done even if it's not easy to get it done, then once you get it up there, that's it. In any curator's professional life, if that life is extended over any length of time at all, if you look over the total exhibition record the viewer will find that some exhibitions are stones dropped into bottomless wells from which the echo never comes back, and no ripples ever spread out — although the curator's power and the power of the institution the curator worked for was apparently the same for those exhibitions, as it was for all the others. And, it wasn't necessarily that those exhibitions were ignored when they were new; in fact, there was very modest public attention, press attention, to many exhibitions that I thought were the most useful and original that I did when I was at the Museum. The ones that proved to be calendar-fillers in retrospective terms did not necessarily get less public attention. The idea that a curator makes the history of art can only be believed by people who know nothing about art. It can only be believed by ignorant people — ignorant in that field, in that area. You can momentarily, perhaps, bend and deflect the attention of the world, if that's what you wanted to do, for a while, but if one believes, as I believe, in tradition, which I do — I mean, why do you think Picasso had those pictures by Cézanne and by Pissarro, not to mention Braque and Matisse and his contemporaries, but the earlier stuff; why do you think that Cézanne would draw the motifs of Delacroix and Poussin? Because you're trying to learn from what is already known to convert it into something that's new. From the end of that diving board makes possible new implications of exciting new possibilities, and that's what the game is about [laughing]. Only the Sunday supplements think the great artists are original in the sense that they keep inventing a wheel. If one believes that, which seems to me completely self-evident and obvious, then the authority of a curator is currently put in its proper, minor perspective....

SZ: There's an ancillary issue -- of the power of the curator and/or the institution in terms of its effect on the market.

JS: Of course it has that. Anything that affects public opinion about artistic value, virtually anything, eventually is likely to have its effect on the market, sometimes very rapidly.... Because of the way in which Mr. Steichen liked to do exhibitions, which generally involved producing prints for the exhibition so that he could decide on the relative sizes and so forth — since you'd have some big prints and little prints — so that they'd all be the same size, they'd all be the same color. Photographs are not all the same color; even in black and white photographs are not the same color. So at least in certain kinds of exhibitions he preferred to make all the prints for the exhibition. He also liked to mount them on Masonite and not glaze them, so there was no problem of having to try to light them in ways that would prevent reflections on the glaze, and he would put them up high. He did not do that to prevent the individual print from acquiring value as an object; he did it for various other reasons, a) for coherence of idea and for freedom of design in the exhibition. When I came here, I didn't do that. I did it very little, to a very limited extent, because I was interested in concentrating on what the photographer had done, not in something similar that might be done at Compton Photocolor, but in what the photographer had done. I didn't do that in order to create a collector's market for photographic prints, but one of the effects of it was to do that. If you call attention to the specific object that the photographer made, one of the possible results of that is going to be that people get interested in that object as opposed to that object and say, "This one is better," and then begin bidding. So of course the opinions of museums...if the opinions of museums were not reflected in the market [laughing], that would give you some kind of indication about what people thought about the opinions of museums. It's hard to make an interesting question out of that.

SZ: Which I didn't do.

JS: No, no, I meant....

SZ: No, in fact you were right when you asked me if it wasn't...only insofar as critics of the Museum will often cite that as a source of great....

JS: There are a lot of other related questions having to do with conflict of interest, etc., which, it seems to me, can be substantial; but they're not questions that are easily addressed in the abstract. Should a dealer be a member of a committee at a museum? Well, maybe yes, maybe they should be. Because what's the difference between a dealer with a gallery — what is called a private dealer — and a collector who is not called a private dealer but who sells all the time, who buys and sells and exchanges? To eliminate the dealer with the gallery or the person who is fully committed to making her living as a private dealer and yet allow the person who deals, maybe that's artificial. Basically, I think that public disclosure is the primary answer to most of these things. I once was having an argument with John Chancellor, which he found extremely offensive — I mean he found my position extremely offensive — but I said I thought perhaps the answer was to make bribery in politics legal as long as it was completely public. A member of the legislature could auction off his vote, more or less at public auction: "I hate the gun lobby, how much will you give me if I vote this way?" And to the anti-gun lobby, "How much will you give me if I vote that way?" The results might not be greatly different than they are now, but they might at least raise the level of the editorial conversation in the newspapers [laughing]. The point is, I think conflicts of interest exist in the world.

SZ: That's just a fact.

JS: Yes. I don't think any of us only have one set of interests, that is, in a largely, philosophical way. I never really collected photographs because I didn't want to spend all that time thinking which acts of mine as a collector might be in conflict with my interests as a curator. So it was simply a matter of my own personal convenience that I decided not to do it, simply to simplify my life. Also, I've never been much interested in acquisition, and also, I thought that in one sense, as a curator you think

the Museum's collection is yours [laughing], so why should you have another, inferior collection at home? But that really wasn't so much a moral issue as it was a way of wanting to avoid all those prickly philosophical and moral questions. Certainly, many museum directors historically acquired works of art, and considering how difficult it is to get directors of museums now [laughter], it would be a little insane to make the task of all the search committees even more difficult by saying directors of art museums couldn't own any art. Also, most critics are dumb as stumps, dumb as fence posts, in comparison with what they should know to be talking about the things that they're talking about.... Who do you know that would be smart enough to write in public about anything twice a week, or however often these people write, not to mention the monthly articles and the catalogue essays. Let us face it: most journalist-critics are flacks, not for any particular institutions or gallery but for the industry as a whole. That's not a dishonorable thing, and some of them are really quite intelligent and some of them on occasion write things worth reading. But you're not supposed to read this stuff as though you're reading Meyer Schapiro or Alfred Barr [laughing], because the people who write it don't think about it as long. They're not being, in effect, paid to think; they're being paid to write. On the other hand, we pay to much attention to them, and on the other hand we probably tend to unfairly denigrate them, because they're like sports reporters or they're like political hacks; they're like the people who are covering the courthouse or the state house. And what makes you think those people know anything about what they're talking about? When we read in the newspapers about something we happen to know about, even in the Times, when it happens to be something we have first-hand knowledge of you're lucky if it's sixty percent right in facts, correct? Is that a fair....

SZ: It's a little high.

JS: A little high. I'm a generous fellow. But when we read about things that we don't know anything about we assume it's 100 percent right [laughing]. Listen, these people give us something to read while we're having coffee and on the bus, and maybe now and then they offer food for thought and not all of their facts are wrong

and if you read enough maybe some of the falsehoods will cancel each other out. I don't know. The point is, curators at least, by and large, I think...I don't really want to be put in the position of taking up the cudgel for curators, but in general and in theory at least I think they have to live with their mistakes, and they tend to write their mistakes on better-quality paper, so they don't disappear quite so quickly as the mistakes of, the asininities of, the journalists. On the other hand, the journalists have got other...at least they can't hide behind a kind of fraudulent scholasticism, a kind of perverse academic screen that consists in slicing the bologna thinner and thinner and thinner, so that finally but one's own graduate students has any idea what the point of reference is.

SZ: How would you describe your relationship with the press in general?

JS: I don't think it's so bad. I think we have a kind of mutual tolerance. I never asked or expected too much of them. I never complained when they were idiotic, because I never really felt I had a right to expect much more. There are people, talking about journalistic critics, there are people from whom I've taken pretty bad workings-over for whom I have considerable respect — Hilton, to name one. I disagree with most of Hilton's basic positions, but he has basic positions, and more important than that, within his own limitations, as indeed all of us do at best within our own limitations, I think he goes to the work and looks at it and then tries to relate it to what his basic positions are.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 4

BEGIN TAPE 5, SIDE 1

JS: [He doesn't] make up his mind beforehand on the basis of whether or not this is useful, either as a crutch or a club, to bolster an attack position. I think he looks at the art first. I'm not saying with perfect objectivity or perfect preparation, but he looks at the work first, and that, I don't think, is very common. I think a lot of critics don't. I

think a lot of critics have positions that they manage to maintain without reference to the work. I think criticism in photography specifically has been pretty feeble, pretty puerile. I think Vicky Goldberg, for example, is a civilized person and a decent person, a journalist who is trying to be a good reporter, trying to tell the truth, so, without reference to whatever the limitations of her understanding, she's one of the good ones. But if anybody is really very thoughtful about it, why would one expect him to do that job? That's the question that one should ask. Do you really think that the Alfred Barrs and Meyer Schapiros of the world are going to write twice a week for the Times? Wouldn't that be a terrible waste....

SZ: How do you feel about the new galleries?

JS: ... At the Museum — you mean the '84 galleries?

SZ: Yes.

JS: I think the photography galleries are great, and I think the painting galleries, as Bill originally installed them — I haven't kept up with all the changes; in fact, I haven't really studied the relatively recent changes that Kirk has made -- I thought what Bill did was great, but a little bit tutorial. I think it should be possible for a viewer to come to the Museum and to have the experience a little more as something done for pleasure rather than correct understanding. In my view it should have been possible to drop in and out of the painting galleries in a more random way, rather than beginning with Cézanne every time on the second time and beginning with whatever on the third floor. But that's a detail; that's a petty little....

SZ: I was really asking do you feel good about it? Did you maximize your department's potential in that whole exercise?

JS: I was enormously pleased with what I did, and I think Peter [Galassi] is also. Actually, if the department had the resources of staff time and money, I think that it would

probably spend a great deal more of its time and energy in rotation of those galleries. Aside from the point, it's irrelevant, if one is talking about prints, for example, or photographs, or architecture and design, to think about space that will show the collection, and that's not what it's for. You show a part of the collection, and you show, hopefully, a rotating part, because who could ever look at the whole collection? So I think that space, in my view...Peter, I suppose, might come to change his mind if the temporary exhibition space continues to be used for larger and larger blockbuster shows that cut the available space for shows of more modest size and more modest cost. If the potential for those side shows continues to be pushed aside in favor of big blockbuster exhibitions, then the smaller shows will tend to revert to departmental spaces, and that, I think, will be unfortunate, because I think it will continue to reduce the amount of collegial exchange among the departments. But if that is true, then drawings and prints and posters and books and architecture and design will retire to their departmental spaces and then want larger [spaces], except for those rare occasions. I thought that the Wright show that Terry did -- I thought two floors was going to be too big. I thought it was going to be stretched and diluted and it would get boring, and I was absolutely wrong. I thought it was a great show and I thought it deserved all that space, and made good use of it. That was the first two-floor architecture show that I can remember. Hopefully, now the next time some important architect has a show it won't be regarded as essential to take two floors, because Wright got two floors. Also, the whole fundraising business is, of course, an enormous problem. It's not only a problem to find the money, the process by which one finds the money is itself a problem, so that if the development department has got an exhibition that they're supposed to find money for, the budget for which is $2 million, and they've got another exhibition that they're supposed to find funds for, the budget for which is $100,000, it's not mysterious or difficult to understand that they're going to put their energy into the $2 million project, because in many ways it might be that much more difficult. I mean, you get it or you don't get it, but it's not easy to get the $100,000 either, and in fact a lot of people don't even want to talk to you about the $100,000 one because they've got a bigger budget than that and they don't need two. So that there's a natural tendency in the

system to pay more and more attention to the more expensive exhibition. Is that enough?

SZ: Can I ask you one more question?

JS: Sure.

SZ: Tell me why Peter is your successor, from your philosophical point of view.

JS: I didn't choose him. I recommended him.

SZ: Why did you? That's what I mean.

JS: But I think he is terrific. I think he's got all the qualities. In fact, I think Peter could run most of the museums in this country — well. He's somebody with high intelligence, sensibility, an excellent writer, very well-educated, both art historically and otherwise, and he loves the stuff and he respects the institution.

SZ: So that's it.

JS: What do you want [laughing]? I can't imagine an institution being so fortunate as to have a guy like that right in the house.

SZ: Thank you.

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END INTERVIEW