THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **KIRK VARNEDOE (KV)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

DATE: **28 NOVEMBER 2001**

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

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

KV: I was born in Savannah, Georgia, January 18, 1946. I was the youngest of four children, by a good stretch. My two brothers and my sister were six, seven and eight years older than I was, so I was the baby of the family, by a long shot. My parents had both grown up, more or less, in Savannah, although my father wasn't born there. He was an investment banker who had started his own firm in the depths of the Depression, which was an odd thing to do, but he still, when I was growing up, was running it with a partner, as a private investment firm.

SZ: Did you say he was not from Savannah?

KV: He was born in Tampa, actually.

SZ: Well, he was southern, anyway.

KV: Yes, he was southern. Definitely. Southern, and with strong Scottish ties; very proud of his Scottish heritage. He was president of the St. Andrew's Society. I grew up with small kilts, piping in front of the haggis -- that sort of thing.

SZ: Golf?

KV: He was a very big golfer. He took us to Glen Eagles and St. Andrew's when I was a child, too.

SZ: But Varnedoe is not --

KV: Varnedoe is actually a French name. There still exist people in France with the original spelling, which is V-e-r-n-a-d-e-a-u -- Vernadeau. The French always think it's Flemish or something, because of the "V", but it was a French Huguenot family, in essence, that got out when the Huguenots got out, then mixed in with Scottish blood and came to the U.S., I think in the 18th century.

SZ: So, strong Scottish ties, and you were about to say something about your mother.

KV: My mother was the daughter of a prominent Savannah doctor, John Kirk Train, for whom I'm named -- I'm John Kirk Train Varnedoe. He had married a woman named Lilla Kolmer, who was very, very wealthy. The Kolmer family went back into Alabama and Georgia. I'm not sure where the money came from, but they had a good deal of it so they lived in a style beyond a doctor's salary. They had a great, big brick house, et cetera.

See, [my parent's families] were [of] two very different styles. In my mother's family, she was the oldest of six children. All the boys went to Yale, all the girls went to Smith, and they were a very northern-oriented, cosmopolitan family in the sense that, certainly, in Savannah, in those days, they were well traveled. They frequently went to England, especially (they were tremendous Anglophiles), and my grandfather also was a great Scotsman and a member of the St. Andrew's Society. They thought of themselves as having a lot of ties to England, particularly to Scotland. They traveled a lot, and they partied very heavily. My brother often says the difference is that that family drove Cadillacs, and my father's family drove Chevrolets.

In my father's family, my father's biological father died when he was a very few months old, and his mother wound up falling in love with her first cousin, which was thought to be a very bad thing and they tried to stave this marriage off. So, actually, my grandmother and my father came to New York for a brief period, when he was a very young child, because they were trying to keep her away from -- But it couldn't be kept away, and she did eventually marry her first cousin, Gorden Saussy, which is another originally French name -- Saussaie. Anyway, they never had any other children; my father was the only child. But Judge Saussy, Gordon Saussy, who became his father and the only father he ever knew, had been mayor of Savannah; had coached football at Georgia; was a very distinguished man in his own right. But they were very, very different kinds of families. I think my father's family was much more conservative southern, just an entirely different outlook on life, as opposed to the sort of free-wheeling, free-drinking family that my mother's family was, and more obviously wealthy.

So it was a very odd childhood, to be split between the Saussy legacy and the Train legacy.

SZ: And Savannah, at that time (I guess this is the '50s, into the early '60s), was provincial? Not exactly?

KV: Well, you never know that as a child, of course. It's the only world you know. It was a port, so ships came in. You didn't have the feeling it was totally rural or isolated from the outside world. Like New Orleans, it has a certain kind of raffishness and a certain kind of elegance that goes with being a port city. And, of course, it has this fabulous natural beauty because of the town plan, Oglethorpe's town plan. It always felt like a special place. It didn't feel like some hick town somewhere. There was always the feeling in Savannah that Atlanta was this sort of parvenu railroad town, where Savannah was the seat of culture; that Savannah passed for what was more artistic in the context of the state of Georgia.

It was a very privileged childhood, because my parents were relatively well-to-do. We belonged to the golf club and the yacht club and all those sort of things, and the network of marsh water -- you know, the tidal delta between Savannah and Savannah Beach -- provides an enormous amount of inland tidal water. Once you can get a boat, when you're ten or eleven or whatever, you're Huck Finn, Robinson Crusoe or whatever, with all these Barrier Islands that are around you. You have an enormous amount of freedom. There's a great deal of natural beauty. My mother had done a master's degree in creative writing at Smith. She wrote poetry, and she was very interested in the theatre. She used to come to New York all the time, and bring us, as children, up to New York.

SZ: She got her undergraduate, too?

KV: Yes. She had wanted to be a teacher, but her mother wouldn't let her, during the Depression. She said other people needed the jobs more. So she wound up being the first woman on the board of education in Savannah, the first woman president of the board of education of Savannah. She was a very active person in education in Savannah, one of the first people to be involved in integrationist groups in Savannah, as well. She was sort of a progressive, liberal force in the city.

SZ: In contrast to your father, I guess.

KV: My father was a much more conservative southerner.

SZ: He'd been educated in the north?

KV: He'd gone to the University of Georgia. He was not a stupid man. He was a very intelligent stockbroker and a very well respected man in the city, but he had traditionalist, patriarchal views. One of the points of my education, in a certain sense, was to watch the two styles. My mother was a liberal, a progressivist, an integrationist, et cetera, and a perfect tyrant to our servants. We always had servants. Everybody in Savannah was very cheap. We always had several black

servants, and she was an incredible tyrant and very, very harsh on them. Whereas my father -- who at one point voted for George Wallace and was a dyed-in-the-wool segregationist, I think -- was extremely, in the old southern tradition of patriarchy, extremely supportive, gentle and generous to all the people who worked for him -- sharecroppers who worked there. We had a pine plantation north of Savannah that my grandfather used largely for hunting that we inherited. We kept a sharecropper up there, and many other people. My father inherited a cab company from my grandfather, as well, that he ran, and all the people who worked for him, white or black, were treated with a very gentle hand, very loving and kind. That was always an interesting difference, between the idea and practice, you know.

SZ: So you were the youngest, by how many years?

KV: I'm six years younger than my sister [Comer Varnedoe], then the two brothers [Samuel and Gordon Varnedoe] go bang, bang. [Everyone] went off to boarding school, and I was raised like an only child, in a certain sense. They all complained that they had taken the hard knocks and I got the soft years. My parents had given up trying to be disciplinarians by the time I came around. Also, they had established themselves. My father's business was more established or whatever, so my brothers and sisters always felt I got a cushier ride than they did.

SZ: You stayed and went to school there until what age? Did you go to boarding school?

KV: I was in public school up until the coincidence, somewhere around 1953, of Brown v. Board of Education, and my moving into junior high school. They suddenly built a large, private day school, outside of Savannah, and I went right away. I guess I was in public school through the sixth grade, then I went to this private day school in Savannah in the seventh, eighth and ninth grades. Then I was sent away to boarding school my sophomore year in high school.

SZ: Which would be 1962.

KV: I guess. No, a little earlier. Because I graduated in June of '63, so I must have arrived in the fall of -- counting back -- '60.

SZ: You were born in January, you said.

KV: Yes, I was always a little bit ahead of my class; young for my class.

SZ: So you spent a good portion of your young years under the spectre of the growing civil rights movement.

KV: Yes. Savannah had a very clear delineation -- east side, west side. There was one big street, West Broad Street, which was clearly the borderline between the white and black community, and was mainly a big, black shopping street. There was very little sense of conflict during the time I was growing up there. It was very quiescent. Most of what happened in the way of any racial disturbance happened after I had gone off to boarding school, and compared with other towns in the south -- compared with Alabama, for example -- was extraordinarily mild in comparison.

SZ: Of your siblings, are you the only one who's really migrated north and stayed north?

KV: No. There's an exact split in the family, now. It wasn't always this way, but my brother, Sam, who's the oldest in the family (named for my father), now lives in Queens, with his third wife and a new child, considerably younger than his grandchildren. It's one of these odd situations. But he moved to New York in the early '70s. He went to the University of North Carolina, married his hometown sweetheart, went through graduate school and got a Ph.D. in philosophy, and was teaching at the University of Maryland when the world sort of fell apart, in the '60s and '70s -- something like that. His marriage fell apart at the same time, and he decided he was fed up with teaching and wanted to do something creative. He remade himself, at the age of thirty-seven or thirty-eight, into a photographer, a commercial photographer. He came to New York with creative ambitions, started a commercial photography business, and he must have moved here around 1972 or

'73. I arrived here in the fall of '74, to teach at Columbia, and he and I actually were fourth-floor/fifth-floor, in the same house on 75th Street, between Columbus and Amsterdam. He's continued to live in New York ever since.

My other brother, Gordon, left Savannah for the west, and spent a long time living in the Bay area. So he was living in Oakland when I was at Stanford, in graduate school, for example. But he had married a girl from Savannah, and they eventually decided they wanted to move back. So they moved back to Savannah at some point -- I can't say now -- in the late '70s. My sister has always lived in Savannah. So now Gordon and Comer live in Savannah, and Sam and I live in New York.

SZ: So you have some ties, still, to Savannah.

KV: Yes. We still own a beach house together on Savannah Beach that our parents left us, and we still own jointly this pine plantation, to the north of the city.

SZ: Do you think of yourself as a southerner?

KV: Absolutely. People don't hear it, and my wife has always joked that the two times my accent comes back in strength is either when I get on the phone to home, or when I talk football. One or the other. But I feel very strongly that my upbringing in the south affected me. Accent-wise, people always ask me if I'm from Canada, because the last part of my accent that hasn't gone away is the "o-u" diphthong -- house, out and about -- which I can't hear. I can hear the Canadians do it. But it was part of what you would call a tidewater accent, which is part of the south.

But I think, definitely, many things about my way of thinking and the way I look at the world were formed by that experience, by that childhood in Savannah, and I still have a strong bond or tie to that ecology -- to that marsh grass, to that salt water, to the sand. I don't have many friends in Savannah. It's not like I would ever think of going back there to live.

SZ: But when you say "the ways in which you think," an example of that might be -- ?

KV: I don't know. It sounds banal, but you're taught a certain kind of manners when you're growing up in Georgia; a certain kind of social approach to people -- especially if you grow up in the class structure that I grew up in, and you go through debutante parties and all that sort of thing. You learn at an early date certain pleasant hypocrisies, et cetera, that inevitably shape the way you deal with people. I think that must have, certainly, sunk in on me.

SZ: So back to your childhood.

KV: Just to continue that for a moment -- I remember vividly coming north, and learning what it was to be a minority. Going to Williams College with a southern accent was to be treated like a redneck rube. Also, the feeling was that the south was a bunch of idiot rednecks who were all racist. The smugness, the utter self-assured smugness of the northerners I met at Williams was not unlike the smugness of the Frenchwhen I went abroad as an American. They had a set of prejudices about this other place that they were extremely content with. "Les Americains sont de gros enfants," you know, that they had. "We don't have those problems." The French, "Racism? We never heard of it. All this stuff about civil rights? This would never happen here." So when the Boston bussing riots occurred, I confess to a deep sense of *schadenfreude*. The feeling of watching the smug hypocrisies of people who had never been in the trenches, in a certain sense, and didn't know what they were talking about, was a formative experience for me, I think. Those brief little moments of feeling like an outsider -- See, it forces you to reevaluate your roots, but it also gives you a sort of insight into these other people's blindnesses about themselves. That's a long digression, but --

SZ: That's interesting. So until you went away to boarding school, a little bit of what your life was like. . . I can't remember what you said. You went to New York to do it, but you said you went to the theatre and --

KV: Oh, my mother used to take us up on the train, on the Silver Meteor, from Savannah, back when there was really a train station in Savannah. That's a very primal memory. There was a real train station. The train had to back in to Savannah, so it was always a great ritual, to bring the train in. We frequently took the overnighter. Those were the days of the linen tablecloth meals in the diner-- the porter came in and put your bed down -- all that sort of thing. We'd take the overnight train to New York, and I got to see things like *Peter Pan* and stuff like that. My father was always coming up here to see people on Wall Street, so [my parents] would come together. We often stayed at the Dorset hotel, curiously enough. Formerly at the Gladstone, which I think was torn down to build the Seagram's building, and then at the Dorset, which the Modern tore down. But those were favorite outposts here. We went to England on the Queen Mary once, when I was a child. I remember very vividly leaving the Port of New York, with the band and the streamers and that sort of thing. We stayed at Brown's Hotel in London, and came back on the United States, which was then the fast aluminum boat, the new spread. Those were very, very rich experiences.

You asked about the provincialism, or enclosure, of Savannah. There was not a sense that you were stuck there.

SZ: When you came to New York, did you go to museums?

KV: Not by memory, in those days. My mother wasn't that much of a museum goer, and I don't remember being led into museums in those days. I was a student member of The Museum of Modern Art when I was at Williams. We used to come into town from Williams, and I received the catalogues through the mail and all that stuff. That's my first sort of memory of museums.

SZ: And as a student, how were you? What did you like?

KV: Well, one of the reasons I wound up where I wound up was that I was born with, or early showed, a fairly good mimetic ability. I could draw. I could just draw things. I could replicate visual experience on paper. So that was always my party trick, in a

certain sense. That was the thing that set me apart from other kids, so I thought that's what I ought to do, since I did it better than anybody else did it. I'd win blue ribbons in little competitions, and I was constantly doodling and drawing in my books. I had formed this vague notion that I was thinking about being an illustrator.

I was a pretty good but not terrific student. I struggled at -- Math was never my strong suit. I took a lot of Latin, which wound up being very, very useful to me in languages, although it seemed like a dead-end issue. By the time I got to St. Andrew's there were very, very few students who were still taking it. I wound up taking four years of Latin. I was always best in English classes, and that wound up being my great strong suit at St. Andrew's. I got very exceptional marks on papers from my professors, who were very supportive, and that was clearly my strong suit, my English. I still was keen on the idea that I could draw, and that I could somehow make a living, or make an identity for myself, drawing. I had only vague notions. I thought I wanted to be an illustrator. And I had one of these crazy notions that, since I liked sports, and since I liked drawing, I could work for *Sports Illustrated.* There was an illustrator named Robert Riger who did photographs and drawings for them, and he did his main work in the late '50s and early '60s, when I was a teenager, and I thought, boy, that would be a great thing to do. It was a very adolescent dream -- to stay involved with sports.

So I had this big notion that I would do that, but I was already aware enough that that was kind of a tricky business and not a certain one, and that I should not cast all my lot into something that was essentially craft training, but should get an education. I wanted to go some place that had a good liberal arts education, but at the same time an art program.

SZ: Had you been a big reader, as a kid?

KV: I read comic books voraciously, believe it or not. My brothers and sisters always feel that that had something to do with my English abilities. I didn't read. I can remember pulling books off shelves. We stayed at my grandmother's place in the summer. She had a big library. Small example: I can remember a couple of years ago, when it

suddenly became a phenomenon again -- I remember vividly at some point, at the age of -- I don't know what, eight or nine -- being out there for the summer at my grandmother's place and pulling this book off the shelves, which then couldn't have been that old, called *Seven Years in Tibet*, by this guy who -- I lived in that world for a whole summer, just by chance, because I pulled it off the thing. Then I forgot about it and thought it was a private secret that only I had, until Brad Pitt suddenly showed up on the big screen, doing *Seven Years in Tibet*.

SZ: And not very well.

KV: So I must have read, but not very studiously or diligently. I wasn't a bookish person, in that sense. No.

SZ: So your ability in English to -- to what? Express interesting ideas, or -- ?

KV: They liked the way I wrote. My English professors required you to write essays on a given topic and I seemed to write well. Then I was reasonably good at analyzing poetry, understanding the meaning behind certain novels, et cetera -- that sort of thing -- but it was all relatively rudimentary, until I got to Williams. Then, oddly enough -- What happened was, I went into freshman English (this was going to be my strong suit), and ran up against a guy named Charles Samuels, who, very sadly, since has committed suicide, who was an extremely bright guy, who gave me five E's in a row. And this is not for "Excellence," this is A,B,C,D,E.

SZ: I know. I went to Smith, and my first English paper was an E, from Helen Vendler.

KV: So this was a miserable autumn, as a freshman.

SZ: I bet.

KV: This guy hated football players, for one thing, and I remember he was a very high-powered, very neurotic Jewish intellectual, and I'd never seen anybody or anything like it. I remember practically weeping in his office. I said, "Why is it that I've done so

well in English all along, and I seem to be screwing up so badly here?" And he said, "Well, if you want me to say it: I'm academically superior to any other teacher you've ever had." Extremely in-your-face. So I wound up working like a slave, to a level I'd never worked before. I remember the last paper in the semester was to write on Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*, and I must have read the play a dozen times, and the act on which I was to write, twenty times. I wrote seven drafts of the paper. I'd never done anything like it in life, in order to get an A-, and it balanced out the course at something like a B or B+. But I thought it was one of the triumphs of my life, and it gave me a whole different idea about what thinking, rigor, discipline, or scholarship was.

At the same time, because I wanted to keep going on art -- I didn't know anything about art history, but I knew that if I wanted to be an art major I had to start with the introductory art history course, so I took that my freshman year. I loved the professor and I just loved the ideas. You looked at things, which I liked a lot, and you got to write about them. I then began to discover that I was pretty good at doing that, not right away, but I knew I wanted to be an art major. I knew I wanted to take a lot of other courses. I then stopped taking English, I guess. I stopped taking English, per se, but I took a lot of things like American non-fiction literature. I took a lot of courses in history, to the extent that I was one course short of being an Am Civ [American Civilization] major. I didn't even realize I'd done it.

One of the reasons I took the art major was that it allowed you a lot of outside electives, so I loaded up on a lot of -- I took Spanish, I took American Negro history, which was really sort of an innovative course at that point, taught by a guy named Silversmith. This was in the years when people were just inventing that kind of course. I took a lot of American history. I took a lot of American character and culture courses, like the non-fiction literature course and that sort of thing. Meanwhile, I was taking a lot of art history, and just the minimum kind of science. Astronomy, which met at 8:00 in the morning, was the sort of gut science and "kids' physics," as they used to call it. I scraped by in those areas, which is peculiar, because now I spend a great deal of my free time reading the history of science, in one form or another.

SZ: At St. Andrew's, you obviously studied history. But had you had a particular liking for it?

KV: It's hard for me even to remember if there were history courses at St. Andrew's. I don't remember being particularly grounded in it. I had a very imperfect notion of history. Almost everything I learned about -- certainly, about European history. American history I studied quite a lot of at Williams, but everything I learned about European history, everything I knew about the transition from Louis XIV to the revolution, all this was learned through art history, or a by-product, in a certain sense, of art history.

SZ: I left out two things. I didn't ask you about your life in sports, before college -- which I should. And I didn't also ask you about any musical interests.

KV: In order -- sports -- I had a terrible weight problem when I was a pre-adolescent, say when I was ten or eleven. I must have weighed 165 pounds, and I was really obese -- I think that's the proper word for it -- about the time they sent me off to St. Andrew's. I had played in sort of the football equivalent of Little League in Savannah. Football was very much a part of the southern mentality, of course, about sports and stuff and I was interested, but I was just a big blimp on the line, basically. There was no such thing as real conditioning, so I played-at football. But I decided, when I went off to boarding school, that I wanted to try to play football. So I showed up at early football, the first year I went to boarding school, and they rolled us out of bed at 6:00 the first morning I was there to run a mile. I'd never heard of running a mile. I made it about 110 yards before I puked, and I barely survived early football, at which point I was cut down to the lowest level, at the bottom, just short of intra-mural football, where I languished along for most of the sophomore year. Then I re-applied to come back to early football, and they really couldn't understand why. They thought this was just a kid who can't take no for an answer.

At this point I began to grow, lose weight and get in better shape physically. So I came back, and in the long run, by my senior year, I was starting varsity lineman. That was a huge, for an adolescent male, especially, in an all-male boarding school -- where warrior values count for a lot -- proving yourself in athletics is a huge thing about your self-confidence. It really meant a lot to me. In general, St. Andrew's was a terrain where I was no longer my father's son or my mother's son. In Savannah you were always, whatever you did, Sam's boy or Lilla's boy -- in very pleasant ways in many ways -- but you were constantly marked by where you were in the strata of things. St. Andrew's, though it obviously wasn't an all-inclusive society, was a fresh start, with people who had no preconceptions about what my father and mother were or weren't, and didn't give a damn. So you proved yourself in the classroom and on the field, and on the field was a big thing for me. I put all my energies specifically into football, because that's where I wanted to make it. And I did. I finally made it as a starting lineman my senior year. So, when I went on to college, I really wanted a place where I would be able to continue to play football, and I knew that the bigger the school was, the less the chance was of that.

SZ: So that was one of the factors --

KV: That was one of the factors in thinking about Williams. Williams had been kind of a mythic existence for me, because they had college counselors at St. Andrew's, and they always talked about what schools were good. These people always sold Williams as one of the toughest places to get into. When the evidence was in -- because I watched the two classes ahead of me -- these guys would get into Princeton or Yale, and not get into Williams. So it just began to intrigue me as apparently very demanding and very elite, but a small and manageable school. The kicker in the game was that the head of the art department, Lane Faison, was married to a woman whose maiden name had been Virginia Weed, who was from Savannah; who had been to Smith with my mother. So there was a kind of connection there, in a way, and I only applied to Williams and Princeton. Those were the only two places I applied. Everybody knew Princeton, of course. My father wanted me to go there very badly.

SZ: That was the Ivy League school for southerners.

KV: That was the U.Va. of the north. My father assured me that was the name I needed to carry on my diploma, and that's where I should go. My mother was keen for -- Because she'd been at Smith, she loved Williams, and I never ran into anybody who had any connection with Williams who wasn't in love with it -- that was very impressive -- whereas people had mixed feelings about Princeton. So, in the long run I chose Williams, and never regretted it. I had a fantastic time there.

SZ: And you really hooked into the Art History Department, which is --

KV: We were very lucky. There's been a lot of ink spilled since, since so many curators and museum directors came through the Williams program in the '60s. Whit [Whitney] Stoddard, who was the guy who lectured that introductory lecture, was the key, what I would call the "detoxifier." You had a bunch of grumpy, adolescent males who were not at all sure that art wasn't too effeminate for them to be interested in, and was not a vaguely fairy thing to do. Whit, who was a funny, hard-drinking, very witty guy with a deep interest in sports, had a master's touch at making you interested in gothic cathedrals or Egyptian sculpture. It didn't matter. He started the first part of the semester, and the first assignment of the course was to go out and draw diagrams of the buildings on the campus. You had to do a cross-section, an elevation and a plan of a key building on the campus. Of course, strategically, it made you able to deal with the course, which was going to show you a lot of cross-sections, elevations and plans of buildings that didn't exist anymore, and you needed to know how to conceptualize from that. So it had that reverse thing, but it also was the instant point; that the point of this course was going to be to teach you to look differently; to teach you how to think analytically about visual experience. So it was an active, hands-on, immediate engagement in something that would then become key to the historical knowledge you would have. He taught it up to the Renaissance, then Bill Pierson taught it from the Renaissance up to the 19th century.

After that, I passed swiftly into courses with Lane Faison, especially 19th century French, which was one of Faison's specialties, and from there I just fell in love with the material – [Jaques-Louis] David, [Eugène] Delacroix, [Gustave] Courbet, [Èdouard] Manet,[Claude] Monet -- and Lane was a wonderful teacher, utterly benign, and thoroughly enjoyed what he was doing; a constant twinkle to his eye; a constant dialogue with, wasn't lecturing at, but lecturing to and with the students. It was a marvelous time to be there, with these three guys, particularly, for me, Stoddard and Faison were great, and I just enjoyed it. I found it was a form I enjoyed.

One of the things I've said a couple times is that I didn't like courses where there was "a right answer," and you had to deliver it. "Suzy skates across the lake in three hours. How long will it take her if she --" I just couldn't. I hated these problems.

SZ: That's why you didn't like math.

KV: Exactly. I hated all that. Courses where there were better and worse answers, and you could be in some sense creative or original in framing how your answer would be intrigued me a lot more. History, especially, and then art history. So that's what I took a lot of.

SZ: And Williams, in those years -- Well, because it was isolated, was a big, sporty school, still, right?

KV: I think something like 70% of the graduates of Williams in those days, by the time they graduated, had participated in some form of inter-collegiate athletics, even if it was only freshman volleyball or I don't know what. It was still very much -- It was an all-male school. It was relatively small (there were 300 people to a class, so there were less than 1,200 people, I think, in the whole school). It's gotten much bigger now, of course.

So I came from a small town, it was a small boarding school, this was a small college, but it was a steady, incremental increase in the playing field, so to speak. So

it was a very sporty place, and a lot of the people you knew took part in sports. There were no athletic scholarships, so the guys on the dean's list were right in there with you, and it was considered a natural and normal part of life. And Faison and Stoddard came out to the games. They loved it. They were frequently out at the games, cheering you on. Which was great.

So it felt like a very integrated form of life, and the professors at Williams -- I took political science from James MacGregor Burns, who wrote that great biography of Roosevelt. It's 8:00 in the morning, you're sitting there with nine other people, and here's this guy teaching the course. It's so amazing. I was so lucky to have this kind of thing. Also, these same people would come to dinner at the residential houses. You had a lot of contact with the faculty. It didn't feel like a big, corporate structure. It was very different.

Music was the second part of the issue. Oddly enough, I never had any real education in music, at all. I don't know whether they tried to get my brothers and sisters to do piano lessons or not, and gave up by the time I came around. My parents had a record player, but music was not a big part of our existence. Rock and roll was a big part of life in the south, in the mid-'50s, especially since [Interruption] -- For me, in 1954 -- I was eight years old. My brothers and sisters were fifteen and sixteen, so Elvis and the whole question of black music versus white culture in the south -- The only radio station that was on late at night was the black station, and you're up on the sleeping porch at the beach with a little transistor radio, and you'd be plugged into this whole other world, that was existing all around you but that you had no contact with. The Coasters and The Drifters and these people would come and play the black clubs outside the city, and the big adventure for my brothers and sisters was to go see these people, which was a dangerous thing to do. There was a real sense that something was shaking loose when you began to get white teenagers involved with the music down there.

SZ: Well, you had a lot of that during your college years, too, that music, I think.

KV: Well, music -- I always say my freshman year it was "I Want to Hold Your Hand," and by my senior year it was "Sergeant Pepper." That acceleration, sort of at every other two months, there was not just a new album but basically a new universe that went with it. It was very heady.

SZ: Anything else about Williams? It's interesting how you went from one thing, and really developed into -- I find it interesting also that you said that by majoring in art history you had more --

KV: -- electives.

SZ: Yes.

KV: That was true. I was not committed to any one thing. I wasn't real sure what I wanted to do. So I liked the idea that by committing to an art history major, I could still shop around a great deal. There were other majors that were more demanding of specialization. I didn't want to specialize in a hurry. I wanted to do a lot of looking around, so that was a real attractive part of the major to me.

SZ: So when did you get hooked?

KV: On art history? Well, it's a very odd and indirect process. By the time I got to my senior year, I was still thinking I was going to go on in studio. I had gone every summer, with one exception, to art schools, because I knew there wasn't enough of a studio program at Williams. So my freshman year I went to the University of Georgia for their summer session, which was, in the south, renowned. They were supposed to have a very good department, and they had this special method of teaching drawing. So I went up and took this series of drawing courses at Georgia, in the summer after my freshman year. And in the summer after my junior year, I went to the Rhode Island School of Design and took this sort of boot camp that they give in the summer, which is designed to sort of catch you up on two years of RISD's fundamental courses, so you could transfer if you wanted. I spent the summer of '66

doing that; taking life drawing, sculpture classes, et cetera, so I had built up a portfolio, even though there was very little studio. There were no life drawing classes, for example, at Williams.

I still thought I might go on in studio art. I applied to Yale. I sent in slides and all that sort of stuff. Then the Art History Department at Williams asked me, as they had previously asked some people, to come back and teach discussion sections of that big lecture course I had taken at the beginning. They broke it down into small sections, and since it was a very popular course (at any given time 200 students were in the lecture), they needed twenty discussion sections in order to make it manageable to teach on a small level. So every now and then they asked an art student they thought might be going on in art history at some point, to promise to come back after their senior year and teach sections of this introductory course.

SZ: Dissolution of the myth -- that there aren't any teaching assistants at Williams.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

SZ: So you did do that.

KV: Well, there was no graduate program, per se, at Williams in those days. It was entirely an undergraduate university, which was one of the things that was wonderful about it. There were no courses to teach. They just wanted me to come back and learn how to teach by doing it, in a certain sense.

SZ: And that interested you?

KV: Well, I had seen other people do it. When I was a freshman there was a similar guy, and there had been a guy when I was a senior, the year ahead of me, who had done this. It seemed prestigious, and it was like being promoted to be an adult, instantly,

without having to go through all the normal trials. The Vietnam War was on and it was a cold world out there, so I thought the idea of staying in a little room at Williamstown for another year was a real -- It allowed me to get the experience of teaching, which by then was something I wasn't disinterested in. I loved what Faison did. He seemed to have a lot of fun doing it. It was something I was thinking about, and I said, "Well, here's a chance to get the experience of teaching at a very high level, without going through the umpteen years of graduate school it would take me to get back to such a position again. It was only one year, so it wasn't a long-term investment, and I got to stay with old friends. The gravy was when the football coach, Frank Navarro -- who had been a very important figure in my life -- Navarro offered me a job coaching with him, as a coaching assistant, too.

SZ: You played football at Williams?

KV: I played football at Williams.

SZ: That's right.

KV: So Navarro -- who was somebody I thought a lot of, and certainly had as much influence on me as any teacher at Williams, somebody I had a huge amount of respect for -- asked me to come back and coach with him, and I thought I would never have a chance in my life, ever, to work at this level again. This is an instant insight into a very high level of teaching, and staying with football, too. It was really attractive and seemed like an honor, so I did it. I went back to Williams for a year after I graduated, taught art history and coached football for a year.

SZ: Which took you to the summer of '68.

KV: Then what happened was, during the summer of '67, a year after I graduated, I took kind of the great summer-after-graduation tour of Europe, with a friend. We met up with other friends, we flew into Rome and went to Bergen, or Oslo, and covered everything in between on a Eurail pass. I had had a date with a girl from Vassar

whom I thought was fairly sharp, and she told me that the one thing I really had to do in Paris was to see the Rodin museum. Like every other young man, I was always looking for ways to impress women, thinking that if they liked this, I should get to know the stuff, so I went to see the Rodin museum, and I was blown away. I really was blown away. I thought it was really incredibly sexy, powerful, emotional, romantic stuff that appealed to me terribly, at that point. So I came back to Williams determined to learn everything I could about [Auguste] Rodin. I buried myself in the stacks and began studying as much as I could study and reading what I could read. By the time I got into the year of teaching I just thought, "Well, you've put all this into art history. Whatever else you do, you ought to have a credential to show for it, so I'm going to get an MA." I had no particular desire to get a Ph.D., but I thought I should have an MA to show for my knowledge, or all I'd put into art history.

It was a naive thing, because when I applied around what I found was that in most art history programs, the MA was the booby prize. Nobody offered an MA as anything of any particular --

SZ: That's what they gave you when they kicked you out.

KV: -- distinction. Yes. The only place that had sort of MA mills, like Columbia, where they really had an MA program and announced it, the other people announced Ph.D. programs, and an MA was what you got if you didn't make it.
So I applied, sort of stupidly, to the few places that seemed to announce they had MA programs, and Columbia was a main point of interest. It had a good reputation, it was a good department, and as fate would have it, Navarro was hired away from Williams to be the head football coach at Columbia. He said, "Well, if you come to Columbia, you can get back a job coaching the defensive line at Columbia." I got into Columbia, in graduate school, and I thought, "Okay. Well, here my life is --" In retrospect, it would have been utter insanity. Coaching Columbia football was no cakewalk, anyway, and --

SZ: They weren't exactly good --

KV: -- being an entering graduate student at Columbia -- and this was in the wake of May of '68 -- it would have torn me apart.

Anyway, I was rescued from this by the fact that by this time I had gotten involved in rugby. I started playing rugby after I stopped playing football, and for the year I was teaching I was also playing rugby, because it was a club sport. It wasn't a varsity sport. There wasn't an eligibility issue. I got back from a rugby game one Saturday, in April as I remember, fairly late in the game, and there was a telegram tacked to my door that said, "Admission to Stanford, accompanied by full tuition plus some stipend. Please call as early as possible re [regarding] acceptance," or something.

I had literally forgotten I had applied to Stanford. Why I had applied to Stanford was beyond remembering. It was on the West Coast, and it offered an MA. So I was stunned. I had no idea -- "E. Lusk," it was signed. She turned out to be the departmental secretary. I thought she must be head of the department. Whether it was a man or a woman, I didn't know. Anyway, I took this mysterious telegram, I went down to the Art History Department the next morning, and I said, "Does anybody know anybody or anything about Stanford?" And George Heard Hamilton, who was the great scholar who had come from Yale to run the Clark Art Institute, was in there sorting slides. And a couple of people -- Faison or somebody -- said, "That's where Eitner is [Lorenz Eitner]. Eitner is the head of that department and we know him. He's very good in 19th century, et cetera. And Hamilton said, "I was just in New York yesterday and I heard that Albert Elsen was transferring to Stanford." Of course, Elsen was the guy who had written everything I had read on Rodin, but he was in Bloomington, Indiana, and I had zero idea of going to Bloomington, Indiana to pursue my education.

But hearing that Elsen -- who was a mythic figure in my mind at this point -- was possibly going to Stanford -- I went home, took a couple beers out of the refrigerator and bolstered my courage -- called information in Bloomington, Indiana, found Elsen in the phone book and said, "You don't know me from Adam, but is this true? Are you

going?" He said, "Yes, it's true. I'm going to be at Stanford next year." I then called the mysterious E. Lusk, figured out who that was, and said, "Okay. I'll accept." I got a wonderful four-year Ph.D. fellowship to Stanford. I showed up at registration at Stanford, was registering with the same E. Lusk, she handed me my check and it said "Ph.D. Fellowship." I said, "I'm not here for the Ph.D. fellowship. I just want to do an MA." She said, "Shh. Don't tell them that. Don't tell them that. That'll just disturb them. Go ahead and cash the check, and do what you do. If you do the MA, that's all right. That's fine."

So I didn't, and, of course, the minute I got into Elsen's office and under Elsen's wing, it was like getting caught up in a dynamo. He was incredible, and he got me going right away, my first year, on what became my thesis topic; got me a fellowship to go away to Paris the following year I was there, and it snowballed. The next thing I knew I had a Ph.D. in art history.

SZ: And your thesis topic was what?

KV: It was called "Chronology and Authenticity in the Drawings of Auguste Rodin." It was clear that I wanted to work on Rodin with Elsen. He had gotten a big shipment -- There's a notorious forger of Rodin drawings named Ernst Durig, who died bonkers, in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington. He may have been a bit bonkers all along. In any event, he always billed himself as "Rodin's last pupil," and he had paid a lot of his debts, to dentists and real estate people, by generously giving away these drawings that the great master had given him. Well, he died, after a long period at St. Elizabeth's, and they found this trunk under his bed, and the trunk was stashed with drawings signed "A. Rodin." Sotheby's, in what they must have thought was a very crafty move, agreed to take on the debt he'd accrued, living there for all those years, in exchange for the right to sell the drawings. Then, when the drawings got to Sotheby's, a lot of people looked at them and said, "Ooh, something's not quite right about these," and Elsen and a lot of other people had looked at them.

This had been going on for a while. By the time I got there in '68, they had sent Elsen the whole batch, with the idea, "Just go through these and see if there isn't anything in here that might be authentic. If this is all a can of worms, it's --" So Al opened this bundle in his office. It was in the old Student Union Building; they hadn't even built the new art building, it was still under construction. I remember sitting there. He opened the package, and he just started peeling these sheets off, one by one, saying, "No, no, no, no." I was flabbergasted. I said, "How can you possibly do this? You're not even looking at these things. How can you -- what's the criteria? How can you judge?" So he said, "Well, if you're so interested in this problem, why don't you decide? Why don't you study it, and you tell me. We'll work out a system. This is a big problem."

One of the problems was that no one really understood about Rodin's own drawings -- in what period. There were several different styles, and it was unclear when they were done and in what order, et cetera. The Musée Rodin in Paris had 8,000 drawings, and Al got me a fellowship to go off that summer to the Musée Rodin. There's a whole story behind -- First of all the fellowship was a funny story, because it came -- B.G. Cantor, who wound up being the great Rodin collector -- he had a huge collection of Rodin bronzes -- and most of Cantor's bronzes had been bought -- We're now talking the fall of '68. This is the first fall I'm there. Cantor has a showing of his collection at the San Francisco Palace, the Legion of Honor, and this is a collection that's all posthumous bronzes; all cast relatively recently through the aegis of the Musée Rodin.

The Musée Rodin had a very competent and good director named Georges Grappe during the '30s, who inventoried this relatively decent catalogue, et cetera, but who made a serious mistake in making a cast of "The Gates of Hell" for Goering, during the war. So as soon as the war was over they clapped Mr. Grappe in irons, and appointed the first sort of distinguished art historian they could get, as a kind of sinecure to it. They appointed a medievalist, whose protégé (and he was sort of one foot in the grave) was this young go-getter named Cecile Goldscheider. So Mme. Goldscheider, as of about 1951 or '52, inherited the reins of the Musée Rodin, at a

time when Rodin's reputation had been in a deep trough. He'd really been regarded as discarded as a Victorian romantic, basically. There was a big surge of interest after he died in 1917, but through the '20s and '30s, as modernism rose, his star fell, and he was regarded as a kind of -- and the Musée Rodin was a backwater. But with the advent of abstract expressionism and a new painter interest, there was a strong reevaluation, of which Elsen's thesis was a part, of Rodin's relevance to modern art, recasting Rodin as a progressive rather than a reactionary. Interest arose again in Rodin's work, and Cantor, particularly, had a kind of epiphany on seeing the Rodin collection at the Metropolitan, and began buying very heavily.

Goldscheider did two things. First of all, she was terribly obstructive to scholars, particularly to Al Elsen. She had done everything she could to impede his research when he was there as a Fulbright scholar, right after the war, and they developed a huge animosity. Then she didn't exercise, I think in retrospect, sufficient aesthetic control over the casting of posthumous bronzes, so that the Georges Rudier Foundry began cranking out what looked like a lot of bad chocolate. The patinas were wrong, the casting quality was wrong.

Al delivered himself of a review, in the fall of '68, of the Cantor collection, which, if words were flames, the bronzes would have been puddles on the floor. It was just scorching. Al was not a temperate man, and he really ripped this collection. Cantor had had his assistants polishing them with wax. This was partly sublimated hatred of Mme. Goldscheider, but Cantor got it with both barrels. Cantor's first impulse was to sue. He was a wealthy investment banker in Los Angeles, he didn't know who this pipsqueak was at Stanford, and he was first going to trot out his lawyers. But he had a curator who was more prudent, who said, "You know, in the long run you need this guy on your side. This is not a war you want to fight. You need this guy. He's got a lot of good ideas. He knows what it's all about."

So they sent a dove of peace out to Stanford, and in the transition of time -- We were in the new building, because I remember sitting in Al's office, in the new building, which had been inaugurated in the spring of '69. And Al (nothing if not pugnacious)

essentially said, "Okay, you want to do something right for Rodin for a change? You want to do something decent? I want you to give me a fellowship for my student here, who wants to go to Paris for the summer." So with B.G. Cantor's money, I went over to Stanford Mall and bought the Nikon camera (which I still, to this day, have), and hied myself to Paris for the summer of '68, to fight my own battles with Mme. Goldscheider, and try to get access -- which was, again, a terrible problem. But I did get enough access, to see enough of Rodin's own drawings in that collection, to begin to work out a chronology.

Two things had been happening simultaneously. In the fall of '69, when I came back, I did a seminar with Al where I presented my research from the summer -- the chronology -- and I also began to talk about how I worked out the problem of the forgeries. I identified several different forged hands, and on what grounds I tried to identify them and stuff. Al liked this research a lot, and I applied for a big fellowship from the National Gallery in Washington, which was then giving -- They didn't yet have CASVA, which is their Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, but they had a fellowship program, and the top of the line fellowship was this thing called the David E. Findley Fellowship, which was three years (unheard of in those days), a three-year fellowship that was designed specifically for people who might become museum people. You were supposed to travel to museums. I didn't apply for it. I applied for one of the one-year fellowships, to go abroad and do the Rodin research. I'm told (Al heard this) that Rudolf Wittkower -- who was the great [Gian Lorezno] Bernini specialist and head of the department at Columbia -- was visiting professor at the National Gallery that year, pulled my application out of the herd and said, "This sounds like a really interesting topic, and worth doing." So they bumped me up to the Findley, to the three-year fellowship, which was unheard of, and I was so delighted.

At the same time, Al began talking to Carter Brown, who was relatively new in the saddle at that point, about doing an exhibition based on this, which would be an exhibition not only of Rodin's drawings, but of the forgeries and how to tell them. He got Carter interested in that idea, so, virtually, the minute I set foot in Paris, in the fall of '70 -- because the summer of '69 I was over there, the fall of '69 I did a seminar on

it, the spring of '70 was Kent State. Everything broke loose. The school went on strike. We did a big show instead, of anti-war art, which I helped organize and bring to Washington. This was a whole other, subsidiary episode. Meanwhile I had gotten the fellowship. But the minute I landed in Paris, in '70, we were looking at the exhibition opening in the fall of '71, at the National Gallery, so I had to write a book in a big hurry. I had to write a catalogue that would go with that, so I delivered a manuscript in February of '71, which was the core of my thesis -- a chronological ordering of Rodin's drawings, and a set of analyses of the forgers and how to tell them apart.

That became the basis for the show, and Al wrote an essay of introduction and there were a couple of other essays. We opened the show in '71 at the National Gallery, it came to the Guggenheim in the early part of '72, and in June of '72 I defended my thesis, which I rewrote. So it was sort of a world's land-speed record. Most Ph.D. theses in art history take eight years. Al just horsewhipped me. I didn't really have any idea how extraordinary it was to get through a Ph.D. in art history in four years, but I've been eternally grateful ever since.

SZ: And put on an exhibition. And write --

KV: Yes. Well, I got my course work done in two years. I did the course work between the fall of '68 and the spring of '70. I completed my requirements, then went abroad; came back long enough to type up and defend the thesis in June of '72, a which point I still had a year left on the fellowship. So I got to go back to Europe for a post-doctoral year on the Findley, and that's when I started working on [Gustav] Caillebotte, and traveled around to museums there.

Eitner had formed the Stanford program on this premise. Stanford was worried about its status in the humanities, as opposed to its business and science, and it hired -- Eitner had been part of a Ford Foundation study about art history. It found that the average degree took eight years, and the reason it did was that people frequently went out teaching, in order to earn a living, and write their thesis while they were

teaching. So his theory was that if you could give people four solid years of support, so they would not have to teach; and if you could stick on top of them, they could write a thesis within four years. I was the guinea pig. I tied for the first Ph.D. produced by the Stanford Art History Department. I was sort of living proof that this could work. Al's theory was (which he believed with Eitner) that the Ph.D. was not your life's work, it was a union card. It proved you could do it. If it was 100 pages long that was enough. You needed to prove you could do research, and you proved out your thinking. Then you should get on with your work after that. So they were very encouraging in that regard. I was exceptionally lucky. I was exceptionally lucky with Elsen, who was an extraordinarily generous human being, and I was lucky to get there. He didn't have a cadre of students. He had left behind the people at Indiana. I got a desk in his office. He opened up his files to me. Co-publishing that book with him in '71 was like playing your first guitar gig with Chuck Berry or something. He really adopted me, and took me under his wing. He liked my style, and he was supportive, too. He came to the rugby games. He was sort of a man's man, and he believed in what you would call muscular art history, I suppose, and found me sympathetic in that regard.

So I was very lucky. I was lucky with Eitner, who was a brilliant teacher. Between the two of them -- I revisited with Eitner much of the same material I had gone over with Faison, back starting with [Antoine] Watteau, going through the revolution and David. But Eitner, who was a [Théodore] Géricault specialist, had a special feeling for French romanticism -- and also for German, which I had never been exposed to. Caspar David Friedrich and [inaudible] -- all that came from Eitner, in a way I had never gotten it before. So I was extraordinarily fortunate with these two teachers, and it was a time when they really got along well together. The Stanford Department later came on hard times, but Lorenz, who was an aristocratic, old world, elegant guy -- God, the first time I went into his office I thought he must be a former SS colonel. I kept looking for the fencing scar. He had this old world, Austrian, slight German accent, the most delicate touch and superbly genteel, aristocratic, deeply cynical and ironic sense of humor. Al, who was gruff, tough, all-American, totally different, much more -- The difference between the two romanticisms, of Eitner and Géricault, Al and

Rodin, were two different kinds of things. But they were great friends. They worked together, and they dreamed of a department where the studio and art history things would work together, so the building had the studios and the art history program in the same thing. We moved easily with the studio students who were there, and I took studio courses with Nathan Oliveira, who was a painter, just to keep my hand in. Aside from the fact that you had tear gas coming in the window every night during '70, it was a kind of golden age, I think. I was extraordinarily lucky.

SZ: And in this post-doctoral year -- You talked about the genesis of your interest in Rodin. How did you come to Caillebotte?

KV: The first time I can remember seeing a Caillebotte painting was on the cover -- There was an exhibition called *The Past Rediscovered*, which was, I think, started at the Detroit Institute of Arts, in what must have been '70 I would say or somewhere like that. Maybe in '71 or '72. Anyway, on the cover was the umbrellas picture from Chicago -- the "Rue de Paris, Temps de Pluie" -- and the first time I looked at the cover my head snapped back. I looked at that picture, and this was the beginning of the rumblings of revisionism in art history. Bob Rosenblum, who was a prime mover, had already written a very challenging book called *Transformations in Late 18th-Century Art*, which was a rethinking of the revolutionary period. Here he was writing about the 19th century, and it was the first beginning of looking at things which weren't Impressionism. The Manet to Monet to [Paul] Cézanne ascendancy had been so dominant that people who didn't fit that mold were marginalized, and the past we discovered was about a more eclectic way of looking at the 19th century. It was the first of many such shows and books that brought back academic art; that brought back [James] Tissot; that brought back other things like that.

But Caillebotte, in particular, and that picture, fascinated me. And I said, "How is it that I've been through five or six years of studying French, 19th-century art history, and no one has ever shown me this picture? It seems so utterly interesting, in relation to [Edgar] Degas and other things. I found out that the Art Institute of Chicago had acquired it only recently. Then when I went to France, naturally, I hung

out in the [Galerie nationale du] Jeu de Paume a lot, and at the foot of the stairs of the Jeu de Paume they had -- on an easel, not hung on the wall -- the *Raboteurs de Parquet*, which was a gripping picture. I was so taken with the perspective in it, and the power of the picture. It seemed so singular.

Then, in those days, I bought a motorcycle, and I was touring a lot on motorcycles. I'd go to odd, out of the way museums, like Bayeux, or up to Rouen, and Rouen had this powerful picture of a guy standing in a café. Finally, I remember coming back from Rouen one time, and stopping in Bayeux to see the tapestry [The Bayeux Tapestry], and I went into the Musée Bayerisches, I think it is, [Musée Baron Gérard] in Bayeux, and they had this picture called *Portraits à la Campagne*, which is these women, sitting, knitting. And I thought, okay. This is the final straw. Every time I see a picture by this guy, it's utterly fascinating. There's got to be something going on here that's worth looking at. So I went back to Paris and plunged into the library, plunged into all the literature, and found out he was every bit as interesting as I thought he was, and that there was very little being done about it, at all.

I tried very hard, during that year, to get the material together. There were very few reproductions of his work to persuade somebody to do a show in the U.S., and I came back in the year I was teaching at Stanford. I went to Chicago and tried to persuade Chicago, since they owned that picture [*Rue de Paris, Temps de Pluie*], to do a show. I tried to persuade the National Gallery to do a show. Nobody was interested. So I took all the research I had done and tried to get involved with Wildenstein, but Wildenstein, since I had no institutional base -- and they controlled the estate and the family -- were utterly uninterested, gave me the total cold shoulder, and said any work they were going to do would be done by this woman named Berhaut [Marie Berhaut] who was sort of their in-house person they had hired to do a catalogue raisonnée. So I was totally stiffed and had no place to go, but I had a lot of interesting research and stuff I'd been doing. I published an article in the spring of '73. I got the degree in '72, I went back in -- It was the spring of '74. I went back in the fall of '72, and in the spring of '73 to Europe. That's when I was studying Caillebotte. At that point history repeated itself, because Elsen was taking a

sabbatical, and they said, "Will you come back to Stanford and teach for a year?" So, of course. My God, it was like heaven. So I finished up the year of my fellowship, and in the fall of '73, went back to Stanford, to teach Al's courses. At the same time I decided I would publish two articles -- a Rodin I had extracted from my thesis, and this Caillebotte article.

So I published the Caillebotte article in the spring of '74, got the job at Columbia, came to New York in the fall of '74 to start working at Columbia, and they immediately saddled me with -- They had a tradition at Columbia of doing benefit exhibitions to raise money for the department, and it was a way of graduate students getting involved in producing a catalogue. Then they used the exhibition as the occasion for fundraisers and stuff. So they said, "Okay, you've done an exhibition. You do this thing." It wasn't a job that many people particularly relished, so I got saddled with it right away and I started doing a seminar, I guess, my second year there -- not the fall of '74, but the fall of '75. I was doing a seminar that was leaning toward the production of the exhibition, which I decided would be on modern portraits. I gave a big CAA [College Art Association] talk on Caillebotte in January of '76, I think, and around the same time I was approached by the Houston Museum, and they said, "We've got a great picture by Caillebotte down here, and we've been thinking about doing a show. We like your article." The curator's name was Tommy Lee, and Tommy said, "You know, your article is the only thing there is. Would you be interested in helping curate this show?"

I said sure, so I wound up doing both shows simultaneously, so that, literally, they opened within one day of each other. The portrait show opened here, at Wildenstein, and I got on a plane and flew to Houston, and opened the Caillebotte show the next day, in Houston. It was very high pressure, because the Caillebotte thing got rolling in the spring of '76, and suddenly, of course, now that there's a big museum involved Wildenstein opened all the doors. I got to meet the family. The family had drawings up in the attic that nobody had ever heard of. There were family albums. There was a ton of material, and all this happened in May of '76. The show was opening in October, so I had to sit down in June and write this Caillebotte catalogue. Luckily, I

got Peter Galassi, who's now head of photography [at The Museum of Modern Art], to work with me. He did a brilliant essay on Caillebotte's perspective studies and stuff, but it was real short order cooking.

SZ: You had known him?

KV: Peter?

SZ: Yes.

KV: Well, when I came to teach at Columbia in the fall of '74 -- I can't remember whether Peter was there that year or he arrived the next, but he was a very bright graduate student who came with exceptional letters from people at Harvard. He was clearly a special person with a lot of initiative. As I seem to remember reading the application (maybe he came the second year), he and Maria Morris Hambourg (who's now at the Metropolitan), and a woman named Marjorie Munsterberg whom I've since lost track of, were all keenly interested in photography, the history of photography, and knew a lot about it. As the issue of Caillebotte instantly raised the question of photography and photography's influence on Impressionism, I got very, very interested in the question of photography, first through its influence on painting, and then its own history.

So from conversations, from the challenge and stimulus of Peter, Maria and Marjorie, I wound up developing a course on the history of photography. I'm happy to say that Peter's thesis -- which was on [Jean-Baptiste-Camille] Corot and Corot's early studies in Italy -- It had its genesis in a seminar I did at Columbia. I was there for six years, and that's when he was doing his -- that was before he came to the Modern.

SZ: Maybe this will be the last question for today. How was it for you to come to New York and live in New York? Totally different?

KV: You know, when I was at Williams I watched a lot of my friends who were in investment banking and stuff come and live in New York, and I thought, "This is a hard existence. I would never want to do this." I was still very much a small town boy, New York terrified me, and I didn't think I would ever want to live here, particularly. But after I lived in Paris for three years, I discovered that I had become very urbanized, and the year I went back to Stanford to teach it became clear to me that New York was the only place I wanted to be, and applying to Columbia was very important for me. Because in modern art, especially, if you're out of town, you're out of town. So many things are happening here, and it was clear to me that that was definitely the kind of life I wanted to live, so I arrived elated. Arriving in New York in the fall of '74, you must remember, was Abe Beame and total bankruptcy. Where I lived, behind the Museum of Natural History, was regarded as vaguely dangerous. There was a lot that was down about the city at that point, but it was still an incredibly exciting place to be. The students at Columbia were first rate.

SZ: What about the department at Columbia?

KV: Well, the department -- This will take a while, so we'll make it the last thing for today. When I got through with Columbia, in 1980, and went to the Institute of Fine Arts, it slowly dawned on me how miserable I'd been at Columbia, in part because of the structure of the department. Of course, I loved the students. I had an excellent opportunity to work with great students, so I should be eternally grateful. But it was a machine, that department. It was a universe that had lost its sun. Wittkower had built that department and he had staffed it with a lot of his bright students. Then he died, and the universe continued to circle but without a sun to it, so you had a caste system, a real hierarchy. It started with the inner core of Wittkower's former students, then went down to the other faculty. This was one of those classic cases where, by the mid-'70s, with the boom of the '60s, they had tenured up the faculty very heavily, so there was very little room for anybody else to get tenure, which meant they had a lot of work to do teaching art humanities to incoming freshmen, teaching general studies (which was part of the night school), et cetera. The plum assignments -- the big, rich graduate seminars -- tended to be run by the inner core, and the slew of

junior professors they brought in there, on sort of a "burn them up in five years and throw them out" routine, got to teach the art humanities, the introductory things, and lower than that were the graduate student preceptors, who also taught introductory courses. So even within the graduate students there was a hierarchy, and from the graduate students through the junior faculty and so forth, and you were made to feel this all the time. There were meetings to which one did and didn't go, and it felt like a big machine. It felt like a big machine, processing people. There were people who were only there for a year or two, to get MA's, and they were cranked through. The head of the department in any given year was a professor who would rather have been teaching, but had accepted being head of the department at the time. The office was staffed by people who were in nursing school, trying to work their way through.

In retrospect, when I got to the Institute of Fine Arts, which had a paid director -- who was the permanent director, and there primarily to direct -- which had a paid academic staff who were there as professionals, it was like I suddenly realized there was another way to do things in life. I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven. It was utterly calm, unpolitical, unstratified. Everybody at the Institute, except me, had tenure, and I got tenure after a couple years. Everybody left everybody alone. The meetings of the Art History Department at Columbia were filled with such cynicism. They were so cynical about the way they thought about students, and the Institute was utterly different. People were totally devoted to an idea of equality. They might disagree about this, that or the other, but they were deadly serious about what they were doing and deeply engaged in an idea of education. It was breathing new oxygen. In retrospect, at Columbia --

Junior professors always have gripes, right? And I was a junior professor. I was paid, I think, $11,500 a year, when I first arrived there, something like that. By the time I left, at the end of the '70s, I couldn't have been making more than $17,500, or something like that. I felt abused there, in retrospect.

SZ: But not at the time? You keep saying "in retrospect" --

KV: At the time I put up with it, because I don't think I understood that I merited any better, or that this was just going to be everybody's lot in life. But there were some galling senses of condescension, et cetera.

SZ: Well, I presume at that point you were envisioning for yourself a life in academia, with the ability to do some of these things?

KV: Well, I had fallen into a routine of doing exhibitions, which seemed like a lot of fun -- particularly doing that portrait show, with the seminar; or, on a more informal level, having Peter participate in the Caillebotte thing. There was a way of learning that was so intense and pressurized, because it was focused on real objects, it had real deadlines, involved dealing with real people, and it was a great way of education, to do this sort of thing.

So at this point, if I can reconstruct my thinking, I think my goal was to try to find a tenured position somewhere in academia, and publish more things. I'd gotten interested in the history of photography, I was writing on contemporary sculpture at that point, so I just wanted to do more of the same. Because when I originally started out I thought I would do nothing but undergraduate teaching. I never thought about graduate teaching. Then when I got to Columbia it became clear that that was a different kind of involvement, and very fulfilling.

SZ: Okay. Let's stop. We'll start with the Institute the next time.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **KIRK VARNEDOE (KV)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

DATE: **13 DECEMBER 2001**

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: We left off as you arrived at the Institute.

KV: I left Columbia and started teaching at the Institute of Fine Arts.

SZ: And you told me that was when you discovered how much you had hated Columbia.

KV: It's such a completely different setup. The Institute is run by a professional director who's there to direct it. He's got a staff of professional people who do this for a living. They're not working their way through any school, or anything like that. So the whole thing had a calmer, settled, more professional air about it, and it had no caste system, no hierarchy. I was the only person on the faculty without tenure when I got there, and I got tenure within a year and a half or two years or something. Everyone treated everyone else with a great deal of respect, and it was just an infinitely more civil place, I thought, and more serious about what it did with education. I think I may have mentioned last time that I would sit around these tables with the Columbia faculty, and the level of cynicism about the product they were processing, in their vast engine, there, was corrosive. I found it deeply surprising and unhappy. The Institute would sit around the table and spend long amounts of time debating points of real issue, that had to do with the quality of teaching, the nature of our programs, et cetera; but on other matters, each individual faculty member was left an enormous

amount of freedom. Nobody messed with anybody else. It was an ideal kind of academic job, I thought. The teaching load was the same for everybody, and reasonable.

So I loved it. I loved my students. I had very, very good students. I was exceptionally lucky, I think, that the first couple of years I was at the Institute I fell in with a group, in seminars and stuff, whom I stayed with right straight through their Ph.D.s, and they were all terrific people. Jeffrey Weiss is now the chief curator at the National Gallery of 20th Century Art; Adam Gopnik, is writing for *The New Yorker*, and has achieved great success as a writer, after moving on, being an art critic; Patricia Berman, who's now head of the department at Wellesley, was in this group; Mimi [Emily] Braun, who's now teaching at Hunter here, wrote a very distinguished book on [Mario] Sironi. These are all really good people and really bright minds. I learned a lot from working with them, and they became good friends, too. Pepe Karmel, whom I worked with on the Pollock show, as well. They were all just about ten years younger than I was, too, so there was enough of a closeness there that we could enjoy the same things.

SZ: And you were teaching what?

KV: I remember dong a seminar on art and science. Weiss did a piece on the Museum of Natural History, in relation to [Wassily] Kandinsky and surrealism. I did thematic seminars like that. Quickly, when I got there, I got involved in doing "Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting," which was the Scandinavian show. I was approached by the American Scandinavian Foundation, which was going to be the sponsor for this big Scandinavia Today year, and they had planned an exhibition of contemporary Scandinavian art that had fallen through. Their fallback position was to do something with the [Edvard] Munch era, which they knew was well known in the U.S. I think they actually asked Bob Rosenblum first -- or at least they asked him who could do it -- and he gave them my name.

I had been working on -- It's an odd sort of pool shot of caroming corners, in the sense that even when I was working on Caillebotte I noticed there were some early Munchs that looked like Caillebotte, very closely in fact, and I wondered what on earth the connection could possibly be. Munch was in Paris in the late '80s and early '90s, but there was no evidence that those circles crossed. So I began to look into Munch's formation, went up to Oslo and worked through the Munch sketchbooks, and got hitched on the figure of Christian Krohg, who was Munch's teacher. Krohg had been in Paris at the time of the Impressionist exhibitions, in the early '80s, and had all but copied a Caillebotte. So there, clearly, was the link, and Krohg was interesting to me. Krohg produced some really interesting pictures, and I had written a little article about Munch and Krohg. So I guess on that basis Bob thought I would be an interesting person to do it.

What I arranged to do was -- First of all they sent me around the five Nordic nations for a summer, going to every museum I could think of, looking at all the art I could find in the basements and on the walls. When I had made a selection I came back and started a seminar here, where the American Scandinavian Foundation provided translators. I divvied up the work amongst the students in the seminars, and they did the research for the catalogue entries on the individual artists, in all the different countries. Then I wrote an introductory essay, and in the long run we used Mimi Braun's essay, which I thought was terrific, on the reception of the Scandinavian artists in Paris, as another one of the essays. Then there were contributing essays from Nordic scholars, as well. The students did the bulk of the main entries in the catalogue.

That was a great experience, really great for them, I think, and terrific for me. It was a repeat, in a certain sense, of the modern portrait show that I had done at Columbia -- a similar kind of structure -- but this time, instead of doing it at a local gallery, which we did with the Columbia show, the show opened at the Corcoran in Washington, came to Brooklyn, and then went to Minneapolis. So we got to see it all together. It was a good experience for me because the Nordic Council more or less gave me free hand, and you had these five different nations, all of whom had an academic

canon of who their local heroes were, and whose national identities were built up in sort of fierce opposition to Sweden's to Norway's, Norway's to Sweden, Denmark's to -- so to get them all together on one thing was odd -- it was against the grain -- and to allow me to demote some of their heroes and raise some people they didn't think so much of, in order to produce a coherent show, which was a show that rode a particular hobby horse I was riding, actually, at the moment; which was, that the American vision of progress in modern art is so Francocentric, and so Parisocentric, that you feel the baton being passed from Manet, to the broken brushwork of Monet and Impressionism, and then, after that, to [Georges] Seurat and Cézanne. Then comes symbolism, then comes Munch.

SZ: Gee, that sounds like --

KV: -- so and so begat so and so, right? It seemed to me that there were a lot of cases like Caillebotte (which was a perfect example), where you had, square in the middle of, so called, the heyday of Impressionism, and that was supposed to be the forward thrust -- a very anomalous condition, where you had someone who was painting a crisply realist art, which was, in many ways, premonitory of Munch, [Giorgio] de Chirico, et cetera; that there was kind of current of late realism, a late, romantic realism, that fed straight through into symbolism, particularly in countries outside France; that the transition between the two was more seamless and melding than it was perceived by the French model. The Scandinavian and northern countries seemed to me to provide a really interesting instance of this in, say, the connection between Krohg, Caillebotte and Munch, for example. And [Max] Klinger. I had done a book on Klinger in Germany, who seemed to be another case of it.

So I called the book *Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting* [*Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting*], and it brought to American consciousness some people who I think have since stuck, in a certain sense.

SZ: I was going to ask you for some examples.

KV: [Vilhelm] Hammershoi, for example, the great Danish painter, who was certainly well known in Denmark (everyone loved him), but a fabulous painter who, I think, achieved a much higher recognition.

This little show had a big impact, actually. It had a big impact on the Scandinavians, who suddenly saw the marketability of a certain vision of Scandinavian art that they, themselves, wouldn't have particularly thought of. For years they've been churning out revisited visions (*Smiles of a Summer Night*, whatever) of *Northern Light*, re-tinkered to their specifications, since. There was a huge surge in the Scandinavian art market, in fact, for a while, in the late '80s, in London particularly, where people like Jansson, from Sweden, who had only ever been a local phenomenon, suddenly began to be sold at high prices. Hammershoi, I think, is really the one who has stayed the course, because he's a very special and particular artist, and the work is very accessible. But Jansson was a really interesting artist, and any number of people – [Peder Severin] Kroyer was already well known, the sort of John Singer Sargent of the deal. A lot of these pictures aren't available outside of Scandinavia. Munch is hard to get as hen's teeth.

Anyway, that was one of the first things I did at the Institute, was that exhibition -- that "Scandinavia Today" show -- the *Northern Light* show -- and we must have started that in '81 or whatever, and it was '83, I think, by the time we got that show done. I can't actually remember right now. Or maybe earlier. Maybe that show was earlier. Anyway, it was one of the very first things I did at the Institute, and that set a pattern, again, of working both in the exhibition world and in the -- and near simultaneously, in '80 or '81, I was re-involved with Elsen, who did this big show called "Rodin Rediscovered," at the National Gallery. Because of my interest in photography I did the whole section on Rodin photography. When they opened up the archives on Rodin, there turned out to be tons of fascinating material about the way he worked with photographers. So I did the section on Rodin photography, then I did the Rodin drawing section. That show I think was also '80 or '81, at the National Gallery. [*Rodin Rediscovered*, The National Gallery of Art, June 28, 1981-May 2, 1982].

Then, actually, the sort of submerged part of history here, which I don't know whether we touched on last time, was the whole question of myself and the Modern, and Bill Lieberman leaving to go to the Met. Well, in 1979, I think, just before the Museum was about to close -- or shut down very tightly for the rebuilding, and then came to reopen in '84 -- it became clear that Bill Lieberman was going to leave to go to the Met, and there was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing about whether this should happen or shouldn't happen. At this point I'd known Bill Rubin through his participation in the visiting committee at Columbia, and because he'd helped me get loans for the portrait show; and, Al Elsen had sort of given me an introduction to him. Al and Bill were very old friends. They've known each other since high school. So I'd known Bill and Bill had come to some of my lectures. I remember he came to the Caillebotte lecture in Brooklyn, already, as early as '76. He was interested in my work and he liked the portrait show, so his idea was that I would be the new Bill Lieberman; that I'd come in and run the drawings department. He tried to press Dick Oldenburg into thinking this was a good idea, too. I don't know how many other people he rounded up with it, but I had a number of lunches with Dick Oldenburg at this point and there was a whole flurry of activity about would I get involved with the Modern? This was just before I got the offer from the Institute. I was still at Columbia. Then the two things started to collide, and meanwhile they decided they didn't want to hire anybody new, going into a building program.

SZ: They had to go inside.

KV: Once Lieberman left they just moved John Elderfield over from the paintings department and let him run it. So that sort of closed that job off, and closed that chapter down, temporarily, but Bill seemed to still very much have his eye on me.

SZ: By the way -- Was Lieberman a part of that, at all, when you came here to talk to Dick Oldenburg?

KV: No, no. He was the departing person. I had no personal contact with him at all.

SZ: In the way he departed. Yes.

KV: So that was a flash in the pan, sort of, and it got supplanted by the offer from the Institute.

SZ: Were you disappointed when that didn't come through?

KV: Bill was more ready for it than I was. I had never thought I was going to do anything but teach. I wasn't at all sure what it was going to be like to be involved with a museum. I had felt I was just now getting my traction. I hadn't earned tenure yet. I left Columbia before I was up for tenure and the possibility of it, so I didn't feel like I'd ever settled myself in the academic world. I was ambivalent. If it had been offered -- It's hard to reconstruct now. Certainly, the Institute offer was extremely attractive. I really loved that and I thought that was great. In any event, I never had to make the choice. It came and went, and then I went off to the Institute and taught.

Already, at this stage, you could see that Bill [Rubin] thought I was somebody that he might, in the long run, groom to come in and follow his steps. I think that's not exaggerated. It was pretty clear that that was something he was thinking about. So he asked me, in the early '80s, to draw up a list of shows I might like to do at the Modern. This was, I guess, right after the Picasso show -- you know, the big Picasso retrospective -- and I drew up a list of shows I always thought would be interesting to do. One of them was a show about primitivism in modern art. Bill said, "Well, that's all very well and good, but I'm doing that show. I've already got that idea. Why don't you come do it with me?" So, fantastic. I thought that was amazing. We must have started working on that show in '82 -- '81 or '82. Bill already had a very clearly defined idea, certainly on the tribal arts side, of what he wanted to do. He had been collecting tribal arts and knew a great deal about them; I was an ignoramus. I had to get into the library in a hurry and start reading up.

SZ: That was not something that you particularly --

KV: Well, I was interested in primitivism in 20th century art; that is, I knew a fair amount about how it worked on the European side. What I didn't have was the connoisseurship, and the background, and the extensive knowledge of the different tribal styles in Africa and how the New Guinea work broke down. It was a much more undifferentiated field for me. It was a field he knew a great deal about, object by object, country by country, style by style. That's where I had to play catch-up, in a hurry.

SZ: Which, I assume, is not for you a big problem.

KV: Oh, it was a joy to do, because the work was fascinating and I loved learning about it.

So we started to work on that show, and Bill had already defined, more or less, the concept of the show -- which wasn't exactly what I -- When I made my proposal to do a primitivism show, it had to do with a different set of emphases and a different set of directions. But his was very clearly focused on tribal art, so, for example, he excluded pre-Columbian art, which he thought of as a "court art," and he defined it very clearly. Whereas, I would have included pre-Columbian, because it had such a big influence on [Henry] Moore, et cetera. But, be that as it may, we didn't have any essential disagreements, and we quickly charted out which parts of the territory I would write on and work on -- which were [Paul] Gauguin and Abstract Expressionism. Then I pushed him to have a contemporary part of it. I think, for him, the story more or less ended at Ab Ex, and he wasn't particularly interested in pushing it beyond that. I felt that the age of the Smithson *Spiral Jetty* and the De Maria *Lightning Field* was about a different kind of primitivism that at least had to be acknowledged. It wasn't about specific objects anymore, it was about tribal rituals, a sense of place, or any number of other things, but it was atavistic in the extreme -- Stonehenge, and that sort of thing.

So I felt that really needed to be addressed in the catalogue and in the show somehow. A lot of it couldn't be done in the show, but -- So we tacked on that end, then I did the Gauguin / Ab Ex parts of it.

SZ: And how was it working at that point?

KV: You know, Bill had a fierce reputation, of course, as a terrible tyrant, and I saw him lose his temper on many an occasion, with lighting people or stuff. You farmed the design of the show out to Chuck Froom. Froom & Franklin, I think they were. It was an outside design team. It's the last occasion I can remember, in this Museum, where an outside design team came in. Because he felt there were special needs for tribal objects, in terms of the vitrines and the hanging and stuff. (He was certainly right about the hanging.) I'm going to forget the guy's name, but there was a guy who did nothing but design the metal mounts that the tribal masks worked on. They were like little Calders [inaudible] in themselves, and he had like a mini-forge that he brought along with him, to adjust these things.

SZ: That was an outside guy, too.

KV: That was an outside guy, too. Froom & Franklin built these -- I would one day like to live in a house as well built as these vitrines were. They were fabulously expensive, and they were the source of endless argument. So Froom & Franklin took many of Bill's tirades, and lighting was an issue. He was a perfectionist, and he railed when things weren't right. On the other hand, I found he was a guy, intellectually, who really loved a good argument, and if someone were willing to put it to him, would sit and listen and argue. He was <u>not</u> an intellectual tyrant. He had very strong opinions -- very, very firm opinions -- but he would leave a lot of attitude for other people. He just wanted to make sure they were as sure of theirs as he was of his, and he liked debate. For whatever reason, he had decided I was okay, so that I never felt coerced, bullied, beaten up or anything by Bill. On the contrary, he was extraordinarily generous with me. The generosity of inviting me to do the show, as co-director, when it was his baby, to start with. It was incredibly generous, and he

clearly had plans for me at this point. He wanted me to succeed, and that's a wonderful feeling to have, when you have someone who's willing to act as a kind of mentor, patron, supporter, et cetera. And he's brilliant. Let's face it. He was a fantastic art historian. He knew a great deal, and the supplemental aspect of knowing as much as he knew about tribal art meant that he was a fantastic resource for me.

SZ: I remember that he had a reputation for having a really wonderful way of installing.

KV: Yes. He cared a great deal about installation, and he thought long and hard about the colors, the vitrines, and this show, particularly, was didactic in the sense that objects had to be next to each other. But he was deeply sensitive that each object also be able to speak on its own, so putting things across the room from each other instead of side by side. I learned a fantastic amount from watching him think through the processes of how to deal with the objects -- which ones to feature, what to put in the center of the room, what to put on the side of the room, et cetera, et cetera.

SZ: Did you have to spend a significant amount of time here? Did you start to interact with members of the department, or was it -- ?

KV: Yes. I spent a lot of time in this department. We had two different curatorial assistants, one who ran the tribal side of it and the other who ran the modern side of it. I had to work a lot with them, because I had a clear idea of which Gauguin loans I wanted, for example, for my Gauguin section. I had to learn how that worked, and how they worked for me to get the photographs. The design of the book was important. I continue to think it's one of the most wonderful books the Modern ever produced. Steve Schoenfelder, who was the designer -- This is somebody I've worked a lot with since, but that was the first time I'd ever worked so closely, really, with a book designer in such a complex challenge. We burned a lot of midnight oil getting that done, under high pressure. It was a much bigger, more complex enterprise than any exhibition and enterprise I'd ever been involved in before. The Caillebotte exhibition was run by Houston [Houston Museum of Fine Arts], a lot of

things were done by other people. Whereas, here, I was really in the day-to-day grind of it, and learned an enormous amount from doing that.

So that was a terrific experience, and that opened in the fall of '84. At the end of it, somewhere in November -- we opened in September, and somewhere in November came the *Art Forum* article, with [Thomas] McEvilley's attack. At this point I was already involved in the preparations (which I never followed through on, and I'll explain why) for the Gauguin show at the National Gallery. Partly based on my work on Gauguin primitivism, they had asked me to join a team with Françoise Cachin and Rick Brettell. Rick was going to represent Chicago, Françoise was representing the French, and I was going to be National Gallery's representative. I had kept very close ties to the gallery because of my fellowship thing, and I was very good friends with Gil [Gaillard] Ravenel, who was the installer and had designed the exhibition with Franny [Francis] Smyth, who was the editor. So I was going to be their freelance person on Gauguin.

The reason I remember this is that I remember, when a lot of this angst and agony was going on over what kind of reply should be written to McEvilley, I was off in Denmark looking at Gauguins with Cachin and Brettell already, and we were having to do a lot of this by long distance. Bill decided the thing needed to be replied to, I think, in retrospect, ill advisedly. The show has now gone down in history as having been generally controversial, but it's my impression that wasn't true at all. Most of the reviews were, in fact, enormously positive. McEvilley's one review raised certain questions -- not a great many of them, but had Bill not replied to it, it probably would have gone away, people would have thought it was interesting, and that would have been that. And Bill wanted to reply to it not so much on the big, intellectual issue of colonialism or imperialism, but because he felt McEvilley hadn't quite played fair with the facts about things like whether this was the first exhibition of its kind. McEvilley had argued that the show of the de Menil collection in Pompidou, which included the tribal objects from the de Menil collection and the modern objects, was a precedent, and he accused Bill, in a certain sense, of over-hyping our show by ignoring precedent. Bill was at great pains to prove that there really weren't any precedents,

so he went back and counted the objects in the vitrines. This was manic and crazy, and the whole opening, once we responded -- since Bill responded, I was obliged to, so I wrote a letter, because I thought there were a lot of things I disagreed with about McEvilley's thing. Well, this is a real lesson I learned. Bill, I think, should have learned it previously. Once you open the door the other guy always gets the last word, because he gets the last word against your [inaudible].

Bill, I think, thought he might have been entering -- I always thought that one of the classic examples of high-minded intellectual exchange was the debate between Bill and Leo Steinberg over the relative roles of Picasso and Braque in Cubism, which was exchanged around, I think, the late Cézanne show -- which is, I think, what spurred it off.

SZ: That's what prompted that show, the Cubism show, I think.

KV: The "Picasso and Braque: Pioneers in Cubism," [*Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* [MoMA Exh. #1529, September 24, 1989-January 16, 1990]] years later. But the debate in *Art in America* between Leo and Bill I think art historical students are still assigned to this day, because it was civil, smart, sharp, polemic without being ad hominem, et cetera, et cetera. I think Bill thought that was the terrain he might have been on again. But McEvilley was an entirely different kind of guy, and he really was immediately ad hominem, dismissive, and Bill -- the king of the hill -- was not used to this kind of "flippery." Then he felt obliged to write the next letter, and -- I got on the next round. I just said, "There's no good ever going to come of this, and the serious issues in this thing need addressing in some other tone and format." So I went over to *Art in America* and wrote a kind of rebuttal, or what I thought was a rebuttal, to McEvilley -- which, happily, in the last couple of anthologies, where the debate has been picked up, they also picked up that article. Which, if you just cruise the *Artforum* letters, never gets picked up.

But, gee, it was a mess. Bill was very tired, and lost the taste for it after the first go-round. By the time this started really cranking up, in January and February of '85, the

show was gone; had moved on to other places and stuff, so it was a nasty piece of business. It coincided, for me -- I can't remember the timing of how this happened. I think it actually happened before, somewhere in the fall of '84 (October, November), I got the call from the MacArthur Foundation (which I'm sure didn't please Mr. McEvilley, either, and I've always thought that had something to do with it), which was wonderful. But the timing was, here came the MacArthur Foundation with another offer to, in essence, take lots of time off and do some project that you really wanted to do. But the realities of life were that, having done the primitivism show, the dye was sort of cast here, and Bill's plans for me were now heating up quite strongly. So that, in '85 -- Let's see. I got the MacArthur in November of '84. In the spring of '85, the Viennese launched this big show, "Traum und Wirklichkeit," (Dream and Reality) in Vienna, and this was the first time --

Now you have to go back in history, I think, to the mid-'70s or even earlier, when there had been a plan between the French, ourselves and the Viennese, to do a big Vienna show -- which Bill had been involved in. Bill and Michel Laclotte had gone to Vienna, they were treated extremely badly, and the Viennese just refused to lend anything. In the meanwhile, between then and the early '80s, there had been kind of an icebreaker in the sense that the Viennese themselves had sent a big show -- "Vienna 1900" -- to the Venice biennale one year, and then they got Hans Hollein, the architect, as the ubermeister, the symphony conductor, to lead this huge "Vienna 1900" thing. I guess somebody smart in the Chamber of Commerce was going to figure out that this stuff was very popular, and it would be a good thing for Vienna to do. So there was this big show, "Traum und Wirklichkeit," and they came to us again and they said, "Okay. Now we're willing to talk turkey about a Vienna show." In the spring of '85 Bill said, "Okay, this is going to be your baby, to do alone. Everybody in the Museum has bruised themselves with this show over the years. It has to be brought home now, and this is your great opportunity to do something on your own. So you pick up this ball and go with it."

Now it's the spring of '85, and what I had to do was I had to tell the National Gallery I wasn't going to do the Gauguin show, which was painful and unhappy, but by that

time they'd hired Charlie Stuckey (the guy who, in fact, I was just talking on the phone with, at the beginning). Stuckey knew Gauguin very well, and I didn't feel so badly. I felt he could pick it up for them, but it was unhappy. I think Carter Brown wasn't pleased, but I had no choice at that point. Clearly, my future lay here if it lay in the museum world, so I launched myself into doing the Vienna show -- which is not exactly, I think, what the MacArthur Foundation had in mind. This sort of crabby tale of lament here is that I had very little chance ever to take off time, because these things hit simultaneously, as the thing was speeding up.

So *Vienna* got thrown in my lap, and once again, I suppose my knowledge of "Vienna 1900" was bound to have been superior to my knowledge of Gabon and fangmasks, but I was not a specialist. I was not specialist at all. I had been raised dominantly in the good, Francophile model, and I just had to start really, really gearing myself up. Plus I was presented with this kind of massive *fait accompli* in Vienna, which had been staged all around the vast installation of the "Beethoven Frieze" and the Secession, and things like they had the coat that Franz Joseph was assassinated in -- all this -- tons of literature and they had Freud's couch. You know, there was a vast kind of *kunstgeschichte* going on there that I just didn't think would work for us. I thought this was the Museum of Modern Art and what we had to do was to do the modern art part of it, so I set about with what I think Hans Hollein would say was a meat cleaver, I would say with a knife, to hue the show in the direction of what we wanted. In order to do that I had to learn a great deal. I had to do a huge amount of reading.

Obviously the Modern wanted its own catalogue to go with its own show, so I went to Vienna in the summer of '85. The show was due to open at the Modern in the summer of '86, so it was a true, one-year wonder. When I got back in the summer I then began to figure out how I would structure the show to come here -- what I would put in -- and I sat down in November of '85 to write that book. I remember delivering the final chapter, under screaming pressure from the editors, at some point in late January. So it was a total marathon, completely exhausting. The Viennese were, as predicted, somewhat impossible to deal with. Hollein was protective of his show, so

he was a little nervous about how much help he wanted to give me. Meanwhile, the French show came in between, so Gerard Regnier, who was doing that show for the Centre Pompidou, was organizing yet another version that would come between our show. So the question of what loans he was getting affected what loans we were getting.

There are many tales of the Vienna exhibition, but the most staggering of them involves the issue of getting the loan of *The Kiss* and the *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer*, two great, golden [Gustav] Klimts that had never left Vienna and were not allowed to leave Vienna for the Paris show, either. But, as we wanted to concentrate the show on painting, these pictures were everything -- *The Kiss*, especially -- but I thought, actually, *Adele Bloch-Bauer* was at least a great a painting, and we really, desperately wanted these things. Fate worked in mysterious ways in our hands in that our show opened in July, literally right around the fourth of July. Let's say it opened July 2nd. [*Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design* [MoMA Exh. #1426, July 3-October 26, 1986] As of late May, the Viennese realized [Kurt] Waldheim had won the runoff election, and that he was going to be elected premier of Austria on July 5th, or something like that. I'm sure this reconditioned their notion about what they needed to set forward in New York. The director of the Oesterreicher Gallery did not want to lend the pictures.

SZ: Because of their condition?

KV: That was his argument. Because of their condition. So we flew the conservator over here, and we talked all about the wonderful conditions and how we would transport these things. As in these wonderful dramas, the conservator really didn't like the director (he felt oppressed by the director), so when the director said they couldn't be loaned, for conservation reasons, the conservator said, "Well, maybe they can." So we courted the conservator like crazy, we brought him over here, and he was a very nervous and complex little man. The director was furious that he was being subverted by his own conservator, but that left that line of defense less secure so that, when the pressure started coming down from the state to do this (and that's

what I think started happening), we had the conservator on our side, and the pressure started coming down. That was May -- the primary elections -- and we're due to open in early July. I've got these things in the catalogue, we're building the design of the room, and we built the main hallway of entrance with *The Kiss* at the end of it and a room full of the golden paintings, of which *Adele Bloch-Bauer* was the other, primary one.

We're now talking three weeks, a month, before the exhibition, and negotiations are still going on. Finally the word comes down from Vienna that the pictures can be loaned if they were flown first class. Hallelujah, right? Bing. There is no plane through whose door this crate will fit, to put things in first class. The whole thing grinds to a halt. You had the image of the prime minister and everybody drinking champagne in first class with these crates there, and they won't fit through the door! Okay. Let's go back. Another round of three or four days of negotiations. Okay. They agree they can go in the freight hold. Because what flew out of Vienna were combis; freight, passenger combis. Okay. They can go in the freight hold. Hey! Celebration again! Ooops. No freight hold door big enough to put a crate of this dimension in. What's needed is a full freight plane.

SZ: I thought you were going to say a military plane.

KV: No, no, no. We thought about that. What was needed was a full freight plane, and there was none such flying out of Vienna.

Our contact in all of this, the guy I worked with, was a guy named John Sailer, who runs the Galerie Ulysses in Vienna, and who has a bicameral mind. He's able to think like an American, but he's able to think like a Viennese -- very devious -- and he had many good friends. Somehow he had a connection at Lufthansa, so they persuaded Lufthansa that the Frankfort to New York freighter should exceptionally, on this day, make a flight to Vienna to pick these pictures up and bring them. We're now down to a week before the show, and at this point, having secured the idea that we can get a plane, that they can be put on the plane, then there's a terrible thing

going on with Kunsttrans, which is the freight operation in Vienna. They're essentially the registrar staff for all the museums in Vienna. They're very well organized, and they do all the packing and handling and stuff. The guy who ran Kunsttrans had a brain tumor --

SZ: I know his wife, yes.

KV: Exactly. She had to be with him, this crisis happened, leaving in charge of Kunsttrans, at this key moment, Frau Griebler. Frau Griebler, in the best Viennese tradition, was a dwarf, and she was utterly convinced that the only people capable of handling these pictures were Kunsttrans operatives; and, therefore, that four, five, six Kunsttrans people had to be flown to New York to take the picture off the plane when it got here. We said, "This is absurd." Frau Griebler held all the strings, and, you know, it's now seven days or something, and we're ticking like crazy. Finally, we caved to Frau Griebler's demands that the Kunsttrans people be put on a Pan Am flight and flown into New York, so they can gingerly take the picture off the plane and bring it in to the Museum.

Okay. So now we're down to two days before. It's getting time. The paint is drying here. We're still not sure we're going to get the pictures. I remember I'm in contact with the Vienna airport, to make sure the pictures are actually being put on the plane -- the Lufthansa freighter it was -- and then, in a last gesture of subversion, the director, pissed as he is against the conservator, will not let the conservator travel with the pictures, but, instead, wants his mistress -- the director's mistress, who is somebody (I forget what) in the culture ministry -- to be the accompanist. They're standing on the tarmac and the conservator says, "I won't let the picture go unless I travel with it," the director saying, "She's going, not you," they're literally yanking suitcases, and I'm listening to Sailor describe this on the phone. It was just an unbelievable episode of madness.

But, in the long run, came the guys from Kunsttrans, with their white gloves. They brought the crates in, we got these loans -- the first time they'd ever been loaned out of Vienna -- and that made the show, just the presence of *The Kiss* and that picture.

SZ: It was a great show.

KV: We had fantastic Dec Arts. I'd never done anything in Dec Arts before, and I loved working with that. The architecture part of the show was inevitably shrunken here. I think Philip Johnson was disappointed. We had a couple of good models, we had the remake of the Die Zeit facade, but it wasn't as strong as it could have been. We were very lucky to get into the Palais Stoclet and get really good transparencies for the first time ever, in color, of the Klimt mosaic frieze, in the Stoclet palace, which we had up.

So there were some mini-triumphs, and I brought some people out who I thought -- I suppressed some people whom I was less interested in – [Arnold] Schonberg, for example -- as a painter I just didn't find I had the same excitement about that other people did. But there were other artists I tried to bring up and make more of. I think the book -- I've read the book over several times. It's a good, synthetic and critical history of Vienna, but Vienna was a cult thing. [Carl E.] Schorske's books, particularly, set the tone about this *gesamtkunst* work, where Freud and Loos and Kraus and all these sort of geniuses in every field were part of this coffee house culture. I always thought it was a little too pat, and that it isolated Vienna from criticism, in the sense that you really talked about how much Klimt did to Rodin, for example, or [Egon] Schiele, to Rodin's drawings -- which, knowing Rodin, I was quite primed for. Or, indeed, how much [Charles Rennie] Mackintosh and the Glasgow architects had a huge impact on Wiener Werkstätte. So one needed to look at it critically, and I thought we did. I thought the book was respectful but critical about that world. But there was a piece of insane short-order cooking, and it was a true, one year wonder. That's my one shining moment as a Viennese expert, because I never went back into anything, with any of that material again.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2

SZ: One small question about that, in terms of -- because I'm sure that involved a lot more people here, and had --

KV: I now had an office. They gave me a little office, right outside of P&S. I had my own research assistant and curatorial assistant, so I was really driving the show this time around.

SZ: Your feelings about it when this was over? That this was the right path for you?

KV: I loved doing it. You know, Jerry Neuner is fantastic, the designer here, and they flew him -- I was used to working with Gil Ravenel, who always got to go look at the objects he was going to do. So I sort of insisted that they send Jerry to Vienna with me, so he could work in that same fashion.

SZ: You, of course, hadn't worked with him before. He didn't know --

KV: Well, he'd been involved in primitivism, but more or less staging [inaudible] and Franklin rather than anything else, so this was something he got to do himself, and I loved it. I loved working with him. There were many things about the show that were hallowing. The people you were dealing with in Vienna were very complex, and it was an acquired subject, not a subject of predilection or love, in a certain sense. So it was a great experience, and seeing it all come together -- Somebody said unpacking the crates in the basement was like a combination of the night before Christmas and a Vampire movie, because [inaudible] -- because it was so saturated with the holocaust. All these objects had blood on them up to the gunnels -- all Jewish families, especially the Wiener Werkstatte material. So it had a very "clammy" aspect to it, shall we say, too. But, I was hugely grateful for the opportunity to do it, and in the end, part of the achievement -- Certainly, the book I would stand by very

strongly. We got amazing things, and I think the show was very successful for the Modern. People liked it, people remembered it well.

So that, then, brought me to the fall of '86, I guess, at this point now, when that show was over.

SZ: And Bill's opinion of it had been -- ?

KV: He liked it a lot. Bill was very pleased with the results. And Bill now started -- my having jumped through this hoop -- in a sense [inaudible] with the inner problem, which had tied the Museum up for so long. The time now seemed to be right to put the push on for Bill. Bill had retirement plans, he wanted to retire in a certain fashion, and he wanted to make sure I got the job before he left. That was part of the strategy. Essentially, it took two years -- from the fall of '86 to the fall of '88, for this all to be worked out. So there was a long period of time in which --

SZ: -- you were still teaching.

KV: Well, I'm still teaching at the Institute, and, you know, it was a period of being left to twist in the wind, basically, because everybody knew what the game was. It was pretty clear. There were articles in '86, right after the Vienna show, I think, that sort of -- There was a piece in *New York Magazine* called, "The Powers That Will Be," where I was sort of designated as the clear, up and comer. I think Michael Brenson did an article about the Vienna show, clearly. So you got put in the heir-apparent slot, at that point, which is an inviting target for a lot of people.

It's hard to reconstruct on a day by day basis, but there was -- I'm sure I had made some enemies in here. There were people who didn't like my style within the Museum, but there was a large rebellion on the part of the P&S staff about the fact that none of their favorites were being interviewed; that there didn't seem to be any rational process; there was not a search instituted; and they felt it did dishonor to the museum profession that a young academic like myself was going to be handling this

job, without having people like Christian Geelhaar or Nick Serotarun up at Whitechapel, or other people considered. It was an insult to the profession.

SZ: But it may have had more to do with your relationship to Bill Rubin.

KV: Possibly. They didn't like him getting his way once again. Also, they must have felt that anyone whom Bill liked was going to be a junior Bill Rubin. I think this was a large feeling; that the reason I was being put in there by Bill was that I was going to continue Bill's way of working, and that I was going to be exactly the same kind of tyrant, or whatever, that they felt he'd been. There were in-house people who felt that John Elderfield should have gotten the job. I think when Bill brought him here, in the early '70s, Bill may have had that idea himself. But, for whatever reasons, he had gotten off that idea. I think some people on the P&S staff, John having been a curator in P&S, were strong supporters of him.

Anyway, there were lots of other ideas about what ought to happen, and I felt constantly like the unwanted child.

SZ: I didn't ask you before but maybe this is a good place -- How do you see yourself in terms of operating in these kinds of political environments? Is it something you like, or are you just good at it, or -- ?

KV: I don't think I'm good at it, and I know I don't like it.

SZ: Because I always remember that old story about how Nelson Rockefeller said he'd learned everything he needed to know about politics at The Museum of Modern Art.

KV: At The Museum of Modern Art. Yes. I think that by the time I got here, some of the fiercest politics -- the days of Bill Paley and Jock [John Hay] Whitney, and Nelson himself, the whole trauma of the Bates Lowry/Hightower revolving -- that a lot of that had calmed down. Dick Oldenburg was a very steady influence, and even by the time I really got here, the Lieberman/Rubin political battle -- which had been the

worst of the knives -- had gone away. But every institution has politics, and I tend to -- My self-image is that I'm a naïf in this sense; that I never understand it until it hits me in the face; that I'm not particularly good at strategically thinking about politics; and, that most evidences of the working of politics wind up depressing me, because they don't seem to deal with issues of merit.

The thing I like about this Museum, and the thing I like about any institution I would want to work for, is idealism; that there is an ideal being served, and everybody who's involved in the place shares a notion of a certain kind of quality that the institution ought to embody. That may be a pie in the sky or romantic vision. What actually gets that vision driven along is, obviously, a lot of egos, a lot of ambitions, yoke themselves to it and drive it. But when you feel that it's the ego ahead of the institution that's being served, or when you feel that your time and energy is being spent in pursuits that have nothing to do with the excellence and idealism of the institution, it's fatiguing, depressing and annoying, and I've never been good at it. The thing is, one of the things about my role at this place and my feel for this place, is that I never had to come up through the ranks. I never came up from curatorial assistant, to assistant curator, associate curator, and I didn't develop a keen sense for how hierarchical and how insanely aware everyone is of the positions. I came in laterally, at the top of the game, so I didn't really have an ear for or a sense of the anxieties and competitiveness at a lower order. Which would have helped me, if I had been more sensitive to them and understood them better.

SZ: Yes. And then you were thrown right in the middle of it, without those --

KV: And I became kind of a lightning rod for it. Bill was bulletproof in some sense. That's what I was saying about McEvilley. He had been on the pinnacle for so long -- sort of Iron Chancellor -- that few dared to do anything against him or to him. I got to be the surrogate piñata in this deal, I think, to a certain extent.

I don't know. I didn't share in their gripes against Bill, because Bill had been terrific to me and I had nothing but a very good experience with him and enormous admiration

for him. But I remember taking individual members of the department, whom I knew and had worked with – Kynaston [McShine], Linda [Shearer], Carolyn [Lanchner] -- out to lunch individually, saying, "You know, what's wrong with me? Why is this huge resistance going on? I've worked here, you know me. What's the problem here? Tell me what the problem is." I suppose this was a stupid and dumb thing to do. They weren't going to tell me what the issue was. But to the extent they would say anything, they would say, "The process. It's not personal, it's about business," in the Godfather sense. "It's that the process isn't rational, it's not right, and nobody else is getting a chance. And you, yourself," they would say to me, "should think this is unfair and you should complain about it." But I felt so trapped in the sense that familiarity always breeds contempt, and the guy who has been toiling away here for two or three years, on primitivism in Vienna, is always going to be at immediate disadvantage to the white knight who rides in from Basel or London, with a clean record. So I was in kind of a damned if you do, damned if you don't position, in a sense.

It was unpleasant, because no one likes to think of themselves as disliked, unwanted or rejected. And I felt so strongly -- Bill's support was strong, I think Dick's support was strong, but you felt there were connivers against you, you didn't know where they were coming from; you didn't know what the gripe was. Words like "arrogance" kept getting tossed around. It was not a happy experience, and by the time I got the job, finally when the decision was made -- in February of '88, I think it was, for the appointment in August of '88 -- I felt a thorough layer of bruises all around, on everybody. It had been left to rot way, way, way too long. It should have happened faster. I think part of the reason it didn't happen faster was that Bill had an elaborate scheme about what kind of gradual retirement he wanted, with a consultancy, an office and a secretary, and it took him a long time to work that out with the trustees. I think the honest truth is that there were some trustees who also felt oppressed by Bill. Bill took no quarter. Bill had few -- Was Bill a politician? I wouldn't say so. Bill was a keen strategist but he was not a diplomat.

So there were many trustees also who felt -- and when I came to the P&S committee, there had been everything but a rebellion in a certain sense, about the emphasis in the Museum on contemporary art. A lot of people felt that as long as Bill was there, they were never going to move on, into getting involved in contemporary art in a true way.

SZ: Was this basically the younger committee members and trustees?

KV: No. Philip Johnson, I think, was one of the people who felt this way. He was very much involved at that point, in the '80s, with [Eric] Fischl and [David] Salle and [Julian] Schnabel and stuff.

SZ: That's true, yes.

KV: And David Whitney. So I don't think it was necessarily an age issue. And many people who liked Bill just wanted him to give more freedom to Kynaston. They forced him to hire Linda, more or less. So I think, oddly enough, in some way, Bill's leverage was that there were a lot of people who wanted a change, so they wanted to give him what he wanted so he would, in fact, move out and somebody else would come in.

SZ: But what was that process like for you? You had to go before the P&S committee?

KV: In the long run, the actual mechanics were very decorous, civil and essentially reform, leading ahead with the executive committee of the Museum. I was taken out to lunch at one point with David Rockefeller, where Dick suggested I was being considered. I met with the executive committee, most of whom I knew personally by then anyway (there weren't any surprises to be had), and we interviewed for an hour and a half. I can't believe they made any decision based on that.

See, the actual mechanics of it were all happening outside my ken. It's all going on in smoke filled rooms and negotiations with Bill. All I know is it lasted a great, long time,

and it left everybody a chance to get fed up, pissed off, annoyed, bored, et cetera, et cetera. I didn't know what was going to happen for two years, and two years I was left sitting there, waiting, while people just -- It wasn't fun.

SZ: Then you got the appointment, and then you had to move in.

KV: So I moved in in August of '88, I guess, and instantly learned a quick lesson. I thought the director's office -- which had always been called Director of Painting and Sculpture, before the title change -- that this would be a great showcase way to emphasize contemporary art. For example, [inaudible] had drawn up a list of pictures I wanted to bring into my office. I think I had a Susan Rothenberg at one point. Anyway, within a week, this list was leaked to *New York Magazine*, and there was an article in whatever the gossip part of *New York Magazine* is, about the "cheek and hubris" I had, in trying to corral all these pictures. I just felt jinxed. I had no idea who on earth on the staff would have leaked the list of pictures I wanted in my office, and who I was interested. But that was the turn. There was a sort of Barney's ad leftover feeling about it when I moved in. On the other hand, as regards the staff and the committee, I never felt there was a real period of adjustment, once the thing was done. But it had been cooking for so long at that point, that I didn't feel there was much of any problem working with anybody in the institution, once that was done. The Modern is like an organism, you know; it strives to reject any foreign body injected, fights with the [inaudible] and eventually forms around it in a very, very strong fashion. So that process began to happen, I suppose, when I got here.

SZ: I'll just ask you one last question for today. In your mind, what agenda did you bring to your new position, at that point?

KV: I don't think I had any strategic plan. Bill often said this (and I don't think Bill said it right, then), he said when I reinstalled the collection, after the Matisse show, and brought Bill through it, Bill got to the end of the thing and he said, "Well, I knew I was right. I was just looking for somebody who wouldn't fuck it up." That's one of the highest compliments I suppose I could be paid.

I think if I did have an agenda, it was not to fuck it up, in a strong sense. I had such a respect for the tradition of the institution. I felt there were things about the installation that really could be improved -- not wholesale, retail -- and that there were parts of it -- I tried to do that, in '92-'93. I felt it was too ahistorical; that the way you did this long, beautiful analysis of Cubism, which brought you up to the early '20s -- and then were obliged to go back and do German Expressionism, Futurism, et cetera, et cetera, and then, eventually, get to Matisse, and then go through Picasso in the '30s, before you get to [Marcel] Duchamp's *Bicycle* [*Wheel*] which you use as [inaudible] for Surrealism. I felt that the tumult around World War I and just before, the sort of mad moment where you have Futurism, Orphism, Synthetic Cubism, Dadaism -- everything sort of a thousand times at once -- that that kind of multiplicity of questions, rather than the linear layout that Bill had, needed to be emphasized, and that one needed to get more variety into the galleries.

And there were some pet peeves. [Constantin] Brancusi, I felt, was dealt with abysmally. There were some pet peeves about particular things, but aside from the installation of the collection, as an agenda, I knew we needed to start working more on contemporary acquisitions, very clearly. I didn't have any particular group of artists in mind, but I knew we really needed to open up in that area. And I thought we needed to do some strategic planning for the decade of the '90s, so that we wound up with a better mix of historical and contemporary shows. So I tried to sit everybody down, as soon as I got in, and say, "Okay. It's 2000. You look back at the last ten years. What are the shows we ought to have done? What should this museum do as opposed to what another museum does?" And that planning led to the three-M shows -- the Matisse, [Piet] Mondrian and [Joan] Miró -- because we felt sooner or later somebody was going to do their shows, and we had the best collections. We should do them.

For my own part, I knew what I wanted to do. I saw my role here not as the cutting edge contemporary person, and not as the next Bill Rubin, but to try to center weight the department in the [Jasper] Johns/ [Cy]Twombly -- that range of people who are

now becoming sort of old masters of contemporary, whom we've not done -- the great John [inaudible], Twombly show -- but if I focused my acquisitions on the work of the '60s, as Bill had done on Ab Ex, and stayed the middle weight in a certain sense, opening up to contemporary -- I'd do the *Artists' Choice* shows, which were very important to me -- but at the same time making sure that the great historical things got done, if not by me, so that Matisse was done by John Elderfield; Carolyn Lanchner did the Paul Klee show. The Miró show was done by Carolyn. So I wanted to make sure the bases were covered, but my own personal thrust was more in the '50s and '60s, as the key, now-classicizing moment sort of thing.

SZ: So we'll stop there. Give you a chance to breathe.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**KIRK VARNEDOE (KV)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**
DATE:	**18 DECEMBER 2001**

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1

SZ: We ended at the point where you arrived. I don't know if you really need this or want this, but I wanted to go through -- The Museum looked a little different -- This is really '89, the board of trustees, but I was actually looking at the staff list when you came -- I don't know if you need that for anything. I think also your committee is on there, at the back end of it, just for context -- but I think I asked you what were the things that you felt were on your plate and where you were going. Maybe what we ought to do, since we talked about the two shows you worked on before you really got here, we could continue with some of the other shows you want to mention, then I can go back to some of that more administrative stuff, and maybe we'll be able to do that this time.

KV: As you wish. I'd be happy to go on with the shows.

SZ: Yes. I'd like to do that myself.

KV: I guess when I came aboard in '88 I was already cooking the idea of “high and low”, which had really come out of discussions I had with Adam Gopnik at the Institute of Fine Arts when he was my student there. It seemed, after primitivism, one of the great, binding subjects of the 20th century was that a great thematic show ought to have its roots in early modern, but be relevant to contemporary art, as well. It seemed like a subject that was and hadn't been -- it had been talked about in abstraction but hadn't really been looked at and clear. There was a lot of blank information, particularly about the low side of it, so to speak -- the advertising, the comics, et cetera -- so we thought there was a big opportunity to not only present a different model of how this interchange worked, but also just to present a lot of new information.

So that show was sort of ready to go. Then when I got here --

SZ: Ready to go meaning --

KV: That idea was cooked and something I knew I wanted to do. By the time I started in '88 we were two years from opening, which means we were really going to be right in the thick of it that spring, finalizing the concepts about the lists and working out what we wanted to do about the catalogue and that sort of thing. But I was going to say that one of the first things I did when I got in was to sit the Department of Painting & Sculpture down (I think we talked about this last time) -- Imagine it's the year 2000. You're now looking back at the last decade. What shows are people going to do? What are the ones you think we should have done? What's best for our collection? How do we balance out our obligations to classic modern with contemporary, and with the sort of middle generation -- the Johns/Twombly sort of crowd?

So that's how we wound up with Matisse, Mondrian and Miró. Those were three artists that we isolated, that we had strong collections in, that there were likely to be retrospectives of, because there hadn't been in a while. Matisse started out -- First it was going to a kind of exchange with the Hermitage, and we were just going to do the great Russian Matisses. But then we thought, gee, having gotten those, it would be a shame, so that grew into a larger idea. Miró, Carol Lanchner took over. Mondrian got complicated, because the Dutch launched an initiative with the National Gallery that we then had to adjust to and figure out, so that got slightly taken out of our hands. But we plotted that those three artists would be where we would really want to lay our classical emphasis. Then I knew all along that I really wanted to do a Pollock show. I really felt so strongly that Pollock was so constantly on the minds of so many artists that his influence was even clearer, that he was head and shoulders above the rest of his generation in many respects, but there hadn't been a major Pollock retrospective in the U.S. There had been this thing at the Centre Pompidou in the '80s, but we hadn't had a chance to see Pollock whole in a long time, and, obviously, no one but the Museum was going to be able to do it, because we held the biggest and best collection.

So that was bound to happen. The Twombly show happened more by my going -- I went to Paris in '89, I think it was, and saw the show that Harry Szeemann had done for Zurich and Paris, which was a Twombly retrospective. Now I think I must have seen the show at the Whitney in '77 or whenever it was, but it didn't leave an impression. The Szeemann show really blew me away. There were a lot of new paintings that hadn't been seen before, including this great, huge, grey picture we wound up acquiring for the Modern, and I was totally taken with the show and really wanted to do it. At that point Twombly seemed committed to a show at Philadelphia with Mark Rosenthal, and through Thomas Ammann -- really, at the time we were buying the Van Gogh, and I was in constant contact with Thomas, who was with Ernst Beyeler, one of the representatives for the Van Gogh *Postman* -- it became clear that Cy had a lot of dissatisfaction with what was going on in Philadelphia. It was a very delicate dance, because you didn't want to poach on somebody else's territory. But it was clear he was unhappy, so I let it be known that, obviously, if he wanted to get out the Modern would be interested. Sooner or later he canned the show in Philadelphia, and then I got him signed up here, to do that. Then the final one of my own projects was Jasper Johns, whom I really felt -- though Riva [Castleman] had done a print retrospective, since Alfred Barr's initial commitment in '58, when he put the five paintings on reserve in the first show -- I thought we had sort of dropped the ball with Jasper. We only had one late painting gift from Aggie [Gund] -- *Between the Clock and the Bed* -- and I was so taken with him as a major force in contemporary art, and as a great artist in his own right, that I really thought it was time the Museum did something. And, I personally wanted to work on it very much.

So that laid out my role with Pollock, Johns and Twombly as, in a certain sense, being in the middle; that I was going to leave the earlier part to Bill Rubin, who was going to do "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism." That was already on the rails when I took over. Then John Elderfield-- would do Matisse, which made perfect sense; Carolyn Lanchner did Miró; and then Rob Storr was going to do more current things, more contemporary; and that I would do sort of the ground floor of contemporary.

SZ: Well, Rob wasn't here when you first got here.

KV: I hired Rob. That's right. I can talk about that. Did we talk about that?

SZ: No, we didn't talk about that. And Linda was here when you came.

KV: Yes. At the same time I was named adjunct curator -- which must have been in '85 or something -- Linda [Shearer] was brought on as a contemporary curator. This had to do with a whole mutiny, or rebellion, I think, on the part of certain members of the P&S committee. I think Philip Johnson was very active in this. I think Aggie was very active in this. I forget who else at that point, on the committee, would have been the motivators. But they felt, as the '80s went along, that we weren't paying any attention to contemporary art; that Kynaston [McShine] was being held under Bill's thumb to a certain extent, and that we weren't acquiring works by people who seemed to be the hot artists of the time, and time was passing us by.

SZ: So it was more an issue of acquisition than exhibition?

KV: Both. I think they felt that the Museum was just losing touch with contemporary art on both fronts. And they felt that Kynaston somehow didn't have the force or effectiveness by himself to get around Bill's dominance. This was their vision; I'm not necessarily subscribing to it myself. They pressured Bill very strongly to hire a contemporary curator, someone who was definitely focused just on contemporary. I know they looked at a number of people, and Linda was hired, who had been at the Guggenheim. Her appointment was announced at the same time my adjunct appointment was announced.

So she came in, and I think her first idea for a major show was the Vito Acconci show, and I remember it opened the night I was -- Wednesday night was the night I was finally appointed by the board of trustees. I remember coming down from the trustees' meeting to the opening. That was Linda's first major show. So the fact that

she got here in '85 and didn't get her major show on the rails until '89, suggests there was a certain log jam issue. She began bringing in contemporary acquisitions, but they weren't necessarily acquisitions that the so-called subcommittee on contemporary art had in mind. The subcommittee on contemporary art was a kind of splinter movement, off the Painting & Sculpture Committee. That had happened before I got here. They were holding meetings on Friday afternoons, to get together and talk about what agenda -- they had a sort of wish list they'd set out, they were willing to promote them, and they wanted to encourage the curators. This had produced a kind of schism in the committee, because the people who weren't on the subcommittee felt excluded. They felt like there was a power block going on, et cetera.

What happened in the years after I took over -- Well, Linda, shortly after (and I'm not going to remember the timing now, let's say it was in '90, I think), decided -- She had a son who played ice hockey, and she was so tired of driving him at 4:00 in the morning to New Jersey and stuff, it was just wearing on her, the life she had with her kid and husband, and she decided she wanted to go someplace where she could lead a different kind of family life, more integrated, less bounced around, so she took the directorship at Williams. I think, also, she wanted to move up in the world, too. So she took the directorship at Williams, and that left me without a contemporary curator during the latter part of '89, and '90. It went on for a long time.

The way it worked was that when I felt around the lot, I had always been impressed by Rob Storr's writings. I barely knew who he was, but then I arranged, through mutual friends -- I got introduced at a couple parties -- and Rob actually interviewed me after I was appointed. He did a couple of interviews, so I got to know him then, because he was interviewing me for *Artforum*, *Art in America*, or something like that. At that point he had never been a curator, but I thought, "This guy has writing skills. He obviously has strong opinions. He's not ideological. He's not carrying any agenda," and he clearly knew a great deal about contemporary art. So I asked him if he would take the job and he said, "No, I've pieced together a freelance life for myself. I'm teaching here, I'm writing there. I don't want to get involved." So we went

off and looked in a whole bunch of other directions, and I came back and asked him again. I said, "Listen, I've looked at a lot of other people. I still --" "No." I think we went through this three times, until, on the fourth time, finally, at the end of it, I said, "Listen. You've got a family. You need a healthcare plan. You need a solid base. I'm not going to get in your way. Come, we'll make it --" So, in the long run, after a year's worth of looking, with lots of heat from the committee and the trustees about finding somebody, finally Rob said yes. I think that must have been just before "High and Low" [*High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* [MoMA Exh. #1559, October 7, 1990-January 15, 1991] opened, I think.

SZ: I think it was '90.

KV: In the summer of '90, finally, was the end of that year-long process of looking.

Certainly, bringing Rob here was one of the things I think I did best for the Museum. He's a fantastic talent, and turned out to be -- By that point, once I started asking him, he was in the process of, unknown to me, of actually curating a show, which he did in Philadelphia, called "The Devil on the Staircase," [*The Devil on the Stars: Looking Back at the 80's*] thinking second thoughts about the art of the '80s. That was, I think, the first show he had ever curated. Then he came in here and immediately started doing a string of shows and acquisitions, which I think were terrific. As I say, his writing, and he represents the Museum worldwide, travels a great deal, et cetera.

So I was hugely relieved to get that monkey off my back, of finding the right appointment, and I was convinced I'd found the right guy. He had a lot of support in-house, here, too. We looked at a lot of other people. There was a lot of support for Gary Garrels, who's now here. But Gary, almost as soon as we started our search, left DIA to go to the Walker, so that took him out of the picture. We looked at people who were writers, people who were curators. At one point I had a long conversation with Jeffrey Deitch, who would have been willing to give up dealing to start here. That didn't wind up being the right mix, the right fit, with the trustees and everyone

else. So eventually I was hugely relieved to get that over with, and get Rob on board, in, I guess, it must have been in June or July of '90, I think.

SZ: You know, in retrospect, it seems fairly unbelievable that there would not have been a curator of contemporary art, a true one. I know Kynaston filled those shoes in some way, but --

KV: Well, it was felt there was needed a more aggressive presence, and the committee turned around, in the ten or thirteen years in which I was there. By the nature of things, people left the committee, new people came on, but the feeling, when that subcommittee broke away, was that the dominant part of the committee time was spent thinking about older art and older acquisitions, and there wasn't any experimentation with newer art. I would say, now, that the dominant part of the committee's time is spent looking at younger artists. I think other museums in the world would be astonished to know that our fixed budget in Painting & Sculpture, for the year -- which is much larger than it used to be -- is close to $400,000, which is not a lot of money, for a year. In any given year we may spend $45 or $50 million, but we do it by special fund raising, by de-accessioning, et cetera, whereas the fixed pool, which is based on a set of minimum, annual dues, is around that thing, and that's only because some people pay more than the minimum of their sort of yearly, annual contributions.

So it's an amazing record of private patronage, and also, I would say that Bill and I -- and I'm sure Alfred, too -- when you're in this position you become a dealer in some ways, because you have to sell from the collection to buy. The first were the seven pictures we sold to buy the Van Gogh *Postman*. But since then, we sold a number of pictures to put together the deal that brought the *Thirty-Two Soup Cans* and the *F-111* in. It's a general rule that we don't sell dead artists to buy living, in principle. You don't sell from the base collection to speculate in contemporary art, but the line keeps moving. Bill sold to buy Ab Ex, and I sold to buy early Pop. I felt that early '60s work was classic, in a certain sense. It was more than thirty years old, and when we bought the *Demoiselles* [*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*] in 1937, it was thirty years old,

and we sold a [Edgar] Degas pastel from the Bliss collection to help fund that. So I thought thirty years was enough recoil that we could be sure what we were doing.

So I de-accessioned a lot to acquire the things that we got. Almost any major purchase we made -- the Matisse *Yellow Curtain* [*Composition,* 1915], the late Braque studio picture -- all these things had to be done by selling out of the collection. The Twomblys we acquired -- *Leda and the Swan* and the big grey picture involved selling -- Well, there we got lucky, because we had a clear redundancy. Gordon Bunshaft left us a Miró *Moonbird*, and we already owned one. By selling our redundant *Moonbird*, I was able to fund the Twombly purchases. There were many different ways it happened, but it's a constant challenge. So that I would say, now, the dominant part of the Painting & Sculpture committee's time is spent on contemporary art.

SZ: On deciding what --

KV: -- how to spend that $400,000. What we tend to do is try not to steal from that annual fund of donations, in order to buy older art. We try to either get gifts from people, or sell to buy, so we can keep the full force of that $400,000 concentrated on the kind of art that you buy at the $30,000 to $60,000 or even less per unit, so you can experiment in contemporary art that way.

SZ: But, as you say, if you have just that amount of money, what you buy and what you turn around and sell for something else, puts you in the market place.

KV: We're in the market place. Everybody's in the market place. The Tate and the Pompidou are in the market place, too. The only difference is that we can make it work for us, and it only works against them. When our prices go up, the buyer suffers. Only if you can also be a seller can you make it work for you. So that, in the Van Gogh's case, for example, that was the high tide of Japanese buying. We sold, I think a relatively undistinguished Monet *Water Lilies*, that was a [William A.M.] Burden gift, and we sold a Renoir nude that we never exhibited here, that Alfred had

had around for a while. And we got exorbitant prices for these pictures, the likes of which we would now not be able to get anything like, or two years later wouldn't have been able to. So we can make the market work for us, as well as having to deal with it.

SZ: One last question. The process of de-accessioning, which can be difficult and controversial -- how has that worked for you here, basically?

KV: I'm a firm believer in it, because I think we've achieved great things by doing it. And I think the concept was essential. Mrs. Bliss made it clear when she left her collection, that if they wanted to sell, to refine the collection, that was fine with her, and that's always been -- We've never taken things with -- [James Thrall] Soby's collection seems to be under some kind of taboo. That's the only thing I understand is a no-sell, and we certainly don't accept gifts today with a no-sell proviso, because it's been such a fundamental way, starting with Barr, going through Rubin, such a fundamental way the Museum has gotten the excellence at the top end of its collection; by combing out the lower ends of it. Without it I couldn't have made any of the major acquisitions. The one exception, I think -- Aggie's *Between the Clock and the Bed*; the Johns, which was an outright gift; and there have been such. Most recently Ronald Lauder made this wonderful gift of the Giacometti *Disagreeable Object*. I'm not saying I don't have wonderful trustees, who from time to time make absolute gifts of things; or, indeed, that through bequest we're still not getting great pictures. But many of the things I was able to do here, I was only able to do by de-accessioning.

Now we make it tough to do (and I think that's appropriate). I have to bring the works to the committee, and I have to show them what it is I'm acquiring. We don't sell in a void; we sell X to buy Y. So the committee gets to look at X, and look at Y.

SZ: They see what you're buying, and they see what you're going to sell.

KV: Exactly. They see what the trade-off is, and I, then, have to make an argument why what we're acquiring is more important to the collection, will be on view more often, be seen more often, than these things that we're selling, and why these things are no longer so important to the collection. If I can make that argument strongly enough, then the Painting & Sculpture committee votes to do this. Then I have to take the same case to the board of trustees, and the board of trustees, similarly, has to ratify the judgment of the Painting & Sculpture committee. So it's difficult to do, and, you know -- First of all it has to pass internal muster. The curators here at P&S have to feel it's the right move to make, and there's often been resistance at that level, that's forced me to go back and look at another solution. So you have to pass through at least two or three filters before you get to do any de-accessioning.

But there are lots of different ways to de-accession. You can swap with a dealer who has a picture you want. You can go out and find a dealer you think will get the best price for you. You can sell at auction. You can do some combination of all these things, and I've worked all these angles from time to time, doing it. I think it's a huge advantage this Museum has, and I think that if the one great scorer came to weigh against us, and lined up everything we've sold against everything we've bought, we'd come out looking like roses, I'm convinced, both on a sheer financial value level, and also on the glory of the collection; the aesthetic merits.

SZ: Right. You've made some really wonderful acquisitions. Was there a time when there was something you really wanted, and you were blocked?

KV: Well, the one recently in my mind, as sort of a parting shot, I really loved the Twombly painting series that was at the Biennale last summer, the *Lepanto* series, which I had seen on their way to Venice, when they came here to be framed and sent to Venice, in May. They briefly were at the Gagosian, and for one weekend he put them up and hung them. I tried to get as many people as I could to go down and look at them. I thought they were mind-blowing. Then I couldn't get to Venice. My wife had a radical onset of Lyme disease, and we lost the opportunity to go to Venice. Apparently, they were hung very badly in Venice (I never saw them), but a

lot of people's enthusiasm waned for them, and they weren't thought to be all that great. I'll admit to being somewhat besotted with Twombly. I think he's a terrific artist, and I thought this was the highlight of his career. I was really anxious to get it done, and for a while I had a patron -- because we were talking $20 million-asking for these pictures, which is not nothing -- and I had patrons here who were really interested in having this happen.

You know, I think September 11th killed it. I had an acquisitions meeting in early October, and the enthusiasm just drained for big purchases. Nobody wanted to be seen making a conspicuous purchase, and there were enough non-Twombly supporters to drag down the feeling. The writing was on the wall. The patron slipped out of it. I couldn't sell. There were very new paintings and I couldn't sell anything from the past, I didn't think, except a Twombly, perhaps, to fund it. And the curatorial staff dragged its heels. So I had to let them go, and they were bought by Munich, by a private collector for the Neue Pinakothek.

So that's the most recent one that got away. We went to an auction to try to buy a [René] Magritte still-life that we loved. It went for a record price, and we were not prepared to bid up that high. It got bought by the San Francisco Museum, a piece called *Personal Values*, and that upset everyone. We all felt we should have been prepared to chase it higher, and it was embarrassing. This was when San Francisco was in the heyday of spending Phyllis Wattis's money, and this went for more than double the high estimate, and an all-time record. We stopped short of it, and the next bid got it. So I would dearly love to get that picture back, too.

So there definitely are some regrets and things that got away along the line, but I was able to get many things I set my sights on. *The Yellow Curtain* took an endlessly long negotiation period to get, from Stefan Hahn. The [Andy Warhol] *Thirty-Two Soup Cans* and the [James Rosenquist] *F-111* were a complicated deal. The Braque we had to more or less steal out from under the nose of the Tate, where it had been hanging for a long time. Every picture tells a story in that regard. They were all complicated. *The Postman* was a complicated piece of negotiation.

But we also had wonderful gifts during that time. Louise Smith's collection came in while I was here. Bill Rubin had cultivated her for years, and I can't really take a lot of credit for that, although I liked Louise a lot and was very close to her. But the great 1909 Picasso, *The Bather*, the woman dressing her hair, the Picasso in the '40s. And, of course, shortly after I took over, Bill Paley's collection came in, which was something Bill Rubin had worked very, very hard on. The show I did of David Rockefeller's collection shows the amazing flow of pictures, the great Matisse, of his daughter reading [*Interior with a Young Girl (Girl Reading)*]; the Cézanne still-life that used to belong to Gauguin [*Still Life with Compotier*]. There are still great treasures, so to speak, in the pipeline, coming to us.

SZ: So how would you characterize the collection that you're leaving, with the acquisitions that were made, and maybe [inaudible] still are.

KV: Oh, I think one of the things I wanted to do, one of the ambitions I had, was when you walk through the collection, you walked from the [Arshile] Gorky *Summation* drawing to the black and white de Kooning, the Rothko (*Slow Swirl By the Edge of the Sea*), into the great Pollocks, up to the one big picture from 1950, the huge drip picture, and then Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*" and de Kooning's *Woman, I* -- just one cannon shot after another, at the highest level of the New York school. Then you hit the Johns *Flag*, and I persuaded Leo to make good on the promise he made to Bill Rubin, of the Rauschenberg *Bed*. I felt that, at that moment, when you hit the *Flag*, and the targets, you were still at a very, very high level, and I wanted that beat to continue through the late '50s and into the early '60s. So getting something like --

Well, there were several things. Philip Johnson's *Red Car Crash* [by Warhol] was a great gift. That was something we really pressed Philip very hard for -- the big Warhol disaster picture. The *Thirty-two Soup Cans*, the one of a kind picture you're not going to see in any other museum. And the *F-111*, similarly. I thought the height of everything Rosenquist was about, and also a great social statement from the mid-'60s -- and, again, a one of a kind picture. Then the big Judd *Stack* that we bought,

which was just at the moment where he was going from galvanized metal into the Harley-Davidson colors, the biggest single *Stack* he ever made. We really stretched very hard to get that.

So I wanted landmark pieces in the '60s, singular, one of a kind, destination type pieces in the '60s, so that when you walked through the collection you'd keep that beat up. I think other pieces like that -- the Twombly *Leda and the Swan* is as good as it gets in that period of Twombly's work, and the big, grey, untitled picture, the so called *Blackbird* picture, or the [inaudible] I think is one of the greatest things I brought in. It speaks so straight to the Pollock. You know. Pollock's legacy is something very few people have been willing to tackle head on, and few people who have tried it have come out alive. The scale and sweep and majesty of this Twombly reinvents Pollock's language in a whole different way that I thought was great for this museum to have. I still think that's an insanely enthralling picture.

So when you hit pictures like that, in the '60s and early '70s, I would feel I had held up, pulled my oar, in the same way that Bill had done by filling in with the New York school; to continue with a beat of unbeatable pictures, in a certain sense. But there were still -- I really wanted a great [Roy] Lichtenstein comic picture. We have a *Drowning Girl*, but I really wanted a battle picture -- a fighter pilot or something like that -- and I knew exactly two or three that I wanted, and they got away from me and I was never able to -- The market got very hot. It's still the kind of thing the museum can fill in. I think we really need a good Lichtenstein picture. I did acquire a late Lichtenstein I think very highly of, the big, interior, mammoth picture -- that serious of pictures of interiors he did -- that I think is eye-popping wonderful, late Lichtenstein. Then I persuaded Roy to give us (I wasn't ready for him to die soon, but), I had persuaded him to leave us, when he died, the *Bauhaus Staircase* version he did. I can't say I'm happy to see it here, because I'd rather have Roy still alive and have it in his studio, but it's a wonderful thing for us to have, that big, Pop version of the Bauhaus staircase. I would say Lichtenstein and Warhol were two artists I concentrated on in Pop, and Warhol, beyond the soup cans, I also acquired a large, gold Rorschach painting [*Rorschach*, 1984] and a big *Hammer and Sickle* [1976] I

thought were both terrific pictures from the '70s and early '80s. Kynaston, in turn, brought in a huge *Last Supper* and a ten-foot *Flowers*. I'm only concentrating on things that I did, but some of the things that happened under my watch I'm very proud of. Obviously, Rob's acquisition of the Baader Meinhof series by [Gerhard] Richter is a real destination picture. Again, that's the kind of thing people come to see because it's a one of a kind, that series of pictures, and I think that was a huge acquisition for us that Rob made.

SZ: Okay. So we kind of got off on this tangent, talking about the establishment of the curatorship for contemporary art. But I think you were heading toward talking about high-low.

KV: Oh, way back when? Okay.

SZ: Let me just ask you one thing about that. Where do you think the -- and I presume I'm right in thinking this -- the current fascination with popular culture really came from, and when did it arise?

KV: Well, I try to argue that it was built into the DNA of the modern art, starting at least as early as [Georges] Seurat's fascination with [Jules] Cheret's posters. I think we took that as kind of an early starting point. But you could go back to Courbet and Courbet's interest in *Image d'Epinal.* We tried to focus not so much on folk primitivism (which is what I think the *Image d'Epinal* is) but on modern, urban popular culture -- the kind that Picasso and Braque got out of the daily newspapers. I think in that case Seurat's interest in Cheret's posters, which were all over Paris at the time, was a good starting point.

So we tried to argue that it was built into, that it was so many different ways, and we tried to analyze them; that the interest in advertising, specifically; the interest in typography in advertising; graffiti, the whole awakening of graffiti -- and each one of them had a separate track or a different sort of history to it. By the time a combination of, let's say, [Jean] Dubuffet in the '40s, with his interest in graffiti, "the

art of the mad," the outsider part of it -- the underbelly culture, you would call it -- and then in the early '60s the embrace of what you would call the overlord culture as opposed to the underbelly culture -- the Pop eagerness for crass advertising, for big commercialization things -- stores ([Claes] Oldenburg's *Store*, for example); billboard advertising; comic books; pulp mass distributed; popular culture. I think Pop was the one that really broke through with that; took what had been a small, chamber music strain in Cubism, for example, and made it into a full brass band. So I think since Pop the complex dialogue between the *avant garde* and mass entertainment and culture has been so rich and tangled, that I would say Pop was sort of the breakthrough in that regard.

SZ: Okay. So, you had pretty much put this show together before you came.

KV: Well, I knew I wanted to do a show on this theme, and Adam [Gopnik] and I sat down and hammered out exactly how the focuses would be, which divisions -- Just as Bill decided to exclude pre-Columbian art because he saw it as a court culture rather than a travel culture, so we decided not to do Courbet and folk imagery. We decided how to focus it, and we eventually boiled it down to advertising, comics, graffiti and caricature, graffiti and caricature as the sort of two older, underbelly sides of it -- a truly demonic, street form of work -- vs. advertising and comics, which were mass produced industries, 20th century, modern industries. So those two things seemed to represent the two broad currents we wanted to deal with, and it gave us the specific [inaudible] side, then do a lot of research on exactly what the newspapers looked like that Picasso and Braque read, who drew the comics that Lichtenstein copied -- all that sort of specific knowledge that was lacking.

SZ: Did you have to take this idea to the exhibition committee?

KV: Yes. No, no, no. I mean, there was a general feeling that they were going to give me all the rope I wanted to hang myself with anyway. It was my project, and I was the new head of -- so they said, "Do it." The photography department, for example, would have had a very different take on it. Peter's *Walker Evans & Company* argues

that Walker Evans' interest in popular imagery had a huge influence on a lot of things, so other departments may have had other ways of doing it.

SZ: Well, in any event, it was done.

KV: It was done, and it blew up. It was a real -- Peter Schjeldahl said, about some other exhibition at the Guggenheim, "a disaster worthy of an 'I Survived' t-shirt."

SZ: So it was unexpected on your part, that it would end that way?

KV: We had reasoned that this show would be disliked by the Right for certain reasons, because it would be seen as a concession to everything that was crass and commercial; and disliked by the Left, because it would seem as a usurpation of the true, popular culture.

SZ: But there are all those people in the middle.

KV: We thought there would be a middle. There was no middle left. That's what we realized; that there are two different things -- there's a public, and then there's your critical filter. The truth is, we're a one-newspaper town. Michael Kimmelman's decision to let Roberta Smith review the show instead of doing it himself, was the crucial decision. And Roberta, who had a lot of her own ideas about popular culture, and who -- There were a fair number of agendas going on there. It was a weird political moment. You may remember, it was the rumbling beginnings of the Gulf War; the feeling that the high tide of the '80s was running out; it was a moment of recession. It was a nervous moment in the art world, and this show had been ballyhooed and pumped like you couldn't believe, as the second coming of Christ or something, and she savaged it.

SZ: Well, why did he [Kimmelman] decide not to review it? Do you know why?

KV: I think she asked him to do it.

SZ: She wanted it.

KV: And he said yes. As lead critic, and as this was the major show of the fall season of modern art, it seems to me that he should have done it, in retrospect. I think you would have had a very different review. Hers was, in a word, “vicious”, partly *ad hominem*, and gave no quarter. Very little was said about any virtues the thing had, and that review let loose the dogs. It really gave permission, I think, to everyone to go into a feeding frenzy on the show, and on me, and on Adam, to a certain extent, who, as art critic of *The New Yorker*, had his own set of enemies out in the world. So everybody jumped on the bandwagon. It was a piling on issue, in a certain sense. There was even one very savage review that came out before the show opened. Barbara Rose wrote a piece -- I forget where -- where she viciously attacked the show --

SZ: Had she seen it?

KV: -- having never seen it, nor the catalogue.

One of the nice things -- I remember Kay Larson, in *New York Magazine*, spent a lot of time on the catalogue, loved it and thought it was terrific, and tended to want to emphasize that positive part, against what she saw as certain problems with the show.

SZ: Of course, she's a lot younger than --

KV: In any event, it was brutal, and it was pretty unrelenting. The show was actually relatively well attended. It's not like a Broadway show; you don't have to close. We stayed open. It was relatively well attended. It was well attended when it went on the road. I think it had, at that point, the highest attendance record ever, for a LA MoCA, for a show, when it went to MoCA.

SZ: What happened institutionally, if anything, as a result?

KV: What do you mean, institutionally?

SZ: I'm thinking in terms of the trustees.

KV: Whatever was said or mumbled was clearly said or mumbled behind my back. Most of what was said to my face was supportive and empathetic. I think some people were indignant about what they felt was unjust treatment. Schadenfreude is a temperamental possibility, and I'm sure a lot of people had shivers of joy and frissons of pleasure about watching the roast go on. I'm sure most of what went on never got to me, so I'm probably a bad authority to say it. But no one -- Dick Oldenburg was incredibly supportive. He was very chagrined that this had happened. The press office felt like this had blown up in their face. They were dismayed in dealing with it. But nobody came and read me the riot act. The one thing is -- Bill Rubin took me out to lunch and he said -- Bill had liked the show when he first saw it. He thought it was terrific, and he saw the problems with it when all the criticism came down, and he felt that the criticism I needed to avoid was that the show had a certain academic side to it; that breaking it up into categories, that there was a certain kind of academic stiltedness to the way the show was presented. It was a hot topic shown cool, or something like that.

In any event, I had on the rails another possibility to do a show on [Etienne-Jules] Marey, [Eadweard] Muybridge and Modernism, which was about photography and the analytic breakdown of motion; and how Muybridge resonated, then, with Phil Glass and Sol LeWitt. And all the way through, *Marey, Muybridge and Modernism* is going to be done jointly with the Photography Department. We had an outside expert coming in to do it, and we were already conceptualizing the show and thinking about a date. I was persuaded that I should not do that show; that doing another, big thematic show, that had a kind of academic armature to it, would be the wrong move for me to make. So I pulled the plug on Marey, Muybridge and -- I accepted the logic of that. I accepted that that was politically smart, so we just pulled the plug on that

project and decided not to do it. I gave myself a longer break before I did Twombly, which was my next show.

Meanwhile, I had also cooked up "Artists' Choice," which was something I really wanted to do here, and I think the first "Artists' Choice" show opened in the middle of the crunch. I think maybe it opened in February of '91, so it was just after --

END TAPE 3, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 2

SZ: And the thought process behind "Artists' Choice?"

KV: "Artists' Choice" was really because -- Two things happened. One was I had always liked the thing they did at the National Gallery in London called "The Artist's Eye," and that was always one picture, where they asked an artist to pick one picture. I always remember Richard Hamilton picked the [Jan van Eyck]*The Arnolfini Wedding*. It always stuck in my mind as so unlikely. It was so surprising, and to see a picture through an artist's eyes. I was so aware, from the artists I knew, that they haunted this place, and they used it. They knew the collection, they knew the garden better than most people did, and they had an investment in it, about particular pictures -- were they on view, were they not on view, the way certain things were hung. They thought a lot about it. I remember particularly the catalyst was -- I was talking to Scott Burton, who had been a critic, as well, and was such an interesting artist -- and Scott had so many interesting ideas about Brancusi. He thought about Brancusi all the time. I was talking to him about it and he said, "Every artist has a gesture. Each artist has an individual gesture," and he was talking about the Brancusi disk at the base of the fish, and how the disk was like a compressed table -- it was like the rendering of a table -- and he reached his arms out in a big bear hug, and said, "Brancusi's gesture was this," and he pulled in, like a compression, to make that thing, and I thought, "That's so vivid." If I could ever show the public, at the Modern, that kind of physical engagement, of what a sculpture is, and show an artist's thought process

about how another artist works -- so the idea of doing a video of Scott -- the two things came together, and I thought, "This is a good idea. This will really work, because it will show how the collection is used; how the collection is still generating ideas; and, it will shake it up in a way that the normal, historical, doesn't."

The only way I could do it in the exhibition program was to take a gallery out of the collection, so I took the opening gallery on the third floor, which was [inaudible] Giacometti at that point, in my installation. It was a very small gallery but I wanted it accessible to the outside, so there would be something. So that's where we started; with "Burton on Brancusi" [*Artist's Choice: Burton on Brancusi* [MoMA Exh. #1514, April 7-July 4, 1989], then we did the Ellsworth Kelly, then Chuck Close after that, and there were four of them. Then I ran afoul of all sorts of things. For one reason or another I was unable to continue that string of shows.

SZ: But they were all your choices.

KV: All my choices, yes. And they tended to be people I knew, and whose minds I was interested in. There were other choices down the line that never came out, but each one did such a different -- I was so lucky to work with these people -- Elizabeth Murray, John Baldassari, Chuck Close, Ellsworth, Scott -- they were all terrific to work with, and they each took the task very seriously. They worked very hard at it, by putting the show up, and it was such a revelation to see the collection through their eyes, and to talk to them about it. I learned a vast amount about it, and I think the videos are very invaluable records of the way they think about the things. I think the shows were enjoyable to people, because they shuffled the deck and put things -- I always remember the wall that Ellsworth Kelly did, where he put -- there's a Mondrian "diamond painting" that has a square inscribed in it, and he put it next to the [Kazimir] Malevich's *White on White*, [*Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918] which is a square picture with a tilted square inside of it. Those two were already interesting, talking to each other. But then the third picture was the Matisse *Rose Marble Table*, which has this sort of octagonal table top. Suddenly that table top becomes an Ellsworth Kelly. It leaps out of that picture, to join the two floating

squares in the other pictures. I never in a million years -- It made me look at that Matisse differently than I would ever have looked at it. This combination of three pictures, no curator would probably ever have done that. And there were plenty of moments like that, in all those shows. So I was very happy with those shows, and wish I could have done more of them.

SZ: Now I want to go back and ask you this question, about how -- Now, eleven years later, when you think about the intellectual content and why it appealed to you to do in the first place, would you do it?

KV: Well, in the many senses in which I am utterly unrepentant, I still think the topic was a major topic. It was a very important topic. I think we produced vast amounts of new information that hadn't been known about the specific workings of Duchamp's engagement with plumbing, or Picasso's engagement with the newspaper. We produced a different model of how these interchanges worked. I think the killer, politically, was my thought that, having selected very narrowly for who we dealt with in the '20s and '30s, we could select equally narrowly in contemporary. So I only took [Jeff] Koons and [Jenny] Holzer and [Elizabeth] Murray. My thought all along was that there was probably tons of interaction with mass art, with multiples, with popular culture. That's utterly trivial. It's the same thing with primitivism. There's a whole zone of influence which may be profoundly important, that you can't demonstrate. Barnett Newman cared a great deal about tribal masks, but you can't show that with *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. It's digested and put in -- and then there's another band of very evident and demonstrable connection which is totally trivial. But somewhere in the middle there's a set of connections that are extremely important, and generative, and help the artist do what the artist does, which are demonstrable and visible. And it's only in that band that you really want to work.

So I picked three artists in whom I believed, for whom I believed the issue of popular culture was central to what they did as artists. So I left out Keith Haring, I left out David Salle, and I left out any number of other people, because I wanted these sort of three emblematic types. I think had the show had a contemporary section that was

more sprawling, and more allowing; had I brought in graffiti painters to paint -- it would have been talked about in a different way. It never would have been anything but controversial (it was bound to be controversial), but the feeling that the Museum had once again operated as a kind of mandarin, exclusive view of things; that it hadn't let itself open; that that was the moment for a new directorship to say, "We're going to be more expansive, more inclusive," rather than trying to be so rigorous -- So politically, I think, the contemporary part of it was where we opened ourselves up to a lot of attack that then reverberated backwards.

I still like Murray, Koons and Holzer. I still think they're very strong artists, and I still wouldn't be keen to put Keith Haring in. So, in some senses, I can see, strategically, what might have been done the other way. But I've picked up that book from time to time, and I think that book is as well written and as innovative a publication as the Museum has put out, in terms of new information about an important subject, written in a fresh way. I hope that book will continue to have its life and live on. I think the show suffered, in its physical manifestation, from the problem -- Bob Hughes said, "You can't put perfume back in a bottle," but when you have billboards, or you have culture that is, by its nature, mass -- whether by scale or whether just by sheer prolixity -- it's ill at ease in the museum. The work of art feels fine in the museum. That's its natural place to be. But a vitrine full of comics next to Lichtenstein inevitably deadens what the comics were, because the comics were there by the thousands, they were prolix and they were easy, and you inevitably take the air out of the game, somehow, when you put the comics in the vitrine. You can't ever show the power of billboards that [Fernand] Léger was responding to when he painted the city, because you just can't get the scope and scale and distance. So I think the dice were loaded, in a certain sense, against the popular culture part of the equation.

SZ: Because it was here.

KV: Because it was in a museum, yes. And because you can't imagine a museum big enough, somehow, to have done justice to putting a true billboard in; to giving a sense of the city that Léger saw, with all those big billboards and screaming colors;

or, how do you demonstrate the pulpiness? We tried papering the whole wall with newspapers, to give a sense of their ubiquity, but what do you do with comic books? So the dice wound up being a little bit loaded against the popular culture part of it, which is where we put so much of our research; into the actual people who drew the Lichtenstein things; into the nature of [George] Herriman; into the nature of the particular newspapers that Picasso and Braque clipped. I thought there were some very valuable -- You know, the little mantras of the show -- "first time farce, second time tragedy" -- this was Marx's idea of the two Napoleons (Napoleon I and Napoleon III), that history always repeats itself, the first time tragedy, the second time farce. What we found was that the way popular culture worked was that the things that started out farcical and light, wound up being the vocabulary of seriousness – [Philip] Guston being the prime example. Guston's morbid, Beckett-like slapstick, taken out of the cheap comics, and his relationship to Art [Robert] Crumb. And where Crumb came from, and how Crumb and Guston have all parallel visions, out of a certain, early EC comic sort of thing. That told the way that worked, in a very specific way. The same thing with understanding that Picasso and Braque picked retrograde advertisements; that they were not dealing with the flashiest new culture, the same way Lichtenstein was dealing with an essentially moribund, dead and dated comics culture, not the new comics culture that was up to date in his time. And the quick interchange by which Picasso and Braque's typography, then, affected *avant garde* typography, which in turn became a new, popular idiom, or how Lichtenstein had such a profound influence on the comics of the late '60s and changed comic style.

All that was analyzed with the ammo and the real information that I felt was very valuable, and still continue to think was very valuable.

SZ: That's the unrepentant part.

KV: Yes.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **KIRK VARNEDOE (KV)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **GREENE STREET, NEW YORK CITY**

DATE: **8 MARCH 2002**

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 1

SZ: I was reviewing the three transcripts I have so far, and most of the large exhibitions we talked about, but we didn't do "MoMA 2000," which had a lot of other ramifications, I think. So maybe we could start there, then move into the more institutional/administrative stuff.

KV: Okay. Well, "MoMA 2000" -- I remember the genesis of it fairly clearly. At some point I/we -- I forget -- but there came a general awareness that the millennium was coming. Five or six years in advance we saw that, "Hey, it's going to be the year 2000, and everybody on earth is going to want to do a big, roundup show of the 20th century, and they're all going to try to pick us clean. Why should we be under pressure to lend all our masterpieces, all over everywhere? Why don't we think first? Why don't we pre-empt the issue about what we want to do, and use our collection in our own fashion? That might have included a loan show. So we thought, "Well,

should we do a big series of thematic shows? Something on the city vs. the country?" There were lots of rational vs. irrational strains in modern art. There were lots of sort of "big idea" shows that were designed to sort of wrap up the century. Then began a process of batting that around, and thinking about what we should do at the end of the century. We decided that, until we decided, we would put an embargo on all loans, which would hold our collection. So we started telling people we weren't going to lend anything, and as we got increasingly closer to it, it began to evolve into the idea of why don't we show the glories of our own collection, which we never have a chance to do? And spend as much time working on our own pictures as we spend working on other people's pictures and loan shows? So it was a very organic process, and it went on over a period of six or seven years. As the date got closer, it had to have some sort of form, so, increasingly, it became clear that we would only do our collection.

The original idea was that we were going to try to, in a certain sense, anticipate what we thought the so-called core and satellite -- or fixed and variable -- layouts of the new permanent collection galleries would do, and in each one of three sections have an historical spine where, say, the glories of [inaudible] and Cubism would be laid out. Then there would be thematic shows that would go off that historical spine, and that was kind of a general, working notion. We decided we would do it in three sections. That was another decision. In order to have the maximum room to show things from each section, we would do it in three sections. Then, when push came to shove, people had to be -- We solicited ideas. There were lots of ideas from all sorts of people, but then, eventually, we had spent so much time thinking about the content that, as it came closer, we just spent more time thinking about the mechanics, and figured that the content would take care of itself, once we had the mechanics in place.

SZ: Mechanics meaning --

KV: The bureaucracy of how it was run; how it would be structured; who would be responsible; how many units there would be, etc. So we arrived at the idea that there

should be a team for each section, which should consist of a chief curator and junior partner or partners. Finally, Glenn [Lowry], I think, had to make the decision about who the three chief curators would be. I wanted very much to do the contemporary section, anyway, so John [Elderfield], Peter [Galassi] and myself were the three designators, and John knew right away he wanted to work with Peter Reed. He'd been thinking about it a lot. Peter Galassi originally had a team that included Anne Umland, but then she got pregnant and there was the whole problem about whether she'd be able to do it, so Rob Storr came on. Then it wound up being a kind of three-way deal with them. I worked with Josh Siegel and Paola Antonelli.

The odd thing about "MoMA 2000" was that it came at the same time as the opening of the new Tate in London, and their insistence on a thematic installation. "MoMA 2000," I think, was taken by more than one person to be a kind of manifesto on the part of the Modern; some group statement about how we thought we should deal with our collection. Nothing could be further from the truth. Once it devolved into the hands of these three teams, everybody made up their own game. Not only did the head people not make a massive statement, but one of the whole points of it was to get involved many voices that normally didn't have a chance. Vast meetings were held; opinions were solicited from junior curators; many exhibition ideas were entertained; proposals were made; and I think the head of each section had to sort out, from among the available people to work, the available good ideas, what could make some reasonable sense in the way it was put together, and each one of the three sections had a very different idea. John tried this sort of three, generic -- you know -- portrait, landscape, still-life sort of thing (it was people, places and things) -- as a large rubric under which he worked. Peter and Rob, then, insistently went the other way, and did twenty-three separate exhibitions, which made no claims for any particular unity. In fact, their title was "Making Choices," and it was all about diversity. We tried to -- you know, "My porridge is too hot, my porridge is too cold" -- we tried to get somewhere in between. We didn't like the idea of the overweening categories, but we didn't like the idea of the massive atomization, either. So we tried to do a discrete number of shows that would, above all, leave room for the more expansive installation needs of more contemporary art. It would allow us to install better. We

tried to learn from what we thought might have been the problem with the shows ahead of us when we did "Open Ends," which was my section -- and Paola and Josh's section -- of "MoMA 2000." By the time we got to work we had a chance to see John's on the wall, and we knew a lot about what Peter's section was all about.

So every one of these shows was made on a different basis by different people, and there was utterly no coordination between them. I know we've talked about this before, but everyone always thinks The Museum of Modern Art somewhere has a vault in its basement, with a set of stone tablets on which its ideology is inscribed and we'll follow it. But this was clearly much more like what they used to call a Chinese fire drill. Once the structure was determined, then there was no communication between the groups about how things would be done, no overweening ideology. It was experimental. In the best sense, that's what it was meant to be. It was meant to be experimental. It was meant to try a lot of different things, and let a lot of people into the discussion and do a lot of things. I think too many people from the outside took it to be a template or a statement, which I don't think in any way it was ever thought to be. I was told that when Norman McLaren ran the Canadian film program, which was a government program -- I always heard about a lecture he gave. He went to a small town to make a film about some dispute going on in the town, and he said that by the time they finished the film they didn't need to make it; that the process of making the film had brought people together in a way that solved the dispute. Certainly, one of the most profound effects of "MoMA 2000" was the increased communication across departmental lines, and up and down the hierarchies, so that people worked with each other who otherwise would not have worked with each other, and saw each other in different contexts -- including the education department, which got involved in a different way. All of that was very salutary. It opened up a lot of lines of communication, and a lot of people got together. I think the aesthetic results and the exhibition results were a mixed bag. [Interruption]

SZ: You were talking about opening lines of communication, which was something that, I guess, has been mentioned in a lot of places as being one of the salutary effects of this whole thing.

KV: I thought the results, in terms of exhibitions, were a mixed bag. There were some things I liked a lot, and some things I really hated. I think almost everybody felt that way about it, so there was a lot of dispute and discussion about what was good and what was bad about the whole production. But just the brute fact of getting it done -- You can't imagine how consuming an enterprise it was. Poor Jerry Neuner -- the sheer logistics of getting things up and down -- and because we owned everything, we couldn't just ship it off. It had to go to storage somewhere. This notion that it was going to be a lighter task because we didn't have to go through all the mechanics of borrowing the pictures, was a complete canard. What we found out was that in a "normal" period of a museum's -- in an autumn or winter session -- you'd have, what? Seventy-five to 80% of the Museum constant, and 20-25% changing. Whereas, in this case, you were changing 100% of everything that was on view. In fact, by the time we got to Peter's section, we realized that was a problem. So the display of the permanent collection that was put up on the ground floor -- which included [Matisse's] *La Danse* and [Picasso's] *Les Demoiselles* [*des Avignon*] and things Peter wasn't using -- stayed pretty constant, right through "Open Ends," too. We found there was a demand; that people who came from abroad wanted to see [Van Gogh's] *Starry Night*, wanted to see *La Danse*, wanted to see *Les Demoiselles*. They didn't want to hear they were off-view. It wasn't so much a problem in John's section, where all those major pieces were on view, but it got to increasingly be a problem as we went forward. So we adjusted as we went along, but the sheer logistics of doing it was overwhelming, and getting all the publications. What we found was we were trying to do something experimental and "outside the box," but the box wanted certain things. The press was used to having openings at a certain rhythm. Our audience was used to having an event sort of mark the beginning of a season, and there were sort of formalities that one went through, with press previews, reviews, et cetera. The machine was a pretty imperative machine. It was hungry. It had an appetite. It wanted to be fed. So all the experimental, loose-ended nature of it had to

be funneled through a fairly familiar set of gates about publication deadlines, opening deadlines, et cetera. The collision between the 100% change -- the rolling series of installations of the galleries -- and an audience that was fed on a diet of getting used to "an opening," not five openings and twenty openings -- there was a lot of friction, collision, fall-out. It was an experiment in progress. We learned as we went along, in that regard. There were a lot of shaky loose-ends to the whole operation.

Meanwhile, of course, you were in the middle of trying to deal with the [Yoshio] Taniguchi building.

SZ: This is what I wanted to get into. But going back for one second, just in terms of the genesis of these shows, did the specter of the new building have nothing to do with it? Because, I guess, one of the things I read was that one of the effects of all this was to really sort of affect the thinking of how things would be presented in this new space.

KV: Well, everything was happening simultaneously, and, certainly, one of the thoughts was that in order to make an effective installation of the collection, in the new building, you need to know what you have. So the idea of exploring -- pulling things up onto view that hadn't been on view; trying experimental combinations of things -- was a very interesting way to just broaden your view of what the thing included. This gets right to the heart of what concerned me, because it was becoming clear that there was an interest in the installation of the collection in the new building; in having the opportunity to have more flexibility in the installation. That wanted to include the option of putting in different media. We had tentatively experimented -- When the Matisse show was on I did a display of the permanent collection, on the ground floor, that was organized, thematically, around body and gender. For example, the [E. J.] Bellocq photographs of the whorehouses in New Orleans were put next to *Les Demoiselles*, next to de Kooning's *Woman, I*, next to Henry Moore. And there was a whole section on the city, where you've got Dubuffet, along with [Eugene] Atget, along with Ed Ruscha, along with George Segal.

So there had been experiments like that, and even in the permanent installation, in areas like Bauhaus design or Surrealism there had been some attempt. But there was a feeling that the Museum was wasting an opportunity, not to have some moments of synergy between its great photography collection, its great design collection, and the painting and sculpture collection. The painting and sculpture galleries, which had been the traditional core, needed to be expanded and livened by the ability, at least, to inflect the permanent collection of painting and sculpture with works from other parts of the collection. Not at the cost of having a permanent gallery for photography or a permanent gallery for architecture and design, but to broaden the issue.

This, then, of course, inevitably raised the issue, even before we designed the galleries, of how these would be programmed; how you would design; what would go into that. It was a touchy issue because, in essence, as the chief curator of painting and sculpture, I was the only one whose galleries were being invaded. It wasn't like we were going to put painting and sculpture in the photography galleries. And the question of who got to choose how it worked -- Traditionally, the painting and sculpture collections had been laid out by the chief curator of painting and sculpture. But as this was now going to be called the "Collection Galleries," who was making these decisions, and how would they be determined? This question would only have been answered when it was done, on the day; when the final building is installed, then we'll figure out who's installing those galleries. It continued to be an issue that was somewhat fuzzy around the edges at the time I left, but I think, certainly, there was an idea that there was going to be a lot of experimentation, and we'd see what lessons we learned. It was never clear who was going to finally learn those lessons and put them into action. That was a question of some import to me, but there certainly was the idea that we'd all learn a lot if we tried a lot of different things.

SZ: And that's what happened.

KV: Yes. Positive and negative. I had some prejudices reinforced, against things I didn't like, and I didn't like them any better when I saw them in the flesh than I did before,

and there were some things that were really interesting to see. And we learned a lot about how our audience felt about the museum, too. You got a lot of negative and positive feedback. Some people said, "Oh, great to see a chance taken." Other people said, "Oh, a waste of a great collection." One of the things was that the feeling was that the Tate badly needed to do a thematic hang, because if it tried to do an historical hang, it was saying that they had no collection in Cubism and other areas.

SZ: But you didn't need to do that.

KV: Whereas we had -- We're fudging over into another area here, but I still feel that with the richness of the collection we have comes a certain responsibility to lay it out in a certain way. I think there are only two museums in the world -- us and the Centre Pompidou -- who could claim to present anything like an adequate overview of the history of modern art, at least up into the '60s and '70s. I think our public comes to us for that, and that's been one of our great strong suits; that on any given day you could walk in, start at the Cèzanne *Bather*, and go through in a synoptic overview of the history of art. The idea was that, inevitably -- We're off "MoMA 2000." Do you want to stay on "MoMA 2000" for a while?

SZ: No, that's fine.

KV: When we thought about the new building (this will get into it), we became clear that no matter how much space -- double the galleries? Go ahead. Two and a half times the galleries -- sooner or later the galleries are finite and history is expanding, because at some point we accepted that we were going to have a permanent collection, in the early '50s (and I wrote that article about Barr's torpedo, about how we came to this point. But in the early '50s, they decided they were going to have a masterworks collection. They were going to keep the Cèzanne *Bather*, keep the *Starry Night*, so you had a fixed starting point, but the end point was the opposite -- it was still going on and on and on -- so that no matter what finite space you pick, you're always going to have an expanding history to deal with, within that space. One

of the results of that could be that you develop a kind of incredible, muscle-bound set of galleries, in the sense that what used to be your "A" work now becomes your "A-" work, because you got in an "A+" work from some donor, or you bought it; and that, increasingly, there's no room in the galleries for anything but the high-high point. So you step from [Picasso's] *Les Demoiselles*, to *Ma Jolie*, to *The Three Musicians*, to [Miro's]*The Birth of the World*, and you lose any sense of the quirky peculiarity and variegation, which is just as much a part of the story as the great achievements. The sense of really telling the story becomes -- The risk is that you become increasingly hidebound, and don't do justice to your collection because so much of it is in storage, et cetera.

So we tried to figure out how we could satisfy the demands of the public, who want to come back and see *Les Demoiselles*, and see it when they're six years old; then see it when they're an adolescent; want to see it when they're thirty-five; and want to see it when they're eighty-five, and think about the great works of art that will change as we change. So the Museum is providing some sense of continuity, so that the visitor from China or Brazil or France knows that when they come they will see the *Starry Night*. The Museum has to fulfill that function, in part, and because of the great glory of its collection, it should. It's the [inaudible] imperative -- how to fulfill that function of continuity, stability and reliability, while at the same time not letting people form habits, get bored, get used to seeing things in the same juxtapositions -- so the idea was this balance of what Peter Galassi first resuscitated from René d'Harnoncourt, which was the idea of core and satellite -- then we changed it to the idea of fixed and variable galleries, because what we wanted was a kind of main line, which preserved what had always been wonderful about the museum -- a kind of art history without words; a march that you could walk through and see the unfolding of modern art -- but that, at the same time and in parallel with it, you would have galleries that could change more frequently; where, for example, in one three-month period you might have, next door to *Ma Jolie* and the high Cubist stuff, you might have Frank Lloyd Wright drawings, that showed the interpenetration of space in the prairie houses, in relation to Cubism. Or, in another time, you might have vorticist photography; or you might have any number of other things that might relate to, or connect to, that.

Maybe you would have contemporary things that would play off -- What this required structurally (and this was the interesting part) was that it required what we didn't have in the linearity of the old collection galleries -- the ability to close a room and keep people walking through the galleries.

SZ: Because everything in the old galleries just went --

KV: -- was one line. And if you closed a gallery, you had to turn around and go back out the door. So having galleries that were dead-ends -- cul de sac galleries -- that you could close off, and nobody would notice, in a certain sense, that they were closed off, because they could keep on walking through -- that was sort of an ideal that we presented to the architect, since we were going to get a bigger square, or footprint, of the new building, and not the long, choo-choo train of a building that we had then. We thought that would be really desirable.

So this idea that there would be a fixed and variable installation -- I went to a lot of trouble -- We sort of thought in terms of ideal ratios. Should it be two-thirds/one-third, for example? Say, two-thirds permanent and a third --

SZ: Could I stop you for one second? When you're talking about all this it sounds to me as if there was a lot more, in thinking about how it was going to be, a lot more collaboration among the departments, because you're really talking about sort of mixed --

KV: Yes. This was sort of the tough part, in a certain sense, for me, politically, in that everybody had an opinion about those galleries. Nobody was bothering with worrying about what Peter was doing, or what Terry [Riley] was doing, or what Gary Garrels was doing. Those galleries were up to them to make their minds up about. But the collections galleries were everybody's business. Everybody chimed in, so there was a huge group pressure as to how this would be done. For example, I had to take the idea of a rough -- and Taniguchi even did sort of just a brute layout, based on ratios (two-thirds/one-third) -- and I tried to install the collection by photo-chips, in this

sequence of galleries, and brought in the results to everybody and said, "Okay. Here's what you get. You can't show [Henri] Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*. You can't show --" It was devastating. The amount you would have to have left out to achieve that initial ratio -- It was heartbreaking. Unacceptable.

SZ: Even in this huge, new space.

KV: Yes. No, no, no. I think -- I'm sorry to say -- I think people may have overfed expectations about what the new building was going to be. We did get a big square footprint, but because Taniguchi put an atrium up through the middle of it, you have a C-shaped series of spaces, or U-shaped series of spaces, for the permanent collection galleries. This means that what we thought of in terms of an inter-filtration between things -- You have a broader line but you still have a line. Furthermore, the total amount of space given to -- Let's say up to 1980. The great gain in the new building is going to be the big contemporary floor. We're going to get what? Twenty-odd thousand-24,000 square feet? A high-ceilinged, open space, the likes of which we've never seen before. But by the time that gets built, in 2005 --

Let's assume that contemporary art means the last twenty years -- twenty-five years -- so that the historical galleries need to cover somewhere up to the '70s or '80s, in order to leave room for -- So if you assume that to be true, then the net gain for painting and sculpture, in terms of the historical space, is not large, is not huge. In just sheer square footage -- there isn't that much more square footage to lay out the permanent collection. And the permanent collection has (a) has grown and, (b) just simply by trying to include -- It used to be that the historical section of the permanent collection stopped more or less in the '60s. The last permanently installed gallery in the old building was the sort of Pop gallery, right? So just to stretch it into the '70s means that you've got to include things like Richard Serra's *"Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure,"* which takes up a lot of space on the floor. Or the big, grey Twombly of 1970, which is a massive picture. There are scale issues once you pass Pop, which sometimes become incredibly daunting. So whereas there is this sort of imagination that we're getting a lot more room, it's not that true. It's still a very tight

squeeze, just to get the permanent collection of painting and sculpture in, much less to open up the room you want for a lot of variation in the other galleries.

This is a real tough nut, and, you know, I felt strongly that there was not -- I felt, personally, very strongly that the principle of a chronological installation was something very much a part of the tradition of the Museum, and very much what I wanted to do. I was not at all convinced that that's what all my colleagues wanted to do, nor that that's what Glenn wanted to do. I think there was a lot of mumbling and thinking about how to try to mix contemporary art in with post-Impressionism and stuff like that. I didn't like these ideas but, as I said, in a certain sense, this never came to a crux, because I left, and they had to solve the problem another way. But there were real tensions involved in that discussion.

SZ: Just a quick aside. With what is still going to obviously be a space problem, or very soon, what about the idea of satellite museums? Did you ever take a position on that?

KV: Yes. Obviously people thought about it, but I don't think anybody ever seriously wanted to do it. The closest we came to this was before Glenn came, when we were looking at a couple of -- The whole driving wedge of expansion was a space for contemporary art, and we looked at a space on the West Side -- we looked at two spaces on the West Side -- and we came very close to purchasing some of those spaces.

SZ: That was the one on 12th Avenue, one of them?

KV: There were two of them -- one on 12th, and the other one was over more on like 8th and 9th. They were smaller and larger. But at that point what we found, both within the staff and with the trustees, was that the idea of having sort of a varsity and junior varsity museum didn't appeal -- It raised all sorts of issues about whose show would be where. Would you do Jasper Johns' show in the old building, but Bob Ryman's in the new building? Who would get to decide how this would work? Would one

become a kind of mausoleum? We sort of examined what made the Museum tick, and felt, precisely, that it was the synergy between the older collection, which drew in one kind of audience, and the contemporary art, which changed our ideas about the older collection. The tension grew stronger and stronger the longer the spread of history got there, but the argument, the tension, the conflict, the paradox, was exactly what kept the whole place alive. I think when we had the chance to buy the Dorset site we saw an enormous outpouring. We didn't realize the degree to which the trustees had been rendered unhappy and nervous about this idea of buying a contemporary space, and the potentially divisive effect of setting up the trustees who were primarily interested in contemporary vs. those who were -- This was not going to be good for the institution. The outpouring of support for keeping the whole thing together meant that where they'd been unwilling to give a penny to the expansion of the institution that could have been made at, let's say, $3.00 a square foot, they were willing to back to the hilt an expansion that was going to cost $12.00 a square foot, as long as it kept the garden together; kept the whole thing together. So that, although the Dorset was a much more expensive alternative, there was instantly money to do it, and huge support for it. I think going through that process convinced us of the uniqueness of the Museum held together, and the idea of dispersal really never was anything anyone seriously thought about. I think everybody disliked the kind of Guggenheim franchise idea, too.

SZ: The future of which is -- ?

KV: Well, the Las Vegas thing is going down the tubes. Bilbao got a huge success because of the strength of the building, but who knows? The jury's still out on what will happen five years down the road.

I think the Tate did it more seriously, with the Liverpool and Wales subsidiaries. They're serving local communities in different ways, without detracting from the strength of their central operation. That seemed to make more sense.

SZ: But that's not what the Guggenheim is, really.

KV: No.

SZ: So let's talk about the new building -- anything you can tell me about your participation, and the consideration of the various architectural --

KV: Well, it wasn't my idea. I had nothing to do with devising it, but I have a huge admiration for the process; the idea they went through -- the call for papers, the way the list of ten was drawn up. I thought it was a rational, smart idea, and it really gave everybody time to think about the issue, opened it up broadly and gave everybody a chance. I thought it was a fascinating process, and I was proud of the Museum for going through that, that way. When it came down to the three sets of finalists, there was only one official curatorial representative on the inside, and that was John Elderfield, as chief curator at large. I wasn't on that, sort of, committee. But the curators constantly got reports, and when it got down to the three, the three came -- Herzog and de Meuron, Tschumi and Taniguchi -- and talked to all the curators, in all the departments, and they got a different idea of what our needs and requirements were. I think a lot of us felt that Herzog and de Meuron seemed to have an inside track. They had the Tate commission behind them, which gave them a certain cachet, and they seemed to like modern art. They seemed to be very hip about contemporary art. They were easy to talk to, et cetera, and Tschumi hadn't built so much and seemed more theoretical. Nobody, I think, even figured on Taniguchi somehow. Taniguchi -- it was this odd thing. When it was sort of question time, Herzog and de Meuron would ask questions like, "Well, where do you think the future of installation art will be?" and Taniguchi would say, "Tell me again how big the freight elevator has to be? Tell me again what the load capacity of this floor is." Everybody thought, "Hmmn, this is --" And then when it came down to it, and we were led into a room with the three models and the three programs -- and this was in the week when the architects were making their presentations to the trustee committee -- and the curators were allowed to see these models, and get the programs on kind of an unofficial basis. And Terry [Riley] tried, as objectively as possible, to present the three programs -- show the three buildings -- then he just left

us alone in a room for an hour or so, with the models. He came back, and we said, "It's unanimous," and he was stunned at that -- Terry was -- then he said, "Well, I guess if it's unanimous, it must be Taniguchi. We said, "You're right," and that we couldn't believe how effectively he had solved every problem we had thrown him; the lucidity of the solution; the clarity of the thinking; the way he made very difficult things look simple; the way he managed to satisfy ten different agendas at once. It made the other things look sort of not-thought-through. It's tough to remember now, but there were some fundamentally wrong decisions about circulation and distribution of program that I thought Herzog and de Meuron had made. Tschumi's program was, I thought, more thoughtful, but the building was somehow clunkier, and it involved things we didn't think were as felicitous as the really crystalline simplicity of Taniguchi's solution. Everybody, all the curators, without hesitation, gravitated to him.

SZ: And Terry, I presume, was not surprised.

KV: Well, Terry was surprised that we were unanimous. He wasn't surprised that it was Taniguchi, given that we were unanimous. The wonderful thing is that they let us -- And if you look at museum design issues across the country, I don't think you would necessarily have the curators get to come in and have a voice at the last moment -- but the trustee committee invited us to come as a group, all of us, all the chief curators, and each of us spoke individually about what we thought was important. I think that meeting, where the six of us, all, one after the other, like hitting the same nail with the hammer six times, drove home how much we thought Taniguchi was good. I think that had an impact. I think it really did have an impact on the trustee selection committee -- which wasn't at all unanimous, and there were several divisions within it.

SZ: What do you think the effect is going to be of the sort of dislocation of the next few years?

KV: You know, I think you're already beginning to see it -- the need to lay off so many of the guards, who are so crucial to the Museum. It's a painful situation. There's going to be a distinct compression of the Museum over the next few years. Not nearly so much of the permanent collection is going to be on view. Going through something like this is a deforming process in an institution, and there will be an enormous fallout from it, just in terms of sheer personnel; people who won't want to stay the course during that period of time, and won't want to move to Queens; people who are taking early retirement. I'm never good at predicting the future, but the pain is evident. The gain? I do think that the big, new contemporary space is going to be fabulous. I think Taniguchi's building is incredibly sensitive to the needs of the Museum. I think he's been a wonderful person to work with. The cost, in every possible sense, is gigantic, and I think people may be shocked at the lack of gain in terms of -- Peter's photography space is going to be the same size, or slightly smaller, than the one he has now. The drawings gallery is certainly not going to be greatly improved. For instance, the illustrated books gallery is not going to be enormously improved over the space it has. What will be vastly improved is the general ability of the Museum to absorb crowds. The box-like monotony of the painting and sculpture galleries will be lost. You'll have more gracious spaces, higher ceilings, more noble proportions. The old building, you know, would almost have had to undergo a gut and remake, even if we'd stayed in it. The infrastructure was failing, and something had to be done.

So the Museum had to go forward, and given that it had to go forward, the fact that it's preserved as much as it has -- the sculpture garden will be back in its full glory -- there are many, many things to look forward to, but there is a pain/gain ratio, and the gain is not always going to be as large as people imagine, and the pain is enormous.

SZ: Plus the huge increase in the operating costs; what it's going to cost to --

KV: -- to feed the animal. Well, you know, everyone looked at the mistake that Boston made in the '80s, of building a big building without thinking about the endowment. When we started off the budget was very much weighted toward a "dollar for bricks, a dollar for endowment." But the idea was that you would increase the endowment

largely in order to support. But now that the crunch has come, post-September 11th and the economy's turned around, I don't know how well they're going to be able to maintain an ideal ratio within the budget they initially set out, between the endowment and the building. The building itself -- the actual construction costs -- are a fraction of the total budget here. There are a lot of soft costs, in real estate (what we acquired all over 53rd Street, even that we're not building on; litigation issues). Even before you get to what you set aside for the endowment, there are a huge number of soft costs in the deal, which means that every dollar you add to the construction budget adds like $4.00 more to the big budget. So it's a terribly demanding problem, it's an expensive city to build in, and it had one aspect to it, in the great salad days of the dot-com world and everything else -- when the stock market was soaring, in the late '90s -- people could pledge $5 million to the campaign and make that back in a week on the stock market. We did make hay while the getting was good, and we got -- what? -- up to $500 million in pledges and stuff now. But the city's money is in peril now. That was $65 million -- that was a tenth of the budget -- and we only got $15 [million] of it. That's in peril. And the ability to climb the last mountain of $250-300 million that's needed, in this economy, is a very tough thing to look at. It's a very tough problem.

SZ: I was wondering if you wanted to weigh in on the other change in administration, because I guess about half your time there was under Dick's leadership. Then the choice of Glenn, and how that may have changed -- I know it changed things, but in what ways for you?

KV: I think the world of Dick Oldenburg, and he was a wonderful man to me -- I loved working under him -- It was, structurally, in a certain sense, bound to be this way because I think Dick adhered to the old idea of d'Harnoncourt and [Alfred] Barr, or the idea of an administrative director and a very strong director of painting and sculpture. A lot was done sort of on handshake levels and private conversations, and Dick didn't govern much by meetings. There were more or less perfunctory meetings of the chief curators, but almost everything was done on an individual basis. I think

he was a very fair man, and he tried to -- he had a certain sense of where the hierarchy of importance was in the Museum.

That changed a lot with Glenn, who is a much more meetings-oriented person, structurally-oriented person -- the creation of a whole new staff of deputy directors, et cetera, a different silo-ization of everything; and, I think, a much more corporate structure in the sense that ultimate decision making power -- the landscape has gotten flattened, very strongly, so that there is, in some sense, more cohesion and participation on the lower levels, but ultimately only one tower on the landscape. The director's role is getting stronger and stronger and stronger. Of course, building campaigns focus power, too, and that centralizes the issue in a different way, too. But I think the trustees must have felt -- You know, there was this whole period we went through, trying to have a paid president. In terms of expansion, Dick had done it once. He did it through the 1980 expansion --

SZ: -- which I went through.

KV: -- and he clearly didn't have a lot of stomach for doing it again. I don't think he would have been thrilled to do it, and I think the trustees were looking for a different kind of, I don't know, fiscal management or administrative management. Dick had been brought in to calm troubled waters. It had been a very tossing sea that he was brought into when he was director, and the place needed a very stable, steadying hand. He gave it, and got the place back on keel, and kept Bill Lieberman and Bill Rubin off each other's throats, et cetera. But I think the trustees were getting restive. I don't know. They didn't talk to me about what they wanted for the future, going forward. Then it was a tortuous process, of course, because they did try to find a paid president and that didn't work. Then Dick announced he was stepping down. They had a search firm, with which I was very discontented, and the search firm came up with, on the one hand, the obvious customers -- Jim Wood (I could have written this list on the back of an envelope, in five minutes.) Everybody knew --

SZ: You could have used the money.

KV: -- and then some real -- the guy who was president of Ohio State [Gordon Gee]. There were some odd candidates.

SZ: Who was the firm? Do you remember which firm it was?

KV: No. I've forgotten.

END TAPE 4, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 2

KV: It became a grind [searching for a new Director], and very embarrassing, for the Museum.

SZ: In terms of process, you would have to go and meet with these various candidates they brought in?

KV: We, as curators, were only asked to meet with two candidates. Wait, no. More than one candidate. We met with the guy who was president of Ohio State. If it got down to sort of a close order, last-minute thing, where they really were focusing on somebody, then we talked to them. We must have talked to three or four candidates. And, again, I think they listened to what we had to say. They didn't want a director who didn't get along with the curators. That was important. But it came down to -- They if not offered, certainly came close to offering -- Anne d'Harnoncourt ruled herself out to begin with. Jim Wood -- so they couldn't seem to get -- then I think it came down to Peter Marzio, whom they had settled on, then he wouldn't take it, either. After that they just got fed up, and they sacked the firm and brought in Nancy Nichols. She had one candidate, quickly, in mind, because she knew Glenn since graduate school, she talked to him a lot and knew he was interested in the job.

I think it was the right move to break the generational lock. I think it was interesting to go for a younger person, and Glenn did a superb interview. He was incredibly impressive in the interview situation. I was 100% convinced, when they did it, that they had found the right person. He really seemed to like the job, liked what the Museum was all about. He was extremely good with the answers to all the questions the curators gave him, et cetera, et cetera, in that situation. And I think Dick was happy, too. I thought it was a good choice, but it was a tortuous process, and Dick deserves an enormous amount of credit. After being "squeezed," shall we say, he was then asked to stay on an extra year beyond -- change his plans and stay on. This was a period of time when -- You know, they used to say if Walter Cronkite raised his left eyebrow, policy changed in Washington. If Dick had sent a signal of disaffection, unhappiness, a lot of people were devoted to him, and he had a big morale role in the institution. He was such a pro, such an incredible mensch about this whole thing, and never for a second took his eye off the ball during this period. He was very, very impressive.

SZ: Well, I'm inferring that Glenn was a good choice in terms of the role he has to play now, to get this whole thing done, and the money and all. But in terms of his relationship to the curatorial aspects of the Museum, is there anything -- ?

KV: Well, I don't think it was clear -- When Glenn was named, I thought, "Here's a guy who truly loves what he does. He enjoys the administrative part, which I couldn't do in a million years. He can sit through meetings and pull energy out of them." He was incredibly impressive in his ability to go from meeting to meeting and keep his eye on the ball. All the administrative parts of it which another personality structure might have found onerous or tedious, he just seemed to light up with. He really seemed to enjoy it. He never seemed to get tired. He never seemed to get negative. He loved handling difficult people. All that was terrific. For me, the more difficult part was how much of the curatorial role, eventually, Glenn wanted to take over. Glenn is writing on contemporary art. He's going to galleries and speaking on behalf of the Museum. He's much more aggressively involved. He's taken over the task of reporting to the trustees about future exhibitions, even reporting to the trustees, now, on acquisitions.

So that the autonomy and special role that each of the chief curators used to play in their own area is being very strongly eroded and suppressed. Obviously, I felt it very strongly in painting and sculpture, since this has been the most dominant, most -- I felt very strongly that, increasingly, a thousand small things -- Every acquisition had to be announced through a press release, of which Glenn was the head, not the chief curator; Glenn speaking on the audio guide, no matter who's done the show; Glenn doing the radio ad for [Gerhard] Richter, instead of Rob [Storr] doing it. These are changes in the fundamental structure of the way the Museum of Modern Art used to be very special and unique, in the special role given to the curators, and they had amazing people -- John Szarkowski, Bill Rubin, Alfred Barr -- they had amazing people in these roles, and the director was always, in some sense, to run the ship in order for these people to do their jobs in the best fashion. I don't think Glenn sees his role that way at all. It makes for a certain amount of discomfort with the adjustment.

SZ: I'm just trying to think -- going back and reviewing what we've done -- I think we covered the major exhibitions. I don't know if there's anything else you want to add to this. I can't think of anything, but that doesn't mean that --

KV: It's now hard for me to remember what we marched through. We talked, also, about acquisitions, I would presume?

SZ: Yes, we did talk about acquisitions. We haven't, actually, though, talked very much about (and I don't know how much there is you want to say) the board and your committee, and how you worked with them; whether you had any special trustees with whom you had important relationships. You did mention, in terms of acquisitions, I think you talked about Dannheisser, was it?

KV: Elaine Dannheisser, her collection. She was hugely important. And I'm sure -- in a certain sense, it was not on my watch, but -- someone like Philip Johnson's role, when we did that show of Philip's collection. If you look at what he gave us from the '60s, it's astonishing. Astonishing. It kept us up to date at a time when the Museum wasn't necessarily that way.

But you know, the committee is an interesting thing, because when I came in '88, there was a kind of splinter group, almost, on our committee. It was interesting. The Painting and Sculpture Committee had apparently gotten (and I wasn't there to see it, but this is what was told to me) -- the committee had gotten restive because Bill was primarily focusing on the early modern part of the collection -- the so-called classic part of the collection -- up to and including Pollock, because he did a fabulous job of New York School acquisitions, in his deals with Lee Krasner and everything. But he wasn't giving sufficient support to Kynaston, and that they needed a greater presence in contemporary. So the same year that I was named adjunct curator, that was when Linda Shearer was brought on, and that was under pressure from the trustees. They wanted more contemporary presence, and the same thing within the acquisitions program. I know that Philip, Aggie, and I forget who else but a few other people, formed a sort of sub-committee, on their own, on contemporary art. They met separate days from the full committee, and sort of drew up a hit list of artists of the '80s, to whom we were not paying attention, to whom they felt attention should be paid. They were going to provide the funds, and encourage Kynaston to go out and check down this list of the artists they felt we should be acquiring. On the other hand you had people who were resolutely uninterested in exploring contemporary art. Gordon Bunshaft was sort of a famous curmudgeon. He was a wonderful guy and I liked him. Of course, his collection was a fabulous thing to get. But he was notoriously grumpy, and there were a couple of other people on the committee at that point. Just because of age changes, and because the climate of things changed, I'd say we went through a total sea change in that regard; that now we're collecting, predominately, contemporary art, and there is a minority portion of time spent to refining the earlier part of the collection. The contemporary part is very much the dominant focus, so that the so-called sub-committee -- First of all, we opened it to anybody who wanted to come, and what it became was a sort of an informal preview of the session, where we could weed out those parts that were the classic part of the collection and just focus on contemporary issues. What began to happen was, we would meet on a Friday, and the committee -- or those who were willing to come to the Friday meeting -- would see work that they would perhaps get a chance to look at

over the weekend in galleries, and they'd familiarize themselves -- so instead of being forced to a vote fifteen minutes after the curator had made a presentation, there was a lot of time to -- Sometimes we saw things weren't going to make it, and we didn't bring them to the final meetings. It became a kind of two-stage meeting rather than two different committees. I don't know what the future of the so-called sub-committee is now, because there's a lot more work for the curators and it requires scheduling and space issues and that. The whole future of acquisitions meetings, over the next few years, is very tough, because what space are we going to hold them in? How can you get people to come to Queens, et cetera? So I don't know what rhythm they'll hold acquisitions meetings at.

But that was a huge change within the committee, and we also added a great many people. People like Elaine Dannheisser came on, for example. There were lots of new additions to that committee while I was there. They had just changed, before I came on, the structure about paying dues, and some people dropped off as a result of that. But I thought it was a very good committee, and I think it's a very good way of acquiring art; that curators propose, they get to make their argument, and the committee disposes. The committee is rightfully tough. I would say that 80% of what the curators propose gets approved, but some of it gets turned down. It's by and large a system that's worked very, very well, and I would say the same thing about the board of trustees. I think the modern board of trustees, when you look across the country, has been exemplary in the sense of being very active and very involved in the Museum, at least during my time there, but minimally invasive in any negative sense; hugely involved with pride in the mission of the Museum; concerned for it; generous; but not meddlesome, in an obnoxious way. So many people are so fortunate, I think, to have people involved with the Museum, given the structure of private patronage for museums. It's so easy to find people who want to use the institution for their own social ends, and the luck we have, to have so many people who are dedicated to serving the institution, in a certain sense -- to furthering the institution -- and using their means to make it go forward, rather than --

SZ: -- the other way around.

KV: -- vice versa. I think, to start at the top -- Of course, David Rockefeller is irreplaceable, and has been a wonderful force for calm and order. He's the sort of great *pater familias* of the whole thing, and the whole Rockefeller family. How could you imagine the Museum of Modern Art without that kind of patronage? It's astonishing to have gone through Abby, through Blanchette, Nelson and David. What an astonishing record of stewardship -- custodianship -- of an institution, and support for it, through that family.

But to have been able to pass the baton from the Rockefeller's leadership, when David was chairman, when I was appointed, to Aggie and Ronald [Lauder], and find two people who are so dedicated to art, whose lives are so centrally involved with artists and collecting, who, at the same time, are enormously wealthy and extraordinarily generous, these people are the franchise, shall we say. It's so important that the board maintain this. Our board is so much less -- I know this was not true in years past, and I'm aware of the problems that happened in the early '70s and so on, but by and large I think the Museum's board has been incredibly anfractuous, un-divisive, and enormously supportive. I think the Museum has been very fortunate with this board.

SZ: Well, it's actually interesting, because there were a lot of other pressures in the early '70s, that really invited that kind of thing.

KV: One of the interesting things -- just by the by -- is that somebody made the observation that it seems that among all American institutions, MoMA is the one that's been most dominated by extremely influential and powerful women, starting with Abby and going through Aggie; that there's always been at the head of it -- You wouldn't say that was true of the Metropolitan, and a lot of other museums.

SZ: No, you would not.

KV: Certainly, whatever critique you would make of the curatorial staff, that in the leadership, if you look at Abby, if you look at Louise Smith, Lily Auchincloss, Elaine Dannheisser -- how many terrific and really important women have shaped the nature of the institution? Eliza Cobb, Lillie Bliss -- it's always been true. And the fact that Lillie's daughter is now on board is wonderful.

SZ: Alexandra. Right.

KV: Yes.

SZ: So, Kirk, just for the record, talk about your leaving, and what you're doing now.

KV: Leaving. When I took the job at the Museum of Modern Art in 1988, I didn't think there was any other job I would ever want in life. I thought that, like Bill Rubin, I would, in a sense, stay in it until I was through. Barr had gone through his whole life in that job. It had a tradition of not being a rotating job. It was something you took, and I took it like a mission. I loved teaching. I loved the Institute of Fine Arts, and I really thought that was the greatest job in the world when I got it. I wouldn't have been interested in museum work, generically, at all, but I was interested in this job.

So when I took it I couldn't imagine ever leaving. At the end of thirteen years, a great deal had changed. I've already talked, in a certain sense, about the frictions that were involved in what I felt was a certain erosion of the position of the department. There were ways I was getting restive and unhappy with that, and for one reason or another I was getting the feeling that, under the different way the Museum was run, with the meetings and everything, that I was spending enormous portions of my time doing things I felt other people could do just as well, and I was not spending nearly enough of my time, I thought, doing things I might be able to do better, like writing. Whatever my particular talents were, I didn't feel I was using them to my best advantage, and I didn't feel there were openings or avenues to do that. I looked at a couple other job offers, including going back to the Institute, and was thinking it over. I was sort of in the middle of a period of reflection and contemplation about what

might be the next thing to come when two things happened simultaneously -- not simultaneously, but in close order.

In April of 2001 I was approached by the Institute for Advanced Study (about which I knew very little at that point). They wanted me out for an interview, so I went on the internet and got books, and figured out fairly quickly --

SZ: -- that this was not a bad thing.

KV: -- that this was an extraordinary [opportunity]. I did the interview with them, I believe, in late April, early May, and they were very positive and encouraging. It was sort of a Japanese offer in the sense that they want to know you'll accept before they offer it to you, because you have to go through a whole process of their sending out letters to people all over the field, soliciting opinions, doing votes, and it obviously isn't worth their while to do this if somebody isn't eventually going to take it. So there was a little minuet going on about positive gestures being made on both sides, but nothing being settled. Then, wham. In the middle of that, in June, I was diagnosed with a recurrence of my cancer. Then it just became crystal clear to me that two things were true: That I could no longer afford to live with the kind of neurotic unhappiness that I'd been experiencing over the past year or two; that it wasn't going to be good for my health. And, that I had to maximize my time as best I could.

So I looked at it. I thought, "Fourteen years of teaching, thirteen years of curating, and an unparalleled opportunity to do exactly what it is that I want on my own. I knew I had the Mellon lectures upcoming in the spring of 2003, and I'd lived through trying to do the Slade lectures at Oxford while I was still working at the Museum, and I was so dissatisfied with how I'd done on the Slades, and I wanted more time to think about these things. I thought lecturing was something I did well, and that working and writing on ideas was something. So the Institute was like a godsend, in that sense. I guess one of the final cappers on the issue was that, looking down the barrel of the next four or five years, it was dispiriting enough when I thought I was hail and hearty, and could live to do the installation in 2005 --

The installation in 2005 was one of the major things that was keeping me, because by the time that would have happened, I would have been sixty years old, and somebody else should have taken the job, anyway. I increasingly realized that for me to wait around four or five years to install that collection wasn't a fruitful use of time, and I'm not sure I've got five years anyway. So the Institute for Advanced Study was an amazing -- it *is* an amazing thing.

SZ: You've been there two months?

KV: Since early January. Yes. I sit in an office surrounded by my library. For the first time I've got my own books around. I have no meetings to go to. They do everything they can to encourage you. The office is an oasis of quiet and peace. I have no staff to worry about. I don't have to argue about anybody's salaries. I don't have to argue about whether somebody should or shouldn't have an administrative assistant. I don't have to adjudicate any ego conflicts. I just have to do the best work I can do intellectually, and I'm meeting an incredible variety of amazing minds, both amongst the faculty and amongst the people who are visiting people there.

So it's a tremendously positive experience for me. I deeply love the ideal of The Museum of Modern Art, the tradition of The Museum of Modern Art -- what it represents -- and the contact with the pictures and that collection. It was a huge privilege, and I miss many people. I had great friends there. I miss being part of an ideal, of a mission, in the same way, because the Institute is more fragmented (it's each person's own mission here), but it's the right thing for me to do at this time in my life, I'm utterly convinced.

SZ: But you haven't moved there.

KV: No. We kept our loft in SoHo. We're very much Manhattanites, and we're bouncing back and forth between here and Princeton.

SZ: Is that a difficult thing to do?

KV: We still aren't settled yet. It's been six weeks, which have just been burned on the altar of transition. We had to spend days and days going out and buying stepladders, scotch tape dispensers, and Kleenex, you know? Because we didn't sell the place we lived in, we had to start again from zero, there -- repaint, carpenter, try to get TV hooked up -- just all the minutiae of moving were more daunting than I think we thought they would be. We still don't have any dining room chairs. So the process is going on for a while, we feel like we've been hemorrhaging money, and there are many other things about it. So it doesn't feel like this whole term at the Institute I will ever truly get my feet firmly on the ground, but I hope that, by the end of this spring, we'll have life settled down to some kind of normal patterns. I still have -- starting in late March it will be exactly a year to work on the Mellons. Considering that everything I've done over the last thirteen years has been done either on weekends, over Christmas vacation or --

SZ: It's such a luxury to [have time and space to conduct your research] --

KV: Yes. Yes.

END TAPE 4, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **KIRK VARNEDOE (KV)**

INTERVIEWER: **AMY HORSCHAK (AH)**

LOCATION: **PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY**

DATE: **JUNE 24, 2002**

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

AH: Just say a few things [to test the recording equipment].

KV: One, two, three, four, five, six. [pause] I was a member of MoMA when I was at Williams, and I can remember the [William] Turner catalogue for sure. Receiving catalogues – those were the days when members received catalogues. It was that long ago. And I came into the Museum many times. Of course, I vividly remember coming up the stairs and seeing [Picasso's] *Guernica*, but I wasn't involved with anybody at the Museum. I was a total outsider at that point. And the first time I ever really had any contact with the inside of the Museum would have been in graduate school.

AH: Did you have any interest in getting involved with the inside of the Museum?

KV: No. At that point, I didn't. I wasn't connected with it, and I wasn't thinking about museums as a career until I got to graduate school, and that became a possibility. And then, it got immediately quite personal because Al Elsen, my mentor and PhD

adviser, was a long time friend of Bill Rubin's. So I can remember him introducing me to Bill. I can remember the three of us sitting together in the Museum garden at some point in 1969 or '70 or whatever, talking. And then I think that Al must have asked Bill to sort of look out for me when I came to New York. And then Bill turned up on the Advisory Committee of the Columbia University Art History Department, which I was a part of, and I had to do this portrait show. It was the first year I was at Columbia, '74, and right away, they got me involved in doing this exhibition, which they did frequently. They did these benefit exhibitions, and I had a chance to choose the theme, so I did modern portraiture. And I was a total greenhorn about how to get loans and didn't know where things were, and Bill was extremely helpful, both with loans from the Modern and talking about collectors in New York. And so I spent a lot of time with him then, and he liked the show and he liked the catalogue. And then he came out when I did the [Gustave] Caillebotte show at Brooklyn. He came and heard me lecture. So he was getting already very interested in me at some point in circa 1976, '75. I still only vaguely knew other people at the Museum a little bit. And that was all until this whole development in '79-'80 when Bill Lieberman was getting ready to go. At that point, Bill introduced me to Dick Oldenburg, and we had this long series of meetings. That was sort of a glimpse of the old Museum. The old Museum used to depend crucially on bars and restaurants on 53rd Street, of which there are virtually none left.

AH: Right.

KV: But there was a dumpy Italian restaurant of the kind that had cut glass bowls with shaved ice and celery and olives. You can't find these things anymore.

AH: It's not on Sette's menu?

KV: And it was a real old style Italian restaurant. And it was where Dick liked to go for lunch and put back alternatively either martinis or lots of white wine. And I went through several lunches with Dick both then, and then later. I think this restaurant still existed at some point in the mid-'80s, when the bigger job came to be at issue.

But, in the long run, it all came to naught in ‘80, or ‘79, because they decided instead to make John Elderfield head of Drawings because they were going into a period of retrenchment for the expansion. It wasn’t thought to be a good time to hire somebody new, et cetera. But that was a. . .

AH: Was that a disappointment? Did you have your heart set on that new position?

KV: I was perplexed about what to do because the Institute of Fine Arts, which was courting me at the same time, was a fabulous place and a great job. And I didn’t know what I really wanted to do, so I was more or less happy to have it decided for me. When it didn’t turn up, I was just as happy to go to the Institute. I didn’t know what it would have been like at the Museum. It was mainly that Bill was incredibly supportive, and Bill seemed to think this would be a great thing for me to do. So I just let myself be swept along by the tide, but it never came to a point of really having to face up to the crunch. And then, after that fell through, then shortly thereafter, Bill asked me to draw up this list of exhibitions I might want to do. I think I covered this before. And I said I was interested in primitivism, and that led into the *Primitivism* show.

AH: So he was really actively trying to keep you engaged.

KV: That’s right. Yes. He clearly was sending me a lot of signals that he really wanted to get me involved. And this is already 1979-80. This is eight years before anything happened. So he was really trying to get me involved a lot. And with *Primitivism*, I obviously did get thickly involved. All the while, I was teaching at the Institute and doing other things. And *Primitivism* was the first major loan show aside from Kynaston’s [McShine] international show after the then-new Museum opened, the expansion with the Pelli tower and everything. And it was done in a totally odd fashion. They hired Froom and Franklin, this outside – Chuck Froom used to work at the Museum – but they hired. . .

AH: . . . oh, right. . .

KV: . . . these outside designers to design the exhibition at a cost of which I think you could have built Versailles. I used to say that my aspiration was to someday live in a place as well built as those vitrines were. Because the show was supposed to travel, and it was Bill's idea that all this furniture would travel with it, so Froom and Franklin were going to design. And they designed the hell out of that show. I mean, my god, the expense spent on that firm. And it was during that, that I got to know Jerry Neuner and realized that Jerry probably could have done the same thing for a fraction of the price. That he was at least as sharp as they were.

AH: So they had an in-house. . .

KV: Well, Jerry. . . at that point, it seemed to me that the history of designing things at the Modern, you could go back a long ways to the machine shows in the '20s, but it had come to be that the idea of designing something at the Modern was which white did you use on the wall? That was about the. . . and Jerry's job wasn't clear. I had been, by the early '80s, I had been working with Gil Ravenel at the National Gallery, for example, on *Rodin Rediscovered*, where Gil had this vast staff of draftsman, silk-screeners. .. you know, he created empires for Dresden and Tut. And Jerry was a kind of beleaguered chief of the carpenters, in a sense, and was given no leeway to do really anything. And he was expected to just be the liaison for Froom and Franklin, but it became clear to me in the course of that show that he knew more than they did. So it was the production values in *Primitivism*, and because everything was being built out of house and had to be designed in advance, the sclerosis of the show, in a certain sense, you had to design each cabinet way in advance. The show had to be mapped out rigidly. I've never done another show that had to be so planned and left no room, practically, for variation. And it was insanely complicated. They had to hire a special mount maker to do the little pieces of wire.

AH: Oh, I think you had mentioned that. Yes.

KV: Yes. That hung the masks, and he was like a little blacksmith. He had a little rolling cart, and he would forge these things on the spot to hang and adjust them. And they would have made a great show in themselves. If you had taken down the masks, they looked fantastic. But I don't think there's ever been a show since that had as much lavished on it as this show did. And the catalogue, of course, was an incredibly lavish production, too. And that was the first time I had to deal with Steve Schoenfelder, who was fabulous. I mean, that book is still, I think, one of the most beautiful books the Museum ever put out.

AH: Did he do *High and Low*, also?

KV: He did *High and Low*.

AH: And *Modern Contemporary* [*Modern Contemporary: Art Since 1980 at MoMA*], obviously.

KV: Yes. I tried to get with Steve every time I could because he was such a cool head under fire and had such a good design sense. And I thought *Primitivism* was fantastic. It was insanely complicated. I can't remember how many authors there were in that book, and how much editing Bill and I had to do on all the essays and a number of correlations and illustrations, and the number of judgments to be made about scale of illustrations, and the number of transparencies to correct. And it was a phenomenal job, a two-volume book like that. It's just hard to imagine the Museum spending this kind of money again on such a project. It was. . . and, there were fantastic objects. It was amazing. Bill, obviously, had the much greater knowledge of tribal art. I tried to make myself a quick study, but he gave me a couple of assignments, basically. [Paul] Gauguin, which was my area, Post-Impressionism, and then, the Abstract Expressionists stuff. And then I persuaded him to do the contemporary section. He wasn't really interested in it as a contemporary problem, but I was convinced that the show would appear stilted unless it had some acknowledgment of the contemporary dimension. So, that was a kind of add-on that he said, "Okay, if you're interested in that, do it yourself." But it was a real huge

production and, of course, it was one of the first of what would then become a common dilemma in that a space had been assigned to it, and somewhere mid-course, it was clear that the space was not enough. So, what had been intended to be the contemporary gallery, Philip Johnson, third floor. . . [tape interruption]

AH: Okay.

KV: I was in the middle of *Primitivism*, right?

AH: Were you involved [with] a lot with the staff at that point, aside from the exhibition team?

KV: There were two curatorial assistants. One was Laura Rosenstock and one was Diane Farynyk, both of whom stayed on, but one of them divided up and took the primitive side of it, and the other took the contemporary side of it. So it was a whole army of people at work on this thing, and I got to know, obviously, Jerry. I got to know a lot of people. That was a good introduction, but it was an exceptional production. I know what I was saying about space demands, that. . .

AH: . . . oh, right. . .

KV: . . . barely had the new museum opened than immediately the space that was given over to contemporary art, the third floor, East Wing gallery, got colonized for part of *Primitivism*. So, *Primitivism* took place in the basement in what were then called the d'Harnoncourt galleries, and then you had to go up to the third floor for the second part of it. Bill, apparently, I'm always told by the lore, that Bill had resisted connecting the first and second floors, the so-called International Council galleries and the d'Harnoncourt galleries because he didn't like the idea of shows that took up so much space. But then immediately, it became what Peter Galassi always referred to as "exhibition creep," that something started and then got gradually bigger and bigger before anyone noticed. And *Primitivism* was the warning bells. The first show out of the gate in the new space immediately colonized collection space for

exhibitions, so that was a harbinger [tape interruption]. So, immediately, collection space was annexed for exhibitions, which was, in retrospect, a doom note. That had just expanded the Museum. It was supposed to have excellent exhibition space, and then – bang -- immediately collection. . . and that became an endemic disease that went all the way through. . . I mean, the other classic example was that the way the new Museum was designed, the Drawings galleries were on the third floor, in the eastern part of the building, not in the Philip Johnson wing. They opened onto the Garden Hall on the third floor, and they created. . . it took a huge divot out of the eastern part of the 11 West building. And what that did was to create in the contemporary galleries of painting and sculpture, a kind of odd dog leg. So that when you came out of the collection galleries, you crossed across the former Bauhaus staircase and immediately hit a wall, turned right, went down a corridor, turned left, turned right, to get into the third floor East Wing gallery. So, it was a very awkward space for contemporary art. And when I took over in '88, I finally, after a long time persuading and talking to the Drawings Department and talking to Ronald, when we re-did the galleries after Matisse, I got the Drawings collection to move off the third floor into what had been the surrealist and immediate pre-war spaces on the second floor at the end of the Painting and Sculpture galleries. It was an equivalent amount of space, and then, re-claimed that area on the third floor to truly have really good collection space for contemporary art, much more expansive space to show contemporary art. And virtually in the flicker of an eye, within weeks after that space was finished, the Ryman show went in there because we had found that in the '90s, we were having this beat of big – the Miró show, the Matisse show – that we were having lots of. . . and we weren't having enough flexibility with contemporary. So, the solution was put contemporary in what was destined to be the contemporary collection galleries. So, same story again. You expand what you think is going to be a nice division between exhibition and collection, and then exhibition eats collection. It's an old problem, and I don't think we've seen the last of it. Often because, as will happen in the new building, the Taniguchi building, clearly the contemporary collection galleries on the second floor are the highest ceiling spaces, the biggest, most open spaces in the Museum. So when you did a Richard Serra show, those are going to be the spaces people are going to want. So, it's fatal, I have a feeling,

but *Primitivism* was one of the first instances of it in my experience. So then after *Primitivism*, then Bill was eager that I do something on my own. Clearly, he had a plan.

AH: Yes. He had this all mapped out.

KV: He had a plan, and he wanted me to do what they used to call in the academy a morceau de reception, a performance piece. So, doing something on my own, and they pitched this Vienna hot potato in my lap, to do that. [*Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design* [MoMA Exh. #1426, July 3-October 26, 1986]] And there, I got to work with Jerry directly. He was fantastic. They really asked that Jerry be flown to Vienna to look at the objects, which I knew they did with Gil Ravenel at the National Gallery. And Jerry got to exercise some real design issues in the Wiener Werkstätte room. We did exceptional things for modern. We painted gold diamonds on the wall for Klimt, and we really jazzed it up for the Viennese decorative arts in a way that I thought was very attractive. And Jerry had all of this artistic skill in him, just nobody had ever let him do it. And he was fantastic to work with.

AH: It seems like you were given so much freedom at the institution, without being a staff person. And it seems like now there's just a lot more hoops to jump through. Do you think it has changed? It seems like you were sort of given carte blanche with the Vienna show.

KV: I didn't know from nothing in those days, so I had no standard of comparison. But you're right, in retrospect, and that probably generated a lot of resentment from folks inside because I didn't have to toe any of the standard lines. I had Bill behind me, and he could make anything happen. And so, I was a free agent, and I didn't have to go to meetings, and I didn't have to worry about budgets and all that sort of stuff. I was just told to do it, basically. It was, in many ways, an enviable position. But, of course, I was trying to maintain a full-time job at the same time at the Institute [of Fine Arts]. And it was also true that in '84, I got the MacArthur, which I had hoped would let me have a lot of time off, and the Vienna show landing right then in the

middle of that blew a huge hole in any plans I had to do anything other and independent. It had to be done when it had to be done, *Vienna*.

AH: So was *Vienna* your MacArthur?

KV: I got through with *Vienna*, finally. I got it up on the walls in summer of '86, and the MacArthur was a five-year grant. It ran until '89, so I was able to eke out some time towards the end of it. But between *Vienna*, and I had to drop *Gauguin*, because I had been hired by the National Gallery as their curator to do *Gauguin* with Françoise Cachin and Rick Brettell. And I actually started into it. I went to Brittany. I went to the Louvre and looked at *Noa Noa*, and toured around a lot of sites. I went to Denmark with that team, and it was really going to be a great show. But when I saw *Vienna* coming, I knew it was a collision course, and I had to make a choice. And once Charlie Stuckey was hired at the National Gallery, I figured he could take over my role because he knew Gauguin. And it was unpleasant. The National Gallery didn't like it, but I had to make a cut to do that. But *Vienna* was a source of endless anecdotes that I don't think I. . . the really. . . there were several crazy things going on. . .

AH: . . . well, in the first interview, you did talk about the loans, the Klimt and. . .

KV: . . . yes, about getting the loans. . .

AH: . . . the final, final hour of their arrival.

KV: Yes, about Frau Griebler [laughter] running Kunsttrans. And the whole situation with the conservator at the Belvedere, and the director. Well, if I've covered that, I've told the best story.

AH: The conflict between the. . . yes, I think you did. The conflict between the conservator and the director, and how you finally played up the conservator's opinion.

KV: Oh, the conservator's opinion was not anything the director wanted to hear. The conservator had his own secret formula for restoring Klimts, which I'm sure must have been crazy. And the conservator was like a former tie salesman who had been brought in there at some point early on, and the poor conservator wound up committing suicide a year or two. . . the story ends as all Viennese stories do, in suicide. He committed suicide a couple of years after the show was over, I think, because he burned his bridges with his director by agreeing that this thing could be loaned. But it was a drama, that show, a thoroughly Viennese drama all the way through. And the last two weeks of it were the most dramatic. It was a fantastic learning experience, but that was also the most brutal deadline experience I think I had because I had to deliver that catalogue. We decided to do – I had decided to do – a separate catalogue, and I decided to do a separate show. And Hollein, who had organized Hansel and the architect who had organized the show in Vienna, really wanted his show to come to New York, so he was not supportive. And since I had conceived a separate show for New York, it really seemed to involve a separate catalogue, and this all had to be written under intense time pressure. This was another Steve Schoenfelder book, which I thought he did a brilliant job of designing. And Jim Leggio, who was the editor, was a terrific editor. So it was a very good experience, but it was compressed and mad, and was written essentially. . . the show in Vienna opened, which is where I got to see what would be available. I saw it in June of '85, figured out over the summer what I was going to do, set down to do the loan lists, started writing the catalogue essentially around Thanksgiving of '85, and finished it by February 1st of '86. Which was, if you look at the book, a fairly intense amount of writing.

AH: And still teaching?

KV: And still teaching, yes. But everybody seemed happy. Dick Oldenburg was certainly. I mean, just the fact that we got *The Kiss*, and we got *Adele Bloch-Bauer*, and the show was a great success. And so, I was considered to have slain the dragon since the whole idea of doing a Vienna show had been around since the

'60's, and no one had ever been able to bring it off. So this was regarded as a great success and propelled me into the next phase, which was Bill's lobbying to construct his future around a gradual retirement and my coming in. And that's what took up the next two years of life, until '88, and that was a long, tortuous period.

AH: Why was it such a long process?

KV: Partly, I think, because Bill had a clear set of demands he wanted to negotiate about his perks as a retiring person. And it was perplexing to me, and we talked earlier about the fact that having come in from the outside as a hired hand, that I no doubt generated some resentment within the Museum. And I think that I was actively opposed by several members of the staff, specifically in Painting and Sculpture, who talked against me to Trustees or anyone who would listen. And Dick Oldenburg had to sort of negotiate between this and Don Marron, who was then president. And the problem was that, I think that there were two problems. I'm not all-seeing enough to know exactly what the personal objections to me were. I gather that several people felt I was going to be another Bill Rubin. They'd had enough of one martinet, and that if I was Bill's choice, I was just going to be the same kind of person, overbearing, all consuming politically. I think a lot of people felt, in fact, it was told to me, to my face, that I was essentially a careerist, that I was just after Bill's job as a stepping stone to Dick's job, that I was power hungry, et cetera. This was a perception, and the perception. . . then, so there were a whole set of personal issues, or personality issues, where people objected to me. Then there was a kind of in-principle objection to the process. It was felt that Bill should not be able to name his successor, that there ought to be a search. And that I wasn't a <u>real</u> museum person, and that there were all sorts of <u>real</u> museum people in the world, Christian Geelhaar, Basel; Nick Serota in London, who was then at the White Chapel; any number of other people who were invested in museum careers and had always been museum people, felt deserved a hearing. And that they felt the Trustees were being sold a bill of goods, that I wasn't well-trained enough; I didn't know museums enough; that this was a crazy idea of Bill's; that I was an academic; and that I was also not firmly enough rooted in contemporary and twentieth century, that I had made. . . I did my

dissertation on a nineteenth-century subject. I had written a lot on Impressionism. I was perceived of as being dominantly a nineteenth-century person, and *Vienna* did not necessarily dispel that. It was partly an early classic, or off-mainstream modern thing. So that I didn't have enough of a track record and credentials in either contemporary or classic modern to get this job.

AH: Did you know any of the trustees at that point?

KV: Very few with any clarity. A little bit Aggie [Gund], because Patterson Sims had introduced me. Philip Johnson because I had met him a couple of times, and because he was voluble and outgoing, so I knew him a little bit. Don Marron because he was president, and I had to deal with him. The others, just more or less, on a social basis. And I was totally green and naïve about how the whole process was happening; perplexed by the sudden rejection on the part of the people I had been working with all the way through *Primitivism* and *Vienna*. Why suddenly this? And I couldn't understand it. I thought I had paid my dues big time at the Museum, in terms of doing these shows, and I thought I had done a good job with them. I thought my writing and production of these shows had been all right, and I just sort of naively couldn't understand why it was I was being fought against. And so I took each of the members of P&S out to lunch individually, and those that would talk to me at all – and some of them basically wouldn't – said that this was a matter of principle that there wasn't a search going on, that viable candidates hadn't been considered. This was too important to do in this backhanded way, and that I should insist, myself, that a thorough search be held, that other candidates be brought in. And I found myself in a real perplexing dilemma because a new broom always sweeps cleaner, and familiarity breeds contempt, and all that sort of stuff. And I felt that anybody on a white horse from outside, in a certain sense, had a set of, in some senses, advantages over me because I was the known commodity, and I was there.

AH: Did this make you reconsider wanting to take the job?

KV: I thought about whether I wanted to do this job. I loved the Institute of Fine Arts, and I loved teaching. And Bill, in the way it happened in '79-80, Bill had a plan, and I was part of the plan. And at some point, he said, "You better say whether you really want this or not because I'm going to go ahead with this if you don't." And my wife, Elyn, was extremely leery of it because as an artist, she knew that getting involved in the Museum wasn't going to be good for her in a lot of ways, and knew that it would be incredibly demanding on my time. And so, there were a lot of reservations, but there seemed just such a tide, such a force of tide, going in that direction. And I felt that if I didn't take it, if I didn't step with the tide then, it was never going to come back around again. And the truth was I felt I could always go back to teaching if it didn't work out. That I could try it, and it was such an exceptional job. And it was a job that, as Barr and Rubin had defined it, was not just a paper pusher's job. It was a job that really had produced serious scholarship, that seemed to demand serious scholarship, and the Museum seemed to give it the kind of leeway that could do that. Bill spent I don't know how many months a year in the south of France. The way that Bill ran the job, he was really very much an absentee landlord. They gave him very broad berth to set his own schedule and do exactly what he wanted in the way of. . .as long as he was bringing in the acquisitions and doing the exhibitions. And so, it didn't just seem any museum job. I didn't have any generic interest in museum work at all. I wasn't aimed at a museum career, necessarily. I loved teaching, and I had no particular desire to leave New York. I don't think if I had been offered a museum job of any other kind, I would ever have taken it. It was this specific job, and it came to me. There it was, and so I said, "Yes. I would go through with it." But once I got into the process, the resistance to it did not dissuade me from pursuing it. In fact, it got my dander up to a certain extent, and I didn't want to get burned in this process. I wanted to follow through with it. But it was really unpleasant, and partly because of these grumblings and objections and resistances and whatever time it took the trustees to get around to it, and partly because of the length of time it took them to negotiate Bill's contract, the word got out on the street by – right after *Vienna* – it was clear by '86 that I was somehow the anointed prince, and it didn't happen until '88. So you had eighteen months, two years, of hanging in the wind where people could take pot shots at you and where the thing was in suspension. And my colleagues at

the Institute of Fine Arts got grumbly, which I don't blame them for, because they got wind of it, too. And there's no good thing to be said about this period. It was hurtful and agonizing and frustrating and made everybody unhappy. And people who had started out supporting me at the beginning, wound up so pissed off and irritated by the end of it, they were suggesting other candidates. I was real glad when it got over.

AH: How long did it take you to settle in once you arrived?

KV: After I got the job in '88?

AH: Yes.

KV: Well, of course, I had worked in, literally in these offices. I had an office there in. . . so I knew the lay of the land fairly well, and I knew the cast of characters in certain ways. So it probably took me a lot less time than it would have taken other people. And I had Bill as a resource. That I will say is that Bill could have, if he wanted to, made my life difficult as the eminence gris. He had an office. He had a secretary. He really was extraordinarily helpful. He knew where all the skeletons were buried every time I wanted to ask him a question. I felt compelled to do many things differently from the way that Bill had done them. Because he had been such an absentee landlord, I, as a good boy scout, felt that I ought to be there more often. And I struggled to correct – because everybody groused to me when I was an outsider about all the things they didn't like about the way Bill did things – and I felt strongly, given the objections that everybody had made, that I needed to distance myself from Bill, and I needed to establish myself as my own person. So I made a point of trying to do the things that people complained he didn't do, to stop doing things that people complained that he did do. And try to establish a different. . .

AH: . . . so you saw the validity in their complaints?

KV: As a piece of advice, Bill told me the only way to get anything done around here is

yell, and I just didn't see following that [slightly laughing] piece of advice because I had watched what happened to people who were yelled at, so I didn't want to yell. And Bill clearly felt that taking six months or three months off every year in the south of France was a good idea, and good for me, and good for. . . I couldn't do it. I just needed the approval more, to be there and tow the line, and be a good soldier, and appear to be a more responsible citizen, in a certain sense, than I thought that Bill had been. I thought this would be a way to build favor in the institution. So I right away set a different kind of tone, work space, work pace, et cetera. The place – perhaps to my great chagrin, perhaps I should have held on to every one of those prerogatives that Bill established. . .

AH: [slightly laughing] And was this your first time. . . you were in charge of the whole department.

KV: That's right.

AH: So was this your first time being in sort of a management type position as well?

KV: Yes. I'd never had this kind of staff to be responsive to. The thing is you have to understand that Bill managed very little. There wasn't much management going on. He left Kynaston [McShine] and Carolyn [Lanchner] to sort of tidy up a lot of things. He deferred a lot of management responsibility. He was burningly interested in exhibitions and acquisitions, and the rest of it fell where it could. There wasn't much bureaucracy in those days. So it wasn't, in some sense, a managed department in the same way. And I thought, again, that would be something I should do, or should get more involved in and try to rationalize that process. So, I changed around a lot of things in the department. I can't remember at what pace, but I changed the structure of the way things were reported, and the management of meetings, and so on and so forth. And I don't think there were that many bumps or slips on the job. And because you had a history of people who knew how to run it – I mean, Kynaston would gladly have continued to run the acquisitions meetings as he always had for Bill, and order the sandwiches and do all that sort of stuff. He didn't need me to tell

him how to do it, so that. . .

AH: . . . Kynaston ordered sandwiches?

KV: Oh, yes. The question of sandwiches at the Painting and Sculpture meetings is one of the key issues about which – who supplied the sandwiches, what kind of sandwiches – every year, this was a major issue about which there was never any satisfaction. Salad, when we had more west coast members, suddenly there was more demand for salad. This is the underbelly. You know, an army always marches on its stomach. Well, P&S meetings always went on these sandwiches and the food, and it was a never-ending source of refinement and adjustment, none of which was ever gotten right. One of the things that. . . did I talk in the other interview about the so-called Contemporary Committee?

AH: Yes. Yes, the sub-committee.

KV: Yes, which was a big issue when I came aboard, and slowly evolved into a kind of non-issue in a way.

AH: Yes. That doesn't exist anymore.

KV: It does exist nominally, but we've deferred. . . it supposedly has its meetings on Friday before the P&S Committee meeting on Monday. And it's so much work to try to get the work installed, and increasingly, as we were acquiring work which could only be installed in collection galleries because it wasn't big enough to fit in the Trustees Room, but then would have to be taken down for the weekend because it was a secret, this was a real problem. And the staff rebelled against doing two presentations. For those who came, the hard core of the five or six committee members who came on Friday, they loved it. It was a more informal discussion. It was much more freewheeling, and they got a chance to think over the weekend about possible acquisitions. So in an ideal world, it was a great way to introduce a subject, get a chance to test the temperature, find out where the objections were, let

people go see shows over the weekend, in an ideal world. In a real world, where you had to borrow the contemporary work you were proposing out of an exhibition that was on at a contemporary gallery, on Monday, that was possible because they were closed. On Friday, it wasn't possible. The logistics were daunting, and people couldn't get their act together soon enough, actually. So we wound up canceling those meetings time and time again just because it didn't work. And I don't know under the new - since I've left, how it's been resolved. But the ideological purpose of the meetings had withered to nothing, since contemporary acquisitions now dominate the full Painting and Sculpture Committee in a way that they didn't at all then.

AH: When you arrived, did you spend a lot of time with the other chief curators in planning the overall exhibition calendar for the Museum? Or were you much more focused on just Painting and Sculpture? Did people work together in the same sort of way. . .?

KV: Well, one of the things I thought ought to happen is that there ought to be coordination at least between works on paper, Prints, and Painting and Sculpture, since we all dealt with the same artists. So I actually instigated a series of meetings in '89, after I came aboard in '88. I started a series of meetings about planning the decade of the '90s, where we got together – and this was unusual and hadn't happened before – with all the people who worked on similar artists. And we asked ourselves the question, "Okay, it's the year 2000. You look back on this decade, which shows should The Museum of Modern Art have done?" And we got all of the anniversaries that were coming up. "Someone's going to do a monograph on artist X. Should it be us? Which shows should we do? Which shows do we have curators who really want to do them?" And it was out of that set of meetings in '89, that we came up with the M-M-M-M-M – Matisse, Mondrian, Miró – sort of contingent, and laid that out in terms of things that we thought we should do because of our collections. And it didn't always work out. We were sort of forced into Mondrian ahead of our time because the Dutch made a deal with the National Gallery in Washington, and we figured the show shouldn't go by without our doing it. So that

one, we didn't inaugurate. But, obviously, Matisse and Miró, we did. And there were other things that came out of that set of meetings in terms of long term planning for the '90s, which were the first attempts I'd ever been aware of to coordinate exhibition planning between at least the departments that concentrated on the same artists. There wasn't any attempt to necessarily coordinate with Photography, or Film, or Architecture and Design, but at least to lay out a program of priorities for the big shows. And that was, I think, very successful.

AH: Do you think people – again, just sort of anecdotally – the other departments feel slighted by Painting and Sculpture and the dominance that it has in the institution?

KV: They certainly did. I think that Bill's personality is sort of "I am Chancellor of Modernism," and he was deeply, deeply concerned for what he wanted to do, and didn't much think about Architecture or Photography. He was focused on the artists he was focused on – Frank Stella, Cézanne, these shows – and that's what he thought his job was, to stay focused on them. And he saw, I think it was his vision that. . . well, it's interesting. If you look at the lecture that Frank Stella gave, the tirade against *MoMA 2000*, I think that you'll, at more than one point in Frank's lecture, hear Bill's voice coming through. And there's a whole section of that lecture as I heard it at the Frick where Frank says that, "Poor Alfred would be spinning in his grave because he had created these ancillary departments, these subsidiary departments, as kind of a nice persiflage around the central event of painting and sculpture. And that it was dominantly a painting and sculpture museum, and all the rest of these things were just supposed to be niceties," this was Frank speaking on the side.

AH: Right, right, right.

KV: I don't think that's too far from Bill's vision. I'm not sure whether that was Alfred's vision. I didn't know Alfred, but that was certainly Bill's vision, that the Museum lived and died on its painting and sculpture collection. And that the core of everything that the exhibition program would be, would be the painting and sculpture exhibitions.

And he had not the slightest self-consciousness or doubt about any of this. And I think he had Dick Oldenburg's ear at the same time, and this was just the unquestioned way it was going to happen. This left a lot of bruised and unhappy people in the other departments and built up a high level of resentment against Painting and Sculpture. In the Freudian sense, we used to call it P&S envy, and there was plenty of that resentment. And that was another thing that I, in part, wanted to try to diffuse because I was so aware of that. As someone who had worked with Bill but had been slightly outside, I could see that in the system. And I had friends like Peter Galassi, who had been my student at Columbia, and I understood from him how it worked in the other departments. So I tried, in some sense, with these meetings with the other departments to be more collaborative or to be more thoughtful about the way it worked in the other departments. I think that since Glenn [Lowry] has come aboard, it has become much more systematic that the playing field be leveled, that the big tower of P&S be brought down, and that decisions be much more consensual amongst the chief curators with Glenn as the final arbiter. So the whole question of how power is distributed or prerogatives are distributed. . . and in the larger world – this isn't just an internal MoMA issue – it's clear that there's a much bigger audience now for photography exhibitions than there ever were before, if you look at the [Andreas] Gursky show, for example. And that people who are interested in contemporary painting and sculpture are very likely to be interested in contemporary photography or contemporary architecture in a way that's different from the past. And there are many more intersections – not only people like Gursky, but Cindy Sherman, and any number of others – that the clienteles, the audiences for these people, overlap in different ways. And the joking thing at one point was that you ought to reorder the committees, the Acquisitions Committee, by very, very expensive art; very expensive art; expensive art; not so expensive art because John Szarkowski used to say that the difference between an art photograph and a photograph photograph was a multiple of ten on the price. So that when it came to Cindy Sherman, for example, or when it came to a lot of these other contemporary photographers, the Photography Department had tradition in the photographs that it had been buying from people, like say Lee Friedlander, of paying a photography market price. And suddenly, you had limited edition, big dye-transfer

or C-prints done by people like Cindy Sherman selling at sub-painting prices. And so the Photography Department was in a bind because if it set the precedent of paying these kinds of prices for these things, then they'd lost faith with their other photographers and they'd changed the whole game in a way that they were never going to be able to compete because their Committee wasn't in the habit of playing that kind of game. So then, the Painting and Sculpture Committee, getting restless that there was no Cindy Sherman would. . . curators in Painting and Photography would propose Cindy Sherman, and this sent John Szarkowski into apoplexy. And you'd have to do these peculiar machinations whereby the Painting and Sculpture Committee would agree to pay for it pending approval by the Photography Committee, at which point, the object would be conserved and kept by the Photography Department because it was a photograph. And then the question of what rights the Painting and Sculpture Department had over it, which had paid for it, proposed it. . . you know, these are real-world issues. They aren't just MoMA internal politics issues. What I'm saying is that it wasn't just the nature of the internal dynamic of the Museum that changed, it was the nature of the dynamic of the market and of creativity amongst contemporary artists that pointed up some of the limitations to the division by media and shifted the hierarchical arrangement around – just in the baldest financial terms – because if you suddenly start paying as much money for a Gursky as you pay for a painter, then suddenly the amount of attention lavished, et cetera. So, it was a very complicated period in the internal dynamics of the Museum, as well as in changing creativity. And the cast of characters changed. When I came aboard, I was the junior boy on the block. John Szarkowski, Riva Castleman, everybody had seniority in their job. But then, when John Elderfield left Drawings, and Riva retired, and suddenly, in the space of six or eight years, only Mary Lea Bandy had more seniority in her job than I did. You know, Peter Galassi came in. Terry Riley came in. The whole scene changed. And I think that the – and I've said this before – I think that the inherited habits of feudalism that had governed the old Museum – kind of systems of rivalries and resentments and fiefdoms and autonomies – underwent a generational shift. And you got a group of people who just liked each other better and who got along better and who didn't have grudges so much about them. In that sense, I think Peter got scarred. . .

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

KV: . . . style than, say Peter was to John's style. And John's style and position came with a built-in 60-pound chip on the shoulder for the status of Photography in that Museum, which became a habit that was hard to shake of thinking about Painting and Sculpture's dominance that way. It has been and probably still is an issue, but I think that certainly, Glenn is determined that the former dominance of that department be whacked way down to size. And I think he has natural allies in the form of the smaller departments who want a bigger share of the pie. For right or for wrong, that's happening, and will happen, and seems bound to keep happening.

AH: Does that concern you?

KV: Intellectually, as someone who used to teach history of photography, and as someone who is really aware of the interest and vital nature of say, architecture and film as fields of inquiry, I think that those are fantastically important parts of the Museum. And I feel that one of the great things the Museum has that other institutions don't have is this incredible sense of the diversity of things that go on in it, that it is the sum total of – and that was Barr's great vision, that architecture and design, that ball-bearings, and films, and illustrated books, and painting and sculpture could all be under one roof – and that's unique to what the Museum's model was and is very important. So in many ways, I think it's very salutary. And I think those fields are incredibly interesting, and I think that having a balance between the way they have time in the sun and develop their audiences is incredibly healthy for the Museum and good. On the other hand, I do think that a large portion of the Museum's audience has been and will be focused on a kind of mainstream painting and sculpture aesthetic, which is increasingly inflected by say, video installation as an outgrowth of sculptural interests. There are many hybridizations where photography, film, architecture all work into the P&S things. But some idea of a

dominant stream of the Painting and Sculpture collection, starting with Cézanne and marching through, has been such an important part of the identity of the institution that I think that if it is given short shrift, and if you try to ignore the fact that big monographic shows of major creators in that field are one of the cores of the Museum's program, you're just flying in the face of reality. If you ignore that, you're not responsive to who your audience is, and it's just not going to be the same. But I don't think it was good and healthy, necessarily, for the Museum to have only one very strong curator who subverted everyone else, or who took all the air out of the room. I don't think that's healthy as a working environment. I think it's much better to have a synthesis of several really powerful minds. I mean, Peter is incredibly bright. He's a fantastic writer. He knows his field incredibly well. It's not a question of ranking from one to ten in levels of importance, since nobody supplies what the other people supply. What's going on in Architecture and Design is not the same thing that's going on in Painting and Sculpture, is not the same thing that's going on in Photography. And it will be to the great health of the Museum if all of these things can develop very lively audiences. And it will also be to the internal harmony and health of the Museum if you have very strong people in all of these departments who feel that they have their chance to have their own visions fulfilled. And it's only necessary, given the nature of contemporary creativity, that those people be able to speak to each other and resolve issues like Bruce Nauman, who works in video, photography, drawing, et cetera. Be able to have the flexibility to contend with the way contemporary art hybridizes, crosses boundaries, et cetera. It's a real delicate negotiation because the Museum has really profited from having separate constituencies, in photography, in video. . . if you had one big acquisitions committee, for example, it would be a mess. You wouldn't have nearly as many supporters if you had. So keeping the separate fiefdoms and keeping specialists, like Peter or Susan Kismaric – people who are focused on that medium and that medium alone – has upped the general level of quality in the Museum, brought more supporters to the Museum, et cetera. At the same time, it risks producing a kind of artificial balkanization, which can't be good for the institution because it's not true to the way artists work. So having people, individuals of good will, in each one of these departments, who are sensitive to and responsive to the other departments, but also

insistent on the prerogatives of their own, will be the only answer in the long run. There's no formula about how many hours of the exhibition schedule ought be devoted to X department. It probably shifts from year to year. I think I worry more about the general erosion of curatorial autonomy, and chief curatorial autonomy, than I do about the specific erosion of P&S's authority.

AH: Do you feel right now we have good people in there, who individually have that in mind?

KV: Well, as I've said, I think Peter, who's a long-time friend, I do feel has a territoriality that he inherited from John that is at times counterproductive. That there's a sense of departmental paranoia in that department that I think hasn't always helped the discussion. Everybody else I think, by in large – I mean, I don't know who the new head of P&S will be – but certainly. . . Debbie [Wye], also – I will say this – Debbie thinks prints, eats prints, sleeps prints, and thinks only prints. Prints are her total being, beginning, ending. She grew up in that culture in Riva's department, and she's only thinking prints at any given moment. Okay, that's fine. It's not that she's hostile, or competitive, or paranoid, or anything, but she just is relentlessly focused on what's in it for Prints and doing the Print job. I think, on the other hand, Terry – certainly Gary Garrels obviously thinks across departments because he didn't come from necessarily a drawings background – and Terry Riley has a fairly broad and supple vision, while he obviously wants to defend architecture and Architecture and Design. Terry has his own problems within his department because he has a split between architecture and design, and he has to figure out how much time he's going to give to design versus architecture, in a way that Painting and Sculpture, I think, doesn't feel conflicted about how much time is given to painting or how much time is given to sculpture. You have to realize that the whole creation of the Drawings Department is a weird anomaly in and of itself, that that's not historically part of the institution, that that was a pure factor of the Lieberman-Rubin problem.

AH: Was that the last department that was formed?

KV: That was created? Well, you could say that Film has been mutated to accommodate video and eventually, to accommodate cyber art. The film department has transmogrified a few times to incorporate different things, but the last creation of a separation department was certainly the creation of the Works on Paper Department, which was a kind of artificial. . . it's such a weird. . . when you get down to what's painted on board versus what's painted on paper, these divisions get extremely artificial. Again, I think it's been helpful. You get very great collectors of drawings, who are specifically drawings collectors, who flourish in the Drawings Committee in a way that they would be slightly lost, perhaps, on the Painting and Sculpture Committee. So that's been very helpful, but it is quasi-artificial because it's almost always the same artists. So that in terms of exhibition planning, acquisitions planning, there's an argument that either those two things have to work very closely together and stay in constant consultation, or odd things are going to happen – stupid inefficiencies and things.

AH: Is there consultation with acquisitions between those two – when you were there – between those two departments? Or between other departments as well?

KV: Fitfully and inefficiently with the Drawings Department, I would say. Fitfully and inefficiently with the Drawings Department, on issues like Cindy Sherman with the Photography Department, but usually on specific points and under pressure. Not in any general sense, not in general vision of what we were trying to do down the road in mapping larger things. Every now and then, for example, in the Ellsworth Kelly instance, Peter and I talked about the fact that he'd like Kelly photographs. We were sort of building a package of things that Kelly owned that we were trying to go after, and things we wanted. And Rob [Storr] and I worked very closely on the paintings that we knew that Kelly owned and made a hierarchy of them. As we approached Kelly with the idea of some overall package, Peter very much wanted to have photographs part of that package. So we did think that over. Ditto when we came to do the Paine Webber gift. All the departments that were involved in that were all consulted, and lists were made about priorities in all those departments before we approached Don with a list that reflected the Museum's interest. So there are

occasions, usually focused on artists or collections, where the different departments will get together. But there also are stupidities that. . . for example – I just blame myself – when Louise Reinhardt Smith's collection came on board, we accessioned a so-called photograph of Rodin's *Hanako* that went with the bust that Louise Smith owned of Hanako. And it was thought to be a Steichen, but it was like a third generation work print or something like that, that Peter spotted once it got in. And we didn't even think about – we hadn't consulted him before. Louise Smith's collection was so important to us for the Picasso paintings and other things, that this seemed the smallest part of it. So that we should have brought Peter into that, and didn't. But in terms of general patterns of collecting, there seems to, at this point, be little collaboration. And certainly not at all with Prints, which just follows its own drummer.

AH: Even with artists that are in the Painting and Sculpture collection?

KV: Well, for example, again, in thinking about what one might as a dream list want to have from Jasper Johns, I thought a lot about that in terms of painting when I was doing the Johns retrospective. And I communicated with Jasper back and forth in letters about the paintings that I would want, but there was no participation of the Drawings Department, and Jasper has a fantastic collection of his own drawings. So that remains to be done and was never coordinated really with the paintings. Those, presumably, Gary Garrels will try to follow up on that. It just so happens that we own every print Johns has made because of other gifts, so it's not an issue. But as far as printmaking purchases on the part of artists in the Painting and Sculpture collection, no. It was often as much a surprise to me as to anybody else what prints by [Robert] Rauschenberg, or [James] Rosenquist, or [Pablo] Picasso the Print Department was acquiring.

AH: So you were never called up for your opinion or suggestions with purchases like this, or acquisitions?

KV: Well, I was called up – again, on the premise of very expensive art, not so expensive

art, et cetera – that when they got to making very expensive purchases like, for example, the [Anselm] Kiefer – they wanted that big Kiefer horse [*Grane*, 1980-1993], which I believe was bought in Riva's honor or something. But anyway, it was a big, major acquisition, and it was money that they weren't used to spending in Prints, and therefore, they came to Painting and Sculpture to try to get some help because an artist like Kiefer, the scale it was, it was the scale of a painting. And it's the kind of thing that you might show in the Painting and Sculpture galleries, and that made sense. So they came to us for help. I must say the Painting and Sculpture Committee, a little of this goes a long way, as far as they were concerned. They didn't like the idea of footing other people's bills, and I had to push this agenda of cooperation with the other departments in a way that my Committee kicked back at me a little bit on this from time to time. Partly because, you were speaking to some of the same people. I mean, Aggie Gund was on Drawings, Prints, and Painting and Sculpture, so she was getting done three times. And there were others who were like that, too, and felt it wasn't fair and that we shouldn't be paying other departments' bills. It was an ongoing issue. It was never resolved.

AH: Would trustees who served on a variety of committees ever play that role of communicating to the other departments what was going on?

KV: Yes, embarrassingly, you would sometimes hear from. . . you would say, "We're really trying to buy this X," and one of the trustees on your committee would say, "Well, do you know that in the Drawings Department they're trying to buy a work by X as well?" And that would be the first you'd heard of it, and you would blush that this was the case. But it did happen, yes.

AH: Do you want to get lunch?

KV: Sure.

AH: Or do you want to keep going?

KV: This is a natural place to stop, don't you think?

AH: Sure. [tape interruption] We're ready to start again. So we'll pick up with *MoMA 2000*.

KV: *MoMA 2000* had a long and one would want to say tortured history in terms of how it started. You know, it started at some point just as in 1989, we said, "Hey, it's 2000, and what have you done for the last decade?" and we started to talk about what we'd do for the '90s, at some point in the '90s, we realized the millennium was coming and that there were bound to be a zillion shows all over the world that would try to do the twentieth century. And we thought they would all try to pick our collection to the bone, that loans would come flooding in, and we wanted to make sure we kept all of our options open first. So we began to think, "Maybe we should block loans for that period so that we can keep our collection together, since it's the greatest representation. And shouldn't we do a show largely based on our own collection?" For a while, we thought about doing mega thematic shows that were loan shows, but then we thought, "Let's spend the time on our own collection that we usually spend on other collections." And it had an organic process. It started before Glenn got aboard. Glenn got interested when he got there.

AH: That's "End of Century?" Was that what it started as, the "End of Century" project?

KV: That may have been the rubric it was generally called at. There was a general concern that something big should happen, and we looked at various proposals for thematic shows. We thought about dividing the century into chronological units. And, after a lot of hammering around, the basic idea was that we would try to have a chronological spine – this was the original idea – in each section that would be probably dominated by painting and sculpture, and that would then have inflected off of it a number of thematic shows that would mix media. And that was about as far as we got in collective bargaining about what should happen. And then, time pressed on, and it had to be put into the hands of specific people. So Glenn made the decisions about which curators were to run which things, with the idea that there

would always be a senior partner and a junior partner. And once those decisions were made, then the complexion of each section really fell to the individual teams of people to do it.

AH: So Glenn selected the three? It wasn't the chief curator selecting the other two people?

KV: No. It was Glenn's, and more or less in consultation. He didn't let the final ax fall until it was clear that everybody was sort of on side for it. But there was a certain logic to why it happened the way that it did, and I think there were a lot of other alternatives. But, he picked each senior person – John [Elderfield], Peter [Galassi], and myself – and then it was up to us to name a junior person to work with us. And each team decided independently what *MoMA 2000* was or would be. What Peter and myself had was the advantage of seeing what John had done, or getting wind of it, at least, before we had to make our final decisions. So each of the sections, in turn, quasi-responded to or corrected to the ones before it. So that this is almost a schizophrenia between John's section and Peter's section in the sense that John went for large synthetic categories, and Peter went for a number of fragmented things. And the final section, the ones that I worked on, tried to strike some happy medium in between. To have fewer shows than section two, but not try for the overall, big thematic categories that section one tried for. And partly, the third section was dependent on the fact that we were simply dealing with bigger works of art, and we wanted more room to show them in, more expansiveness, et cetera. But I think the great mistake about that show was that people from the outside saw it as a programmatic or manifesto statement, and it just wasn't that. It was more like what used to be called a Chinese fire drill – lots of people running around with lots of ideas under distinct time pressures – and it crystallized in three different ways with three different teams of people, none of whom were in complete coordination with each other. And it certainly wasn't planned beforehand to be what it turned out to be in the end. And what it turned out to be in the end was less of any kind of template or manifesto, as a whole, huge, let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom kind of experimentation to see what might happen. I think it was misfortunate that *MoMA 2000* sort of

corresponded chronologically with the opening of the new Tate and their thematic, as opposed to chronological, hang. And everybody got very stirred up about whether the Modern was, in fact, rethinking its collection and not going to show the collection chronologically, and that question was just set completely to one side. It was figured that one would learn some lessons from this stew of shows that might inflect or might apply to the future ways the collections were dealt with, but it wasn't clear which lessons would be the operative ones, and which would be discarded, and which would be adopted. So, there was far too much tea leaf reading, I think, on the part of the public and the critics about this exercise when it was produced. I thought that. . . you know, they always say you can tell the pioneers – they're the ones with the arrows in their back.

I thought that John. . . I thought there were some big sort of mistakes made in the early going. I thought that the large categories that then had to be broken down – people, places, and things – first of all, seemed too generic to me. It was portraiture, landscape, and still life all over again, and I thought the whole point was to do something new. And you had to learn these three categories, and then within them, there were sub-categories, and I think that the public had difficulty. And then, no sooner had they learned that, then they didn't apply to the next section that was coming along, which was Peter's section. So it was a difficult. . . we learned things about how much the public will or won't absorb in the way of new things. John was the first to have to contend with the fact that no matter how experimental you get, there's a machine that still needs a regular structure of openings in the fall, openings in the winter. You can't have all the openings on one night. You can't open all your shows at once. Everything has to be rolled. Once you got into the pragmatic realities, it suddenly became clear that there was a reason that normally the Museum has eighty percent static and twenty percent changing because when you're changing a hundred percent, the logistical demands are enormous. And one curator may fall exhausted on the finish line, but the painters, and the carpenters, and the preparators just have to keep going for an enormous amount of time. And the logistics of conservation, label making, painting turned . . . and John's team was the first to encounter this and had to make it up as they went along, how to contend with

it. And the rough division into three sections had partly to do with the need to open up architecturally three different parts of the Museum at three different times. We learned that the public disliked having their favorite pictures displaced, so that the decision in section two to put up the masterworks not being shown in a display in the International Council, and then to keep it up, it was all ad hoc. This was all learned as we went along. But I thought there were some experiments that worked better than others. I was certainly in the camp with people who did not like the [Rineke] Dijkstra photograph next to the Cézanne *Bather*, which was a source of discontent for many people. I felt that that was a disservice to both of them. I didn't feel that the common denominators merited putting them together. And I thought that they didn't look good together, and that one didn't learn a lot from seeing them together. And I could go through a number of instances like that. Whereas little shows like the Posada/Ensor show I thought was terrific and really interesting, the kind of thing that you wouldn't see normally at the Museum. I, personally, didn't love the big sculpture salon, which I felt was too crowded and too dark, and all that bronze tended to weigh me down. But I think that, on the contrary, what John, since he had the disadvantages of going first, he also had the advantages of going first in that a lot of people were initially thrilled just at the prospect to look at that collection differently, to see the rooms used in a different way, to see spaces broken up differently. There was a thrill of liberation just at breaking down the old constraints, and an enormous amount of press attention paid. And one of the things we learned is that the press's attention has a limitation, too, and that by the time you got to the contemporary section, people were exhausted. They just didn't want to hear any more about *MoMA 2000*. It had gone on too long. They were tired of hearing about it. If section three had opened first, it would have gotten a whole different sort of thing. So, many things were learned month by month, week by week, cycle by cycle in that operation. And individual things were learned about particular curatorial talents that hadn't had a chance to express themselves. Many things were learned about collaboration and avenues of communication that hadn't been there before. Honestly, I think if you cull the whole year for utterly memorable moments of art where you saw great works of art in new contexts, where you had gripping things experienced on the walls that you wouldn't have seen in an ordinary year at the MoMA, I'm not sure that the batting

average is enormously high in the cold, gray light of dawn. The thrill of novelty, the effervescence of many small things happening, what left an enduring impact? I don't know. Rob's "Modern Art despite of Modernism" was considered a real departure on the part of the Museum, and at least it had an argued catalogue to go with it, which made its agenda work in a different way. But they tended to be vest-pocket triumphs – you know, Laura Hoptman's little weird science show, or the anatomy show that Anne Umland did, the Posada/Ensor show [*Ensor/Posada* [MoMA Exh. #1836D, October 6(7), 1999-February 1, 2000]]. There were small moments that were intriguing, interesting, glad to have seen them happen, but would you want an absolutely steady diet of this in the Museum? I think probably what it lacked was the kind of central core of a drop-dead aesthetic experience where you're alone with a great work of art. And one of the troubles with thematic shows is it has to reduce works of art to common denominators to get them together in a room. And while that may stimulate thinking about, it doesn't encourage the uniqueness and complexity of the single work of art that you stand in front of and are challenged by. And I think all of the shows, to some extent, had to be, by nature, guilty of that problem. So that the tradeoff for seeing. . . in the object section that was in part of section one, where you saw still lifes and found objects together, maybe it tweaked your curiosity, but was this the best way to look at a Cézanne still life? Did it do justice to seeing the *Absinthe Glass* by Picasso in a new light? I'm not sure over the long haul about the lasting value of some of those things. I think the more lasting values will probably be internal, and personal, and collegial within the institution, which were particularly terrific. But the catalogues and publications that accompanied the show were by and large produced under duress in ad hoc situations. I don't know what lasting value they'll have to scholars or anything else. Would it have been better to spend those same energies doing a systematic catalogue of part of the Collection or something that would have. . .? I don't know. Hindsight's twenty-twenty.

AH: Well, what about *Open Ends*, in particular? How do you feel about that, and both the exhibitions and the catalogue?

KV: Well, *Open Ends*, I think, took the most radical approach to the publication in that it

was the most different from any kind of publication the Museum has done. And it got into print a different image of the Museum than you see in print any other way because of the contemporary emphasis. Our decision not to play to the Pop, for example, stuff, but to play to the '80s and '90s much more strongly, meant that we gave the public an image of our collection I just don't think they were aware of, and that was valuable to get out. And I think that that book has some value wherever seen in the world because it shows part of the Collection that's not as familiar, and people don't know we've been collecting in those areas. And it also was radically even-handed about the relationship between the departments, so it gave a very different feeling for our pattern of collecting. So it doesn't substitute for other kinds of publications, but I still think it was a valuable idea to do and is visually exciting to look at because it's a scramble-the-cards kind of game to do it. I wish that there had been more time for it to have more intellectual substance than the small sort of bite-size essays that it has, which were just like sort of extended labels. Because a true MoMA publication would have had a more, I think, crunching kind of intellectual thing.

As for the exhibitions themselves, I confess that personally, by the time it got around to it, I looked at all of those thematic shows and saw that they – thematic shows tend to favor figuration because it's easy to read themes – so that things like the "Innocence & Experience" show that Josh Siegel and I did about children, where you were able to integrate photographs with sculpture, we did that all on the basis on images, images of toys, images of children, et cetera. And certainly the protest art show, "The Path of Resistance," that Susan and Josh did was all relentlessly imagistic [*The Path of Resistance* [MoMA Exh. #1878, November 1(5), 2000-January 30, 2001]]. And so, too, a lot of that show tended to bias toward figurative art. Whereas I found that when I did the "Minimalism & After" show, [*Minimalism and After* [MoMA Exh. #1877, November 1(5), 2000-January 30, 2001]] and gave the luxury of giving that huge amount of room to that big, great Twombly painting, or putting those cubes in the thing, I just felt the power of abstract art very, very strongly in those rooms. I felt myself so much more compelled by those installations than I was by a lot of others that I began to realize that the whole premise of the kinds of

shows we'd been doing de-favored a lot of the best art that we had. That the great Pollock, the great Newman, this big Twombly, a lot of this material simply wasn't. . . that the power of that stuff wasn't put to advantage by what we'd been doing. And I came out of it with a healthier interest in and respect for Abstraction, which is part of what's driving my decision to do the Mellon lectures on Abstraction. So I guess I wearied a little bit of thematic shows by the time all of this was over, and I also regretted that *MoMA 2000* – that *Open Ends*, particularly – was as crowded as it was. With works like the Cai Guo-Qiang boat and the Barnett Newman obelisk, it's great to have them both up, but you want more acreage between them than they had. There were sort of things one on top of each other. And there were some ideas, like "Pop & After," that you just don't have the space to develop in a gallery. Any version of it is going to be snippets and bits, and that's what it tended to feel like, was snippets and bits. So that shows, on the one hand, crowded each other out, didn't have enough space to do themselves justice. So many things about that whole enterprise seemed to me, in one sense or another, compromised – compromised by a lack of space, compromised by a lack of time, compromised by what we did and didn't have in the collections so that the idea couldn't be fully realized, et cetera. And I wonder what other kind of statement it would have made, for example, to say, "We're going to spend the whole year, empty out the Museum, and decide we're going to pick three hundred of the greatest works of art we have, and show a hundred at a time in three segments." Would that have made a different statement about what our set of values are as an institution? And do extensive educational cataloguing and research on each one of those works of art. The advantage and disadvantage of the kinds of shows in *MoMA 2000* is it can tend to elevate trivial things because they're pulled up into the soup along with great things, but the danger is that it levels the issue, too, and it tends to not ask for demanding decisions about what the most powerful and most compelling things are. Whereas in fact, the whole purpose of the Collection all along has certainly been to try to collect what were the most powerful and most compelling things, and the great quality of that Museum as opposed to other museums is it owns so many things which are regarded to be the most compelling and telling of their kind. Maybe it would have made a different statement to have isolated <u>that</u> and played to <u>that</u> rather than this

whole. . . you can't have everything at once, but by the end, I think the public was tired of it, and I was a little weary of it by the time it got done.

AH: Do you think it was a worthwhile endeavor?

KV: It was certainly worth trying. I think, in retrospect, I wouldn't have done as much of it. I would have constrained it more. I think it was exhausting for the institution.

AH: Was it eighteen months?

KV: To go through the whole thing, and I think that I would have shortened and compressed the time period if I had it to do over again. That said, it showed a certain amount of courage on the part of the Museum. It showed that we were willing to try something else, if only to prove to ourselves we didn't like it as much as we liked the other thing. I mean, somebody said about the Taniguchi – about the whole process of finding an architect – is the Museum went through a relentless period of self-examination and finally decided it liked itself the way it was. And that's fine as long as it's. . . so, if we wanted to go through a lot of exercises to try a lot of new things and then sift out what we did and didn't like, that was a noble enterprise to have gone through. If you asked me whether the results – aesthetically, intellectually, as art experiences – justified all that labor, then I'm not sure the equation is. . . whether the principle justified it? Yes. And whether it was a good thing to do? Yes. Whether the net result was the best and most sufficient result of all the labor that was put into it? In hindsight, everybody has things they'd change, I think.

AH: Could you comment just a bit about what came with a design curator and a film curator on this?

KV: Well, it's hard to comment on collaborating with the categories. . .

AH: . . . with the people?

KV: . . . because if it had been a different film curator and it had been a different design curator, it might have been a lot less fun. In fact, both these people were serious workers and bright people and had no personal baggage that got in the way, I don't think. I think it was a remarkable experience to work with them because everybody had a nose for the common good. Nobody tried to get turf oriented in too big a fashion. Everybody had a good sense of humor, which was utterly essential. And I think everybody threw their shoulders at it, and I don't think we ever arrived at a point where we were in fundamental bitching, screaming, slugging disagreement, nor even in snarky, insidious disagreement, which is a compliment to everyone involved, it seems to me, and to the way the process worked. And I had a good time working with all those people.

AH: Did you want to talk a little bit about Muse?

KV: Muse, the now defunct Muse. Of all the experiences of my final years at the Museum, the one that most exasperated me, I think, in many ways, and most brought to a pointed head many of my concerns for what the Museum might become, would have to be the for-profit Web site. I just was appalled – and that's the word – at some of the things that I thought were happening in that enterprise. Start with the basic premise of having Trustees fund a venture that's trying to use the Museum's name to establish something in the for-profit world, this seemed to me to produce. . . I mean, this just didn't seem to me to be right as a premise, that it muddied all sorts of lines that I didn't think should be muddied. And I never understood in the great mania of the dot-com days, how this thing was going to make money. I didn't understand how we were going to necessarily. . . either we were going to sell things we usually gave away, like information and stuff, and then it wasn't clear that there was a buying audience for that information, that the demand for our old Léger catalogues was going to fuel anything. So then when we met with the group that was supposed to launch this Web site for us, it became clear that what they wanted to sell was things like travel packages, lists of the ten best exhibitions in Europe, and all this sort of stuff. They had one of these crucial meetings where after long

laboring. . .

AH: . . . who would be coming up with the travel arrangements? Would it be MoMA staff doing travel arrangements? MoMA staff doing. . . ?

KV: Yes, this is exactly what bothered me, one of the many things that bothered me. The fundamental issue was the closer they drew this Web site into the Museum and used the Museum's identity as a selling tool, then the more imperative it seemed that you apply Museum standards to what was on that Web site. The further it got away from the Museum, the more you didn't have to apply those standards, but the less they were able to use the Museum's identity, which seemed to be the strong selling point. The crucial phrase was, "Leveraging our brand identity." And what they were selling – and this was their phrase — was they were selling our "criticality." Criticality means we make judgments about what's better and worse, and we'd been doing that for a long time at great, grinding dissension and pain about what we will and won't collect, what we will and won't show, et cetera. But as I understood it, there were two possibilities. Either you were going to have a quasi-independent staff that was going to be deciding which were the ten best exhibitions in Europe and writing up copy about them, or you were going to depend on MoMA staff to do it, which raised double specters. Either MoMA's name is being used by people who don't have the set of standards that traditionally defined MoMA staff participation, or on the other hand, you're sucking MoMA time away from the Museum itself into working for Muse. And brutally, there would have to be two different pay scales because the dot-com world pays a lot different. So if the young curator who can't get a show on the schedule at the Museum is given a choice between grinding away on collection notes or doing gallery inspections or whatever else they're supposed to be doing, or writing something up on the ten best exhibitions for Muse and getting paid twice as much, or trying to organize online tours for Muse, then you get a huge tension about where the attention of anybody on the MoMA staff is going to. . .and I never saw this being resolved. And after weeks and weeks of this, when they had this sort of announcement. . . I went to the early meetings of this thing. They went on forever, those early meetings. They were all pumping us for information. The guys from. . .

AH: . . . now, were you at any of the meetings when the whole idea was being discussed?

KV: Yes. Yes. Yes, and lots of reservations were announced, but it seemed like everybody was doing it and if we didn't at least try, we were going to get left behind. That we had to make a fair crack at it because somebody else was going to claim the territory. So they hired this launch firm or whatever – Cyan – and these guys came in and they knew from nothing about the Museum. So they sat down vast tables of the Museum staff – me, Mary Lea Bandy, Debbie Wye, all sorts of people from the Museum staff – to pump information for them, hour after hour of meetings. And I got fed up with these things. They were consuming enormous parts of my day. They were not for the Museum. And I was obstreperous and asked nasty questions, and they stopped asking me to these meetings after a while. So, weeks and months went by, and then I was asked back to another meeting where the fruit of all of this was going to be presented. And I remember vividly that one of the crucial questions was, "What's the niche that this Muse site is supposed to fulfill? It's important to find an unfulfilled niche on the Web." And the niche was defined as "lifestyle curator." And I virtually vomited in the room. A "lifestyle curator?" I mean, does this suggest which Newman reproduction goes with your sofa fabric? And this is not what I signed on to the Museum to do, and the idea that The Museum of Modern Art was going to get involved in this kind of thing, drove me to distraction.

AH: I've never heard the term "lifestyle curator."

KV: And going back to your basic question, either MoMA staff is working for this thing, which means it's not working for the Museum, in the basic sense, and you can't make for-profit values and non-profit values work together. One of the things I found most distressing is that these young hotshots had a lot of rhetoric about "thinking outside the box," which was all essentially [phone rings; tape interruption]. I never understood how for-profit values and not-for-profit values were supposed to be reconciled in this enterprise. And the fundamental questions that were there at the

outset, “How close is this going to be to the Modern? How far away is it going to be from the Modern?” just kept getting postponed. The whole train went ahead. Vast amounts of Museum time were consumed by this. James Gara was practically doing nothing but running this enterprise, as far as I could tell, for a long, long time. The number of personnel hours Mary Lea Bandy and Debbie Wye spent in meetings with these people. The commitment of the institution to doing this. . . of course, you have to remember, that it looked like the world was turning upside down. I remember being at one of these Cyan meetings to launch this the morning that AOL and Time Warner merged, and it looked like the minnow was swallowing the whale. And you couldn’t – the phrase of Karl Marx, “All that is solid melts into air.” – it looked like everything that was substantive was being dissolved into speculation. So that companies that were losing zillions of dollars were seeing their prices shoot up. All forms of standard logic seemed to have been suspended. Well, as we learned, they, in fact, hadn’t been suspended, and the whole thing came to a crunching halt after a while. But there was a kind of mesmerized euphoria about the word “dot-com” and the sense of the possibilities of the Web that had a kind of tulip mania feeling to it, and everybody was swept up in it. So, you kept saying, “But these fundamental questions haven’t been answered. How are you going to make money on this? What relationship is it going to have to. . .?”

AH: . . . and what were the responses to that, both from. . .?

KV: . . . it was the Oklahoma land rush. “We’ve got to get our flag planted on this turf first. We’ll figure out everything else later. The crucial thing is who gets to the ground first, who gets this claim on this mine or this niche on the Web, and we’ll figure out the rest of it later.” And I was never clear whether this was an enterprise that was truly supposed to make money for the Museum down the line – steadily for years, we’d have steady income from this – or whether we were developing something that we were going to spin off, go public, whatever, sell to somebody else. I’m not sure who knew the answer to that, whether an answer was known, but I could never get a clear answer to that. The basic rhetoric was that this was supposed to be an “endless cash source” for the Museum, but I could never figure out how it was

to be so and what money it was supposed to make. And the answer that we were supposed to sell what we'd formerly been giving away, like educational information, didn't seem to me to be satisfactory on two counts. A, I wasn't sure there was a big market for it. B, I thought it was in the nature of our institution to provide that to our public as part of our mission. So all of this seemed to have the capacity to deform the institution terribly, to set up a sign of shadow MoMA with shadow curators and shadow people making decisions, and scales of payment that deformed the standard sense of what went on within the institution. And the more I heard of it, the less I liked it, so I weep no tears over its demise because I don't think. . . to me, it's not like a great and promising thing that went sour. I just don't think it ever had been. . . the fundamental questions I had about it and its relationship to the identity of the institution seemed to me never to have been answered anywhere in the game, and they were just all constantly put aside in the rush to go ahead and do the damn thing just for the sake of doing it.

AH: But did people recognize that – fine, they wanted to get this landed as soon as possible – but were they sensitive to the issues you were raising, that those would be addressed later? Or did they sort of disregard them from the very beginning?

KV: It was recognized that one of the crucial questions, certainly. . . yes, the two crucial questions, "What are you going to sell?" and the question of, "How close will this be involved with MoMA's identity?" were acknowledged early on to be major questions. It's just that the fact that they were not answered didn't seem to trouble people as they went on down the line, that they were constantly deferred in doing other things. And, you know, there were some things – like licensing agreements, for the Museum to license out the production of MoMA widgets or something like that – which were essentially retailing issues that could have been done without the Web, and they wound up being sort of lynch pins of the operation rather than anything innovative. I only presume that the Tate must have come to these conclusions slightly earlier. . .

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

KV: As far as Muse goes, I was saying that the rhetoric that these kids used, the Cyan kids used, was all avant-garde rhetoric, was all about "defying convention," "thinking outside the box," "doing the extreme thing," et cetera. And I had this bizarre feeling of flip flop because this is the rhetoric that used to be against the bourgeoisie, for the creation of a new society, et cetera, but the only thing that mattered to these guys was quantity – quantity, quantity, quantity. Quality was only a way to get at quantity. The number of hits on the Web site, the number of people who visited, the numbers, the dollars, it was all quantifiable and quantifiable was the only measure of good. This was the vision of not just Cyan and not just Muse, but a whole new constellation of values which I felt was so specific to the post-1989 world, where the market was conceived to be a morality, where the idea that more was better, and if you didn't want a bigger audience, you were doing something immoral. And so the whole rhetoric of not only the avant-garde, but the whole liberal left – "diversification," "empowerment," "outreach" – all of this had gotten folded into marketing more clicks on the hit, more turnstile turns, more sales in the bookstore. Who doesn't want more? "You don't want more catalogues to sell?" they would say to you. "You're a curator. Don't you want your word to get out?" More, more, more, more, more. And so the quantification of quality, and the confluence between marketing and morals, it's a broader endemic disease. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the feeling that capitalism and democracy are the same thing, that they are necessarily interwoven, and that the proof of what's good is what the greatest number of people. . . and you know, the Museum has never been about that. We could certainly increase attendance by – I don't know what – selling hot dogs in the lobby. There are any number of things you could do. . .

AH: . . . more Monet shows. . .

KV: . . . yes, endlessly. Yes, exactly. There have been many things we could do that would get more people into the Museum than what we do, but we didn't want to do them. And that seemed to have been lost in this shuffle. The idea was more was

better, the market was moral, and those were the implicit assumptions of this thing. So that you weren't just fighting the illogic, the irrationality of it, the fact that you didn't have a clear plan for making money, that you couldn't solve these hard-headed questions was lost in the smoke and mirrors of this rhetoric of "do good" and the rhetoric of "improvement" and "outreach" and all that sort of stuff. It was very sinister, I thought, and very unsettling.

AH: Where was most of the support coming from? Was it coming from the staff or from the trustees who were really pushing this along, or from the Director. . .?

KV: Well, there was an invisible group of trustees, who had actually banked roll hiring Cyan and stuff, and I'm not sure who they were. I could name some of them. But their faces were never in evidence, nor were we ever privy, except by rumor and gossip, to the debates within the Board of Trustees amongst those on the Board who didn't believe in this as an endeavor. And there were people who didn't, as I later found out. There was controversy within the Board as to whether this was a good thing to go ahead and try to do. There was no doubt that Glenn believed in it a hundred percent and that Gara was just about the same, in step with him. And it didn't take more than that to truly drive the issue. Many of the curators were. . . there were some who were more committed to it. There were others who were just going to do it because it was a Museum activity that was said to be good to do, and they were going to follow along. And then there were grumblers and dissenters, of which I suppose I was the major one.

AH: Who were the other grumblers?

KV: Jim Coddington, I know, really had a lot of – because he and I were playing squash together at this time – had a lot of doubts about this as an enterprise, I think. Peter Galassi, I think, bought into the school of thought that nobody knows where this could go, but the Museum had to try it or else it was risking getting left in the dark, which was a defensible position. And I can't tell who else. . . John Elderfield, I think, had a healthy skepticism about it as well. And Terry did. Terry certainly had a

healthy skepticism. But design objects would have been one of the strengths of Muse, that they would have sold lots of chairs and furniture.

AH: Which is what we do anyway.

KV: Yes, we already did that. We were already in the retail business in that regard.

AH: I guess keeping along this line a little bit, could you comment on how – and you did to a certain extent in your previous interview – how Glenn has shaped the institution, aside from the obvious restructuring of staff and all of that, and where you think he's leading the institution?

KV: Well, it's hard to sort out what has come as a result of the building program. Building programs have their own way of shaping things. They create power structures, streamline things, make some things strong and other things weak in a way that is almost independent of the people doing it. And Glenn came in with a sort of mandate to build, so part of it has to be judged in that context. I will say that I think he made some really terrific appointments in areas where traditionally we hadn't been strong, and he found some great individuals. Development had always been a weak sister as long as I had been there. It never had been very strong. I think [Michael] Margitich did an amazing job, a really amazing job, and he's somebody I really, really liked working with. Publications had long been a sick child – rotating directorships under Dick Oldenburg, never anybody that lasted. Michael Maegraith is a fabulous professional, really, really terrific, and I really liked working with him. [James] Gundell, who left – there's a natural antipathy, I think between curatorial and retail – but I thought that Gundell was a pro and worked well as a team.

So a lot of the appointments Glenn made at professional levels were more professional and better skilled than the Museum had had, and it raised the whole level of the endeavor. And I think, similarly, he took people who had been oppressed within the institution, [James] Gara being a major one of them, and gave him the scope and power that he needed given his importance to the institution. Gara had

always been a major asset, but never had the recognition, never had the profile that he got from Glenn, and I think he would have left. And so, that's terrific, and many people. . . I think that Glenn also rationalized a lot of procedures that probably needed rationalizing. Promotion structures, the way that people are promoted, particularly as you gain higher rank in the curatorial side, you need broader institutional review so that it stops being within the power of one personality to just bring along their acolytes. If you're going to be a full curator at The Museum of Modern Art, then the institution has an investment in it, and there are a set of criteria. And senior curator, ditto. And there were a lot of things like that – the way Publications worked, the publications review process, so that someone got to say this is a crazy project. One person couldn't run off. The price you pay, of course, is that the bureaucracy increases. More things are done by meetings, and I personally found that I was just getting plagued by meetings. And the way Glenn ran the thing, there were more meetings than there ever had been of everything I was a part of – the chief curators, the curatorial staff, et cetera. And I came to feel, at the beginning, that that promoted a lot of dialogue, but at the end, I began to feel that it sapped away a lot of stuff, too. The amount of time you spent in meetings in terms of decisions really getting made, what it allowed people was to wear themselves down talking, and then the decisions were made somehow outside the room anyway. So that large amounts of time were spent arriving at consensuses that in the long run didn't mean anything. And empty, empty hours were spent, and I didn't like this. I felt – I know that Glenn resists the word "corporate" – but I thought there was a greater corporate mentality. Putting things under all this proliferation of deputy directors – the old slang in the first couple of years of the "OPDD's," the "Over Paid Deputy Directors" – more and more deputy directors, more and more. . . and I think one of the things that it had as a result, like a corporate structure in America today, is that it leveled the playing field for everybody but the director. The director's position became much more powerful vis-a-vis say, the individual chief curators, than it ever had under Dick, much more the center of authority. And the worrisome part of it is that position increasingly becomes a center of authority about acquisitions, exhibitions, not in any overt and structural way, but particularly it can wander over in that direction. And I think the Museum has profited enormously from having very

strong chief curators and from letting those chief curators run their fields. And I think to the extent that that's been undermined, I'm not sure I find that a happy direction to go in. So, that there's a price that's been paid. On the one hand, there's a strong professionalization of areas that weren't professional any more, and the Museum was too big an operation to leave things running in the hands of amateurs, in a certain sense. But in all the listings. . . I remember having a vast meeting and talking about budgeting, and the one thing that was never on the budget was time for curators to think. The whole idea of creativity within the curatorial staff, which can't be quantified and which isn't egalitarian, was not allowed for, just not budgeted in anybody's time, and everybody's time increasingly tends to be budgeted.

In the age of e-mail. . . it used to be that – and this is not a complaint against Glenn; this is just the way things are in the age of e-mail – I used to, my secretary sorted all my mail and my phone calls so that I was protected. Now, I'm inundated with stuff which is expected to be answered all the time – not now, but when I was in the job – I was inundated with stuff that was expected to be answered all the time. And I found myself leaving to go home every day with the feeling that I had accomplished less and less and less, and that the only time I could get anything done was on either weekends, late nights, or over vacations. That all the crucial things about writing, thinking, planning, all of these things I don't think are done very well in group meetings. I think they're done in solitary hours by people who really have the expertise and knowledge and want to do it, and then brought to meetings. And I think that the meetings flourished, but the down time and the other stuff tended increasingly not to be allowed for in the game.

AH: Do you think that. . . there's some ideas that we're in this period that we're in right now because of the building project and after the building is built, things will sort of change back again, allowing things like, there's been a question about time for scholarship and research. Do you feel like it will change back? Or do you think under the leadership of the current Board and Glenn that it will increase with this pace?

KV: I don't think it goes back. I think things given up are rarely recouped, that they're taken away for good. And unless there's a change of either leadership or strongly a change of philosophy, and an active attempt is made to regain those values, they're not going to come back naturally. The train is just speeding too strong in one direction, and somebody would have to turn the switch and put it on another track, and I'm not sure when that's going to happen or who that would be.

AH: Can you comment a bit about our partnership or merger with PS1?

KV: I think that was probably a terrific thing to do. I was all for it when it was done. It's interesting, the arc of the two institutions. Here's PS1, a counter cultural institution to the '70s, a typical creation of the post-'68 world where you try to quasi-institutionalize a set of counter cultural or anti-institutional values – an anti-institution institution – to provide a framework for experimental activities. Those kinds of things work best with a very small group of people who are believers, and Alanna [Heiss], that's her baby. She created it. But they can die with that same group of people. It's very difficult to hand off such a thing. It's such a personal. . . those institutions tend to have a very short half-life. Very few of them endure because to endure, an institution has to take on the kind of barnacles of bureaucracy and stability that are antithetical to its nature. And PS1 would probably have crumpled. Alanna was getting ready to let it go. She was. . . and the Modern, on the other hand, reaching a certain venerable age, risks getting muscle-bound by its power, risks getting too sclerotic, losing its earlier contact with the experimental, et cetera, and losing touch with a certain audience. And so, a loose association between the two is great for the city of New York and probably great for both institutions, that it gives PS1 the stability, the basis to keep going into the future. It lets the Modern be associated with a much younger audience and a much more experimental outpost, do something it has done before. All of the principles I thought were the right principles and the right things for the two institutions to do at the time, and a net gain probably for the city of New York. That said, there are plenty of pitfalls, which had to do with the money that had to poured into it, starting with the structure of PS1, and the end commensurability between a place that doesn't have climate control, doesn't have security, a place that's

rigorously based on those sort of issues through the scholarship – our standards of writing a catalogue, our standards of selection versus their standards of selection. As long as the two are kept at a reasonable arm's length from each other on those issues, I think the thing can continue to work. If, God forbid, PS1 should become colonized, as a kind of junior version of the Modern and get too sanitized and too cleaned up, it would lose, and I think that the Modern would lose in the long run. Similarly, if the Modern were to adopt PS1's standards as part of its program, I think the Modern would be losing something. It's a tricky issue. They both have to keep their identities, but in a loose yoking, I think they both do each other a lot of good.

AH: Could you also talk about – you've mentioned Jerry a couple of times in Exhibition Design – but other departments that you feel, the more behind-the-scenes departments from the major curatorial areas, that you feel are critical in shaping the institution? MoMA, not any institution.

KV: Well, let's start with a negative example, in some sense, which I feel is that the whole unresolved issue of Education, which you must know very well. I mean, for as long as I've been there, it's never been finally worked out how Education gets to be a standard player at the table because I think that the curators think of themselves as educators, premium has been put on curators' writing, and Education has always been deemed to be for school kids. And the larger issue of an integration between the curatorial effort and the Education Department awaits the person at the head of Education who can do it. And so far, there just hasn't been one, and that seems to me one of the unresolved issues.

I mentioned that I thought Publications had improved enormously, and their. . . the people who, the quality of how the Museum is perceived in the outside world depends on people like Marc Sapir, who does a fabulous job in production control, and there has always been somebody good in that job as long as I've been there. The standards of The Museum of Modern Art in terms of color correction, printing, these sorts of things, we've always had higher standards than other people. We've worked harder at it. We send people on press who are more demanding. We do

more color proof corrections. Few in the outside world understand how that happens. They just see as the result that it happens. And I know that in editing functions, in word and line editing, in assisting on caption efforts, the work of zillions of curatorial assistants, editors, that what goes into our publications is something a lot of people take for granted. But I think both the text part of it and the pictures part of it have always been the province of very dedicated individuals at that Museum. Jerry is a totally exceptional person, and he makes sure he has a staff of exceptionally good painters, dry wall people. Most people don't think about spackle, or how it gets done, or how fast you can put up a temporary wall, or how you can build a vitrine, but Jerry has it down to a science. And he gets work out of those people that's A: at a very high standard, B: done with an efficiency and speed that you can't match any place else, and it seems invisible. People don't notice it, but it's very, very, very important.

Conservation, I think is terrific, by and large. I think Jim [Coddington] is a wonderful conservator to work with. It takes someone who's a flexible perfectionist, in a certain sense, someone who has really, really high standards, but knows where the line can move, how to respond to the demands of when the curator has to have the picture, how to do things in advance, how to be reasonable about loan decisions, understand institutional imperatives, protect. And Jim seems to me to be a model both of skill and knowledge, but also of common sense about those issues. And I think that we've been very well served in that department.

You know, I've lost touch with the people that work the desk in Visitor Services, but obviously, that's extremely important for the way the Museum works. Hidden power behind everything, of course, is Ethel Shein. The way the parties work, extremely important. We take it for granted that the food shows up, that the catering comes in, that all those tables work, that the flowers are right. That has to be done, and it's always done well. The place always has an element of class about it in its operations, and that tracks back to Special Events and those departments. When you do an exhibition, you're involved with all these things. You have a publication. You have a thing that has to get up on the walls. You have conservation issues.

That's one of the great things about being at a museum, is collaborating with real professionals, and I have very, very few gripes about the Modern. I think that's one of the great things about it as an institution, is that precisely on those invisible levels and thanks primarily to the personalities of the key people in charge of those departments, it maintains extraordinarily high standards. It's just taken for granted that we do it better then other people. Just taken for granted that we take longer, that we take more care, that we don't care what other people's standards are. Our standards are these whether it's in preparator, whether it's in labels, whether it's in publications, whether it's in conservation, et cetera. That was one of the things I really liked about working at the Museum. It gave me pride to be in an organization where so many people independently and in their own departments said, "I don't care what anybody else is doing, my department is going to run well on this level." That collective spirit. . . I mean, I think a lot of people think The Museum of Modern Art is bitchy and arrogant and demands. . . you know, is hootsy-tootsy, but it's true. We do do things better than other people do in all these areas. We take more care and are more exacting, and the product is better as a result, I think.

AH: Aside from the Education Department, do you see any other departments that were concerning you?

KV: [pause] I think that we went through a lot of change in the Communications Department in the time that I was there, and I was never fully satisfied that we had a long-term solution to the proper relationship between Marketing and Communications, between what we do for advertisements, how we treat the press. I think that ever since the new structure came in, we essentially have a Marketing/Communications person at the top, and your press person is underneath it. It's been hard to find a press person of the highest caliber who would settle for that. On the other hand, if you try to combine and find a press person and a marketing person, the tendency is to go for somebody who is in marketing more than press. So there's something slightly ajar about that structure, and I would be happier to have a really crisp professional at the press end of it – somebody who can edit a press release really well, who represents the institution well to the press, who knows

who to take to lunch, who recognizes all the faces in the crowd, who has the right personality to know how to manage different journalists – that's been a long time since we had that kind of smoothness and savoir faire at the press level, all the way across the board. And that seems to me still unresolved.

AH: It seems like areas that normally have come into a bit of conflict with curatorial areas – like Marketing, Retail, and Development – appear to work quite well at MoMA with the curatorial staff. Do you feel that to be the case? Have you ever felt that there was that sort of ongoing conflict between the two areas?

KV: Well, certainly not in Retail under Gundell and not in Development under Margitich. There have been communication issues about advertising, what was the kind of advertising we wanted to do. And there was dissension even within chief curators' ranks. "Pull quotes", a lot of people thought that using pull quotes in ads was condescending to the level of movie things. And then if you didn't have one to use, it seemed odd, and that getting into that was letting the public determine what our standard of what quality was as opposed to. . . so there was some argument about whether we should use pull quotes. And then the nature of what should be advertised, what should be selected as the icon to represent an exhibition, and how the exhibition should be. . . I mean, the classic one was apparently the ad that landed across John Elderfield's desk in relation to *Bonnard*, which showed the endless, beautiful series of Bonnard's wife in the tub, that was the crucial thing. [*Bonnard* [MoMA Exh. #1808, June 17(21)-October 13, 1998]] As the exhibition was nearing its end, the sort of last days, an ad landed on John Elderfield's desk for approval with one of these tub pictures that said, "See it before we pull the plug." And that kind of issue of taste and how the Museum is represented, I still think there was room for plenty of conflict between Marketing and curatorial in that regard.

AH: I think they sold soap, though, in the Design Store during that exhibition.

KV: They may have. I mean, I ran into problems. They once were doing a Jasper Johns jigsaw puzzle, which they hadn't consulted me on as Chief Curator of Painting. And

it was just around the time of the Johns exhibition, and it didn't do me any good with Jasper. And we had to cancel all of them, and it was a big scandal. That was way back, under Dick Oldenburg and Louise Chinn. I tend to think that there hasn't been that kind of conflict since. Gundell and I worked on issues of retail. For example, we did a Pollock scarf in the long run. I didn't necessarily love the idea, but he went with my idea that we should only do a black and white, and that we should only do it full image as opposed to cropping, and so on and so forth. So it wound up being something I could live with. We both gave a little in the deal, and the thing worked. Whereas, we came up with ideas like the Pollock jazz album, which I thought was a terrific idea, which they loved. So, it was all in all not a tension-filled relationship, but I do think there's a natural tension if you get the wrong person, especially in Marketing, who doesn't have a sensitivity to the Museum's identity.

AH: It seems like the Museum, so far, hasn't really put up with that. So I always feel this comfort that if someone were to come in at that position, they'd be quickly spotted and sort of ushered out.

KV: Probably not hired, I would think. You'd probably have a filter or a sense for it going in.

AH: Umm. . . [tape interruption]

KV: Well, one of the things that was required – it was more traditional in Painting and Sculpture than in any other department, I think, though they had probably done it in Drawings, too – was essentially, it would be an art dealer. Because one of the ways that we made some of our most powerful acquisitions, and it always has been the case, was by selling works out of the Collection. Bill did a lot of it. Barr did a lot of it. And I did, too, because especially with early modern works of art, where the prices were inordinately high, you wanted to keep your power drive for contemporary purchases, and so you refined the earlier part of the Collection by selling parts. So one of the first things that I did when I got there was to sell seven pictures to buy the Van Gogh *Postman*, and that was a real learning process. And we had to go around

to the donors. We sold a Mondrian that the [Celeste and Armand] Bartos's had given us. We sold lots of important pictures. What we tried to do was we went around where there was depth, where we had lots of things in that area, or we knew – we sold a Kandinsky landscape, for example, because we knew that Dick Zeisler was giving us one from the same period that was just about as good. We looked down the road and tried to find things where we had depth and we didn't need. . . and that was a constant effort. And the way you did it was you, just in order to protect yourself, both auction houses I always called in to give me an estimate of what they thought it was worth. And then I would take two or three dealers who I thought made the market in the artist I was planning to de-accession and try to get them to give me bids in what they. . . usually, I would consign, and they would sell it for X price and take a percentage. Rarely did I actually sell a work to a dealer and let them do it. In the Van Gogh case, we swapped some paintings to Thomas Ammann and Ernest Beyeler, who jointly represented the Van Gogh picture, and they then were able to sell it. It was counted so many million dollars against the deal, and then they were able to sell it for whatever they were able to sell it for. And actually, they wound up taking a bath on. . . we sold the little Renoir that had been hanging around the Museum for a long time, and when we figured it in the swap with them, it was the height of the Japanese boom. And shortly thereafter, that market failed, and it became much tougher to sell a late Renoir after that. So that, I'm happy with the de-accessioning I did, and I think by and large, if it was all put on paper, I would still agree with the trades in terms of the quality of the Collection. But I think even financially, if you sold those seven pictures again today, you wouldn't come near the value of the Van Gogh today, that we did the right thing. We almost never sell pictures just for money. We always sell to replace another picture. So the trustees are always given the choice, "Let go of this, and you can have that." So they know what they're giving up, and they know what they're getting in return, which I believe in. I think that's a great policy.

The one exception to that case during my tenure was the [George] Bellows painting that we got from the John Hay Whitney bequest. When Mrs. Whitney died, we finally received the list of pictures that John Hay Whitney, her former husband, had

designated for the Museum, and everyone was a little bit in the dark as to what would finally happen. We knew what John Hay Whitney's wishes were, but he had left the pictures to his wife to enforce these wishes, so we weren't quite sure. And we got many of the great things that we wanted. The early Picasso self-portrait is a fantastic picture. The Cézanne *Turning Road at a Stock* [*Turning Road at Montgeroult*, 1898] We got wonderful pictures. But down the list of pictures that we got, we also got a big George Bellows polo scene, and we'd never owned a Bellows, as far as I can remember. We never showed Bellows. It was American, sort of Early American art of the twentieth century, not really modernist in any sense that the Museum defined, and. . .

AH: . . . we don't have polo art.

KV: Well, we don't have many polo players, either, it's true. So, this was when. . . there were other things from the Whitney collection being sold at auction. And the Whitney sale did very, very well, and since we didn't have any use for this Bellows, we thought, "Well, we should just sell it and endow a fund for acquisitions, not for any particular. . . just sell it and endow a fund for acquisitions." So we went to the auction houses and said, "What can we get for this picture?" And they said, "Well, you know, the record for a Bellows is 2.8 or 3 or something like that, but we think we can probably do better than 4 on this picture. It's a really terrific subject. It crosses over on sporting lines. And we think we can go up on this picture, 4 or 5." "Oooh," that sounded really interesting. We were really interested. So we got the two auction houses talking, and then they said, "Well, the Whitney imprimatur is really something. Maybe this is a picture at 7 or 8." And we go, "Oooh, that's great." And then they said, "Well, you know the world record price for <u>any</u> early twentieth-century American painting is a John Singer Sargent at 11, and we think maybe this is in that category, that we can go 11." So, it got. . . finally, we decided we would go with Sotheby's. Everybody made propositions to do separate catalogues, the picture would be taken to Dubai and shown at the Dubai races, and so on and so forth. We decided to go with Sotheby's because they had sold the rest of the Whitney estate, and we thought they were the Whitney people, and they could make it work, and they

were very enthusiastic. So, they said, “Okay. We’re going to estimate the picture at 10 to 15.” We said, “Great. We’re really happy.” And they said, “But we think there are a few collectors who are really possible for this picture, and we know who they are. We’re not going to burn the picture, but we’re going to offer it to one or two collectors at 16 during the summer, very privately, and if they bite, you’ve gotten over your high estimate. Everybody’s happy. If they don’t, we’ll go to auction.”

So they offered it to one or two key collectors of American painting at 16, and these guys all flinched. They said, “That’s way over the record price for any American painting of this period, and I’m not willing to take that chance. I’ll show up on auction day and take my chances.” And Sotheby’s was right. These same guys came back to auction again. And the auction went off when I was in London with the Matisse-Picasso team at the Tate, and they called me out of a curatorial meeting and put me on the phone to the auction room at Sotheby’s. And I had a guy on the phone, who was holding up the phone, listening to Dede Brooks send the bids up, and the bids marched right along through 7 or 8. And I got particularly nervous because at the last minute, Sotheby’s had offered us a deal. They said, “Hey, listen. We’ll guarantee you nine million dollars. We’ll guarantee you nine million dollars – it’s much more than double what any Bellows has ever sold for before – as long as we get an increasing split of more and more percentage of anything above that total.” And that was pretty attractive. It’s nine million dollars in the pocket guaranteed, and then they’d get a heftier and heftier cut of what happened above that. But in the long run we said, “No. We have faith in the picture. . .” [phone rings; tape interruption] So we turned down the guarantee and the percentage and decided to take our chances with whatever happened. So I’m getting nervous as the thing climbs up. So it passes 9 and 10, and I say, “We’re home free. We did the right thing.” So then it passes 11. So then it passes twelve, and I thought, “My God. We’re over a record.” The picture went over twenty million dollars. I think that the hammer hit at something like twenty-three [Note: 27.5] million dollars for the picture. It was the world’s record for any American painting of such a period.

AH: What year was that? What year was it sold?

KV: What year was it sold? It must have been sold in '99, or '98, or something like that [Note: 1999]. It was utterly astonishing, and I was just bouncing around the room at the Tate. I was holding the receiver in my hand, listening to Dede Brooks, this go thing go up, go up, go up, go up. And for years, we didn't know, in fact, who bought it. It was Bill Gates that bought it. And it's interesting that both the people who turned it down at 16, were under-bidders, chased the thing up well above 16 and still didn't get it. And it was the dark horse that they didn't figure, so to speak, who came in and bought the polo scene. So that established a huge acquisitions fund for P&S, more powerful than any acquisitions fund we've ever had. It throws off interest every year for acquisitions. So, that and the Gordon Bunshaft fund, is another fund that throws off interest. Because, you know, the normal game in the Painting and Sculpture Department is that you start, you have a committee of twenty-odd people. They pay a fixed amount, a minimal amount every year, but the guaranteed budget of the Painting and Sculpture Department every year is four hundred thousand dollars you can count on having, three hundred thousand dollars, something like that. Whereas, the Centre Pompidu or the Tate are given four million, five million dollars a year to spend. But in any given year, we may wind up spending fifty million dollars, partly by raising special funds, and partly by selling. So now having a couple of endowed funds like this, that guarantee us every year throw off, is extremely important to P&S acquisitions. But that was one of the bigger coups of my time at the Modern.

AH: Amazing. I had asked you this when the tape recorder was off, but – about the influence that the Trustees, potential donors, corporations have on acquisitions or exhibitions. In your experience, what is their influence, both positive and negative, and how much it has on the day to day functions of the institution?

KV: I think, by and large, the Museum has been – in my time there – has been incredibly, remarkably lucky to have a Board of Trustees which is very supportive, extremely generous, concerned and involved in all the ways you want them to be, but not manipulative, and not obtrusive or intrusive in the ways that you don't want them to

be, have a great deal of respect for the staff, let the staff make the decisions it wants to make. The only slightly uncomfortable experiences I ever had were with key Trustees who wanted to make gifts to the Painting and Sculpture collection of artists that they particularly admired, where the curatorial staff didn't admire the artist or didn't admire the painting as much. And by and large, our feeling was that if X Trustee is enormously generous, going down the line – as the old phrase, "Paris is worth a Mass" – that the idea is that there are certain compromises that are well worth making in the larger scheme of things. And so, we swallowed a few gift acquisitions that, by and large, the curatorial staff didn't necessarily believe in, and they'll just disappear into the Collection honorably, but those Trustees are enormously generous and have helped with extremely important things otherwise. And so, I never felt any pressure from trustees to spend Museum money on things that they were favorable about. I mean, obviously, the curators propose and the Committee disposes. So, curators don't have the final vote, and the trustees, among themselves, can kibitz about what pictures they don't like and like. That's the way it works. But I never felt anything improper in the whole time that I was there about trustees trying to influence exhibition policy or trying to, in any inappropriate way – trustees are, of course, they're collectors and they like certain artists – but in any inappropriate way, influence acquisitions other than, as I say, certain gifts that you just couldn't turn down. That was a small price to pay, it seems to me. And I don't think that that's at all to be taken for granted because, again, other institutions' trustees don't have the combination. Either they're more disengaged and less involved in the institution, or they're overly intrusive and aggressive. And I think the Modern has had the best combination of <u>really</u>, really involved and committed and generous trustees, who have not tried to manipulate it.

AH: Aggie once mentioned that – she was talking about how difficult the acquisition process was, and you couldn't just accept anything – and she said that she had, on a number of occasions, proposed pieces from her collection that were turned down. And she said that they'll eventually get it because she has bequeathed everything to the Museum. She was like, "So, they'll, you know, they'll wind up with it."

KV: It's true, and I can think of instances where that's happened. And I've heard her say the same thing, so. . .

AH: . . . eventually. . .

KV: . . .I think that's true. Of course, the old. . . one of the things is it's true in taking bequests, that we often receive a great many things that we wouldn't have counted on, and we have turned down whole bequests. There are people who just leave things to us – artists, particularly, who die and leave us things that we never asked for – and we don't have to accept them. But obviously, trustees and people close to the. . . leave us things that we want and things that we don't want. So that, for example, Bunshaft understood that there might be things that we would sell, and he provided for anything we sold from his bequest, for the money to go into the fund for acquisitions that he had established. But there are many other cases where. . . in Aggie's case, she collects so many living artists and we never sell the work of living artists, so those will certainly probably come in with her bequest. But I think she's got a long way to go, happily, before anybody faces this issue.

AH: Well, speaking of living artists, I was wondering also about. . . you had mentioned when we were speaking earlier – again, off the record – about Elyn being concerned, as an artist, with you taking a position at a museum. Do you feel that this has affected your relationships with living artists? Do you feel that there's a different sort of dynamic with you – or when you were a curator at the Modern – and friendships and relationships with living artists? And also how that may have affected any decisions you've made about people you've selected, people you've focused on, just from having personal relationships with. . .?

KV: Well, certainly, I think probably the *Artist's Choice* shows that I did – with Scott Burton, with Elizabeth Murray, with John Baldessari, with Ellsworth Kelly, with Chuck Close – I don't think I would have done any of these shows with any of these people had I not know them personally, if I had not some sense of their engagement with the Museum collections, the way they talked about it. It was listening to Scott talk in

personal conversations about Brancusi that gave me the idea of asking him to do that show, and then it went on. And Ellsworth is my neighbor in the country, so the whole fabric of personal relations definitely went into the group of people that I asked to do those shows because I knew enough about them – the way they worked and the way they thought – to gamble that it would be productive to do that. I'd stand by any of those shows, and I don't think it was bias or prejudice or anything else. It's just the nature of the kind of collaborative shows those were, for me to invite those people, and it's hard to think about inviting somebody cold, who might be a terrific artist, but you have no idea the way they think about the history of art and whether it would make any sense for them to do that kind of show. On the other hand, I don't think that our decision to do the Chuck Close retrospective was at all on the fact that I know Chuck socially and think he's a terrific guy. I would not have done the show for that reason. It's always difficult, and I always asked myself when I was a curator whether the friendships I had with people were. . . whether the artists. . . I was self-conscious about certain artists that we hadn't favored with, that we weren't buying. For example, there were certain artists that I liked a lot and I saw personally, but we didn't buy their work, and I always felt self-conscious.

AH: Like who?

KV: Oh, Mel Kendrick, the sculptor, for example. Brice Marden always felt that we weren't keeping up with his work as strongly. These are people I used to see. Mel Bochner, at a certain point, until Pepe [Karmel] came aboard and we got a lot of Mel's work. There were lots of people that I used to see at parties, and they knew and I knew that we were not buying their work, and it's an unspoken thing, but you wonder. And you wonder with people with whom you're friends, "Are they just being my friend because I can possibly do something for them at the Museum?" and I guess now, I'll find out because I've left and I'll gradually see who falls away and who doesn't in this crowd. You're always aware of it. You walk into galleries; you know that the dealer is dealing with you in a certain way. I had wonderful friendships with dealers. Would I have had those friendships if I had not been a curator? I don't know. You can't answer the question because there's no way to do the test case. In

a certain sense, they're gone. But I think if you ask me two or three years from now, I'll have a clearer idea of who I no longer see or who no longer seems to be nice to me because I'm not in that job anymore.

AH: And also, what about. . .since there are a number of artists on staff, did you ever feel there were uncomfortable situations that way with people approaching you as artists? Like I know a lot of the preparators are artists, and other people are artists, and kind of stepping over that personal-professional line, was that ever an issue?

KV: Yes. There were some awkward moments. Certain people on staff who were artists wanted me to write letters of recommendation for them. People would give me announcements for their shows. Slightly awkward, yes. Never terribly uncomfortable, never got in the way of our relationships, but not entirely natural or easy as a relationship. [tape interruption]

AH: So also, just along the lines of talking about trustees – and staff – is there anything more you want to share about personal relationships, or anecdotes, or experiences with other staff or trustees or situations?

KV: Well, personal life with trustees has been one of the greatest pleasures of being at the institution, I would think. I so think about the terrific women that I knew at the institution who are not there anymore – Lily Auchincloss, who was fantastic, a great, elegant spirit. I always remember when we were talking about the funding for *High and Low*, and Mike Margitich had said something, or whoever was funder then had talked about – no, it couldn't have been Mike because it was 1990 – what it took to raise money for the exhibition. And I think Lily sort of misunderstood the shortfall and came in my office, showed up in my office unexpectedly. I was so glad to see her. I said, "Come in." She said, "You know, I think I can give you a million dollars." And I said, "What?" And she said, "But it would have to be 500 now and 500 later." And I said, "Lily, I'm astonished. What for?" And she said, "Well, I thought you needed money for this exhibition."

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KV: So Lily Auchincloss offered me a million dollars, basically 500 now and 500 later, totally unsolicited. And I'd never done anything, I didn't think, to deserve it or ask for it. And she said, "Well my. . .," she said that her father, I think, had always told her, "Never tell someone what they ought to spend money on. Always let them figure that out." So she sort of left it up to me how I wanted to spend this money, and in retrospect, that was just fabulous and fantastic. She was so elegant, that woman, and never pretentious; really a wry smile, a lot; soul of generosity; and I really admired her and was happy to spend time with her. And the other very different type of personality, of course, was Louise Smith. And Louise was more crusty, a little bit more salty, and she always had – she had a Texas background, I think – she always had salted pecans at her house for dinner, which was something – I come straight from Savannah – so I really identified with it. Cheese sticks and salted pecans, very much what I grew up on. She had the beautiful, huge Kandinsky of the archer, which used to hang behind her dining room table. And it was always torture to go to dinner at Louise's because the waiter would come along with a bowl of stew between your back and the Kandinsky, and you were sure it was getting scraped, spattered, et cetera, et cetera. But she was a tough cookie in many ways, and she had pictures like the Picasso of the woman dressing her hair from 1940, which are very tough pictures to look at. And no one else, I think, would have lived with them in that same way that she did. But she had a great sense of humor. The story – I'm sure it's been told many times – but Barr had persuaded her to give him the Picasso *Glass of Absinthe*, and at some point in the '50s whenever Picasso made the *Pregnant Woman*, which is that sculpture made with the big bowl in her belly, Barr really wanted this, and he only had one shot available at it. And he called her where she was skiing – she was a fanatic skier – out west, and she was brought down to the phone. And she said, "What are you calling me for? It's a beautiful day. I want to be out on the slopes." And he said, "Well, I just wonder whether you would change your mind and instead of giving us the *Absinthe Glass*, give us the money for the

Pregnant Woman instead?" And she listened to Barr's argument and said, "Well, it sounds like you need both of them. Why don't I give you both of them?" And he said, "Well, my God, can you confirm that for me in writing?" And she said, "Listen, I'm far too busy to write. I'll send you a telegram." And Barr got the telegram, and the telegram said, "Never in the history of art has a glass of Absinthe led so directly to a pregnant woman. Louise Smith." [laughter]

Louise was also really, really committed to expansion. That was one of the things that was amazing, and it's amazing about David Rockefeller, that it's some of the oldest members of the Board of Trustees, some of them who have been around the longest, who are most fervent about the Museum going forward, who are willing to commit anything to see the Museum go forward, and Louise was one of those. She was really eager to see the new building happen, and I was happy that we got to show her collection, thanks to the Cullman's who gave the money to do it, in the Museum galleries before she passed away, and it wasn't by much either. They were terrific people. Of course, working with Aggie and Ronald and David, all of them have been terrific people to work with in different ways. Ronald's got an amazing eye. He's a constant genius for taste, quality in works of art. His apartment is just astonishing as far as the quality of the things in it, whether it's Medieval ivories, or Matisse drawings, or Schiele, or Kandinsky, it doesn't matter. Aggie and her commitment to the life of artists and to living artists, the way she lives with art, the way she's involved with supporting artists, with Studio in a School, she's such a fervent cause of good in the artistic life of the city, and so incredibly generous and unstinting in her care for the staff of the Museum, from the guards through the people who sit at the desk to. . . the amount of time she spends every day caring about other people is just, just remarkable. And, I've had wonderful relationships with some of the newer trustees – Patty Cisneros, Don Bryant, all of these people. It's never been a chore to socialize with or spend time with the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art and the people on the Painting and Sculpture Committee. I've learned a lot from these people. They're dedicated to the institution, and they're interesting, alive people, by and large. There's really been. . . you know, without the slightest bit of shining on, it's really been a pleasure to work with the dominant percentage of

them. I've had so few negative experiences with the trustees, and admire them enormously, and have always thought it a privilege to be able to speak to them and talk to them about the acquisitions we were making, and just, they've personally been extremely supportive and generous.

AH: What about the staff? Anything – again, not tying into anything in particular – but just certain staff who. . . you know, vignettes from situations in the past?

KV: Well, I talked about working with Jerry, which has always been such a terrific pleasure, laying out the collections, watching him solve problems in exhibitions. I had a good relationship with Jim Leggio, who was a terrific editor, though he was kind of a prickly person in a lot of ways. There was a certain distance between myself and the staff in P&S when I came aboard, particularly Kynaston and Carolyn, neither of whom I think were thrilled by my being named by Bill, and that took a long time to warm up or develop. I think by the time that I left, I'd finally managed to gain Kynaston's respect, and Carolyn, I think, was a supporter, as well, by the time she left. But I was lucky enough to be able to make some appointments of my own. Rob Storr being one of the most important, somebody I always admired. Never really a close personal friend, but somebody I thought very highly of and tried very hard to get him for a couple of years, before he finally said yes. Anne Umland, who's somebody that had been my student, who I think is terrific. I mean, in other places in the department, Fereshteh Daftari has been with me since Columbia when I was a teacher there.

AH: Oh, wow.

KV: We've know each other since the '70s. Roxana Marcoci, who was my student at the Institute of Fine Arts. It's been wonderful to have a kind of continuity at MoMA with people from other parts of my life in the past. And, there are just so many people that every day made it a pleasure to come and go in there, from Maria [Martin] at the staff desk, who is one of the nicest people one could ever meet in life, to many of the guards, who just really had a bearing of dignity for the institution that I really

respected. It's one of the reasons I went to work in a museum as opposed to teaching, was that teaching is a very solitary operation, and museums are collaborative and a team. And it's one of the things that I now retreat back from. Having been in the thick of it for so long, I'm now back in my own office by myself without even students around. But I think it's the right thing for this phase of my life. I have projects that I really want to get done, and I need to do the writing and stuff by myself, so maybe it's the right thing that came along at the right time. But certainly the personal relationships I had at the Museum were part of the fun of being there and what made it worthwhile.

AH: Can you also comment on Rob's departure from the Museum and what you think they need to find for the Painting and Sculpture Department at MoMA, now that you're no longer there, now that Rob will be leaving in the fall? And what you think that department needs?

KV: Well, Rob represents the kind of person I think The Museum of Modern Art – and any great museum – ought to foster. He's not bureaucratically responsible. He leaves a messy trail around him. He doesn't do e-mails. He doesn't fit the book in clear ways, and there are many things that he does which seem to people, certainly, high-handed or. . . he doesn't fit in easy niches and that sort of stuff. On the other hand, he's a brilliant writer. He's nobody's ideologue. He's not prisoner to any kind of ideology. He's smart as a whip. He has good relationships with artists because he is an artist, and he understands things from the object up. And he's indefatigable in terms of lecturing around the world, going to openings, going to International Council things. He's a great ambassador for the institution, and he's perceived as just enough anti-institutional, in a certain sense, and maverick to bring along with him to the Museum a certain kind of public that might otherwise. . . a group of people – artists and critics – who might otherwise be suspicious of a big institution like the Museum. The Museum needs to be big enough to make room for somebody like that, to not expect them to conform to a lot of the other things, and that's why I thought P&S, as a big department, could allow the room for something like that to happen. It never bothered me that he didn't. . . I didn't care about watching what

office hours he kept, et cetera. I think it bothered a lot of other people in the institution. And as long as I was there, I sort of created a protective shield around Rob that I think disappeared when I left. And I think that he had personality conflicts that grew more extreme. He's very conscious of power strategizing. He's a much more, in some sense, politically astute person than I am, and much keener and more street savvy than I am. And he really has a certain sense of where the competition is, how power brokering is being done, et cetera, and I think he felt more and more uncomfortable. And I think it's really too bad for the institution that a way couldn't be found to make him happy. That said – and I've said this to Rob myself – I'm not sure he would have been the ideal candidate to take my job, though he has obvious credentials in terms of his command of the field and his sheer intellectual power, and there are many respects in which he's superior to me in that regard, and I recognize it. On the other hand, precisely because he doesn't like managerial responsibility, because he is a kind of lone wolf, I'm not sure that it was the right fit of the job, and I'm not sure it would have been good for the institution – I don't know – or the Department, to have somebody at its head. We'll never know. We'll never know.

AH: Was he interested in that position?

KV: Hard to say. I think he probably, like most people, would have found it very difficult to turn down had it been waved his way. Chief curatorships came up – Prints, Drawings, et cetera – and Rob, because he was the obvious talent, was considered each time for those other jobs, and I think it was clear he wasn't interested in <u>them</u>. There was thought that his voice should be brought to the chief curators table to be heard, and I think that that was one of his frustrations there, was he felt that he played a very important role in the Museum, but that he wasn't inside the loop in a way that was commensurate with that. Second part of the question is criteria for somebody that replaces me. I feel that that job has a tradition that whoever holds it should have some kind of academic credentials, that should be perceived as a writer, and not just as an eye, but a communicator, not necessarily a theoretician, but someone capable of writing a substantial catalogue, writing articles, someone with the credentials of a historian, a scholar, et cetera. I think this is what, obviously, Barr

sort of invented the role. Rubin clearly came from this kind of background. There was no doubt about the quality of what he did in terms of catalogues. I'd like to think that I upheld that part of it. It's getting increasingly difficult now because the span of time that's covered is more extreme. I think Bill stepped down, in part, because he knew he didn't have any sympathy with contemporary art, and he didn't want to deal with it. He wanted somebody who had more sympathy. Again, it gets more and more difficult to find someone who has the openness, the flexibility, the credibility in dealing with the art of today, who at the same time, has the command over the field of Matisse, Picasso, Post-Impressionism, who can speak and write with credibility about those areas. There are just fewer and fewer people that you can find, and so increasingly, you feel that you're pressured to make a choice. It would seem unfortunate to make either extreme of choice, to get someone who simply appears to be a scholar of early modern art with no feel for the present; on the other hand, to get someone who's thoroughly embedded in the present but has no ability to command or deal with the great collection of pre-1940 art. . . so, it's a real difficult position, and you have to think in terms of the balance of the Department. No one person can do everything.

I always thought of my role there as shifting the center of the Department away from – Bill's great strength was Abstract Expressionism, and that was where he really built the Collection, and that's the generation he grew up with, and that's where, I think, that and then Stella was his one man after that. I wanted to try to hold a center of gravity that moved into a different generation. So doing the Johns and Twombly shows, for example, was important to me in that regard. Whereas I thought that Rob and Kynaston could more clearly occupy the position of authority within the Department. I certainly made numerous contemporary acquisitions, and I had a strong hand in thinking about the contemporary program, but I ceded authority, in a certain sense. I thought within the balance of the Department, I wanted to be sort of at the mid century, in the '50s and '60s, and let others take on more recent things. And I – with John Elderfield, who did the Matisse show, of course, because that was his expertise – I would hold down the Picasso fort and the older part of it, as well, with Carolyn, who was there, and then with Anne, who did her dissertation on Miró.

So I thought of it as a whole spread. Now they have to find a new anchor person, but I just hope very much that it will be someone who can write effectively, who is perceived as having scholarly credentials, and who does have the command over the earlier part of the Collection, which is our greatest, long-term, the core of our identity and a resource of the institution.

AH: And I guess, for now, you've talked about the Mellon lectures and your upcoming book on Johns. Is it Johns, Rauschenberg, Twombly, what are you hoping to focus on now that you are here?

KV: Well, the Mellon lectures come up next spring, and I've decided to give them on issues in Abstraction since Pollock. Part of the experience of *Open Ends* was the experience of finding deeper personal satisfaction in the Abstract works, and that's part of it, and I have other issues that I want to deal with. So I want to deal with individual artists and art works that I have found very powerful and compelling in works since '55, say, and the legacy of Minimalism, which is something I've lived through myself, and so I'm going to do issues in Abstraction. The other long term project that I had was to do a book on Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly, especially in the late '40s, '50s, and early '60s, from '45 to '65, because as a Southerner coming to the North, I'm interested in their trajectory out of three different places in the South into the North.

At a key moment, they all come to New York in the early '50s. It's such an interesting time of change in New York, and there's a dialogue, especially with Rauschenberg and Twombly, with Europe that's extremely interesting. They're both in Rome in the early '50s. They're in North Africa with Paul Bowles and that whole crowd, which is a great and interesting moment, and the Stable Gallery that they show at shows a lot of Italian artists. And then Twombly goes back to live in Italy, just at the moment when American art is making such a big impact in Rome. So there's a whole Europe and America story there, and a major shift in the sensibility of the nation and, certainly, the culture, the avant-garde culture of the nation. And it brushes up against the story of [John] Cage and [Merce] Cunningham. It has

something to do, in parallel, with people like [Truman] Capote and Tennessee Williams and Southern culture coming to the North in the early '50s. And these three guys had such an interesting set of personal histories intertwining with each other, and it's just a story. . . I think it's a great story to be told. And I would probably stop it at the moment that Rauschenberg wins the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in '64 because then, a whole other story starts, and you have a different story of American art in the '60s. But all three of these guys from three very unlikely places in the South, growing up in the Depression in the '30s, all passing through some military experience in the late '40s and '50s, coming to New York, being with each other and then apart from each other, and producing a lot of really fascinating and amazing change and fascinating and amazing art. And since I've done retrospectives of both Twombly and Johns, I feel strongly steeped in that, and I also feel that in ten years, a lot of the key witnesses to the story won't be there to tell it. Leo Castelli is already gone. John Cage is already gone. How many years before the other key players in the story are gone? So if I can, I'd like to do the research towards a book like that, which would not be a standard art history book. One of the things that I'd be able to do here that I was never able to do at the Museum, is write a project that's on nobody's deadline but my own, where it's only finished when I say it's finished, and thus, to aspire to some greater kind of literary richness to a story like this, as opposed to just art history and pictures with commentary. There are lives here. There are cultural issues. There are places that need evoking. That would allow me to try to write in a different way than I've ever written before, and I just have to get the time to do it. And so, I'm concentrating everything on the Mellon's now, and if my health holds and I have a longer horizon starting after that, this would be a major project.

AH: Have you talked with them about it?

KV: Yes. The difficult issue, of course, with these three guys is that they're all gay men of the '50s, and privacy has been an important part, certainly – especially of Johns' and Twombly's lives. Rauschenberg is more garrulous, in a certain sense, and I think a little less defensive or worried about these issues. But Johns and Twombly

are both rigorously private people, and I think that they're – I know, from talking to them, especially Twombly – they're very leery of sort of psycho-biographical interpretations of their art, and nervous. But my argument to all three of them is that somebody's going to write this story, and they should trust that I'll do it better than other people will and with more sensitivity. And they've all tentatively agreed that they would help me try to do it. What that would mean in the event, in the actuality, I haven't yet to test, but I've told them all three about the prospect of doing it. And, you know, they're all so competitive between the three of them, too.

AH: Right.

KV: So, on the one hand, none of them wants to be left out if the book is going to be done. But on the other hand,. . .

AH: . . . it's not going to be just Johns and Twombly. . .

KV: . . . each of them would rather it was a monograph, I have a feeling [laughter].

AH: Is there anything else that you can think of before we stop.

KV: I'm sort of spent out. I don't know. If you think of things later on, you can always use another excuse to come back to Princeton.

AH: Exactly.

KV: Okay.

AH: So we'll call it a day.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 2

END INTERVIEW