

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
75th Anniversary
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON

Artist

Professor of Art, UC Davis, 1993-2005
Film Department Chair, San Francisco Art Institute

Interview conducted by
Richard Cándida Smith
in 2009

Copyright © 2010 by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Funding for the Oral History Project provided in part by Koret Foundation.



Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Lynn Hershman Leeson, dated December 15, 2009. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All copyrights and other intellectual property rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Excerpts up to 1000 words of this manuscript may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and the attribution below is included.

Requests for permission or questions should be addressed to SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or archives@sfmoma.org and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

“SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Lynn Hershman Leeson,” conducted by Richard Cándida Smith, 2009, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; © San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010.

Table of Contents—Lynn Hershman Leeson

Interview #1: September 9, 2009

[Audio File 1] 1
Coming to San Francisco, visits to museums and galleries in the Bay Area—Hershman Leeson’s exhibition history—An art community, or the lack of one, for women—Her experience with her dealers and with directors and curators at SFMOMA—Agent Ruby and other web-based and internet-based art—“The Art of Participation”—Museum acquisitions of new media—Social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and changes in the art world—Virtual work.

[End of interview]

Lynn Hershman Leeson

Interview 1: September 9, 2009

Begin Audiofile 1 09-09-2009.mp3

Cándida Smith: First question I want to start with is if you could recall when you moved to San Francisco and why you moved here.

01-00:00:39

Leeson: Well, I moved, actually, first to Berkeley. It was 1963, and who wouldn't move here, in those Free Speech days? We had offers to go, to Boston and Berkeley, from Cleveland. Berkeley was farther, so that clinched it.

Cándida Smith: Did you come to Berkeley as an art major?

01-00:01:07

Leeson: As a graduate student, yes.

Cándida Smith: In the MFA program, then?

01-00:01:10

Leeson: I was *supposed* to be, but I couldn't figure out how to register. So I thought, everybody else knows how to register; they must really be smart. I thought, well, if I can't figure out how to register and everyone else can, I'll never be able to make it here. I quit, which was my first radical act.

Cándida Smith: Maybe good luck for you, too. Then I know, later, you went to San Francisco State.

01-00:01:35

Leeson: I went to a number of schools, UCLA, Otis, and a number of places. I finally got my masters at SF State.

Cándida Smith: So you had a sense of the art world in California more broadly, in the 1960s?

01-00:01:51

Leeson: Yeah.

Cándida Smith: Can you recall your first visits to the San Francisco Museum of Art?

01-00:01:59

Leeson: I believe it was on Van Ness early on. I would go there as much as I could. Coming from Cleveland, which had a great museum—I credit the Cleveland Museum of Art with, actually, my survival mechanism because I would go there almost every day and spend almost, I would say, 60 percent of my time in the museum. The museum, for me, has always been a refuge, someplace I would go and communicate with

people—but they weren't alive!—and just look at work and try to learn from them. It's really very comforting for me.

Cándida Smith: So you continued that with the museum—?

01-00:02:39

Leeson: I continued that here, going to as many exhibitions as I could.

Cándida Smith: Are there any exhibitions or pieces that you saw at the museum that were particularly memorable, particularly important to you, as you were developing your own vision as an artist?

01-00:02:59

Leeson: In the sixties?

Cándida Smith: Yes.

01-00:03:02

Leeson: I can't remember a specific exhibition that comes to mind, of something that was particularly influential. It was more seeing work here and there. Maybe it was films at the museum.

Cándida Smith: So the weekly film series that Edith Kramer put on.

01-00:03:20

Leeson: That's right. Where I learned about George Kuchar and underground film, which I hadn't know about.

Cándida Smith: Were you going to Canyon Cinemathèque?

01-00:03:31

Leeson: No.

Cándida Smith: No? Well, thinking back to these early days, how did the San Francisco Museum of Art compare to other institutions you knew? I don't know if there was a modern art museum in Cleveland.

01-00:03:48

Leeson: The Cleveland Museum of Art is the third largest in the world, after the Met and the Louvre. So it didn't compare to the Cleveland Museum of Art, but what does? It was still a great experience, going there.

Cándida Smith: How about compared to the de Young or the Legion of Honor?

01-00:04:10

Leeson: I went there, as well. I think if you put them all together, each one was like a division of something. I do remember that there was a Bruce Conner work that said "please touch" on it. Somebody tried to touch it and got wrestled to the ground by a guard. To me, that was really

radical, that you were able to touch. I think that if there's anything that influenced me, it was that, because interactivity is all about touching. I did a work that actually said "touch me," as well, but you touched a screen. So I think that that was influential.

Cándida Smith: Were there galleries that you liked to go to at the time?

01-00:04:43

Leeson: At the time, it was John Berggruen, it was Hansen Fuller, in those days. They were the two main places that I would go. Rena Bransten, Quay Gallery.

Cándida Smith: The "touch me" thing, I came across that you had a controversy—I guess that would be a nice way of putting it—with the Berkeley Art Museum because you included audio in your sculpture, in the sculpture exhibit that you did there, which I think was early seventies.

01-00:05:27

Leeson: I think it was 1971.

Cándida Smith: And you got into a fight, I guess, or a dispute, with the director?

01-00:05:35

Leeson: I didn't really get into a dispute. The University Art Museum at that time was told by the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] that they had to show women, because they didn't show any. So they put on shows of three women, and I was one of them. They thought I was just going to put in drawings. But at the time, I was starting to put sound into my sculpture because I thought it was an extension of sculpture and I didn't see any separation. It was a use of space. So I put some drawings, but I also put my most recent works, which I thought, of course, were the most important, which it turned out that they were. Well, without telling me, Brenda Richardson closed the exhibition. So I went there with some students, very proudly going to show them my exhibition there, and it wasn't there. They had taken it down without letting me know, and the reason they gave was because there was sound, and they said sound was not art and didn't belong in an art museum. Turns out that piece was probably the first work that ever used sound or media that I know of, so it's a really historic piece. Some curator in Turkey just inquired about that piece, in fact, about buying it. It was early, before there was that definition of media art.

Cándida Smith: Was that typical of the art venues in the Bay Area at that time, a kind of confusion about what was allowable?

01-00:07:01

Leeson: I don't think that there was any confusion about what was allowable, but they were always very restrictive. Actually, it turned out, this

disaster was a way of pushing me to think more radically about what art was, where it belonged, how you place it. If I couldn't show it in a museum, where could I show it? That was when Eleanor Coppola and I decided to open up rooms in the Dante Hotel. If that show hadn't been closed, I don't think we ever would have done that. So we opened up that piece, one of the first site-specific pieces in the United States or anywhere, and it used sound.

Cándida Smith: The museum, the San Francisco Museum of Art used to be very much a place where artists would go and hang out and do different things. I wondered, did you? As a younger artist, were you going there? I know certainly, the artists of the forties, fifties generation used to view the museum as, in a way, *their* social space.

01-00:08:10

Leeson: Well, I was raising a child and for a while, I was a single parent. I didn't have hang-out time. I do now. I have hang-out time now, but I didn't then. So that was a luxury that I didn't have. But I would go there whenever I could.

Cándida Smith: I understand you were one of the participants in the Soapbox Derby?

01-00:08:33

Leeson: Yes.

Cándida Smith: How did that happen?

01-00:08:36

Leeson: I got invited. I think that was— What year was that?

Cándida Smith: I think it started '77.

01-00:08:43

Leeson: I kind of had made a name for myself with these things like *The Dante Hotel*. All the things you weren't supposed to do, with *The Floating Museum* and doing work that generally didn't fit into a museum context. So I got invited to participate in the Soapbox Derby. What I did was I took a soap box—it was an Ivory Soap box, actually—and put little wheels on it and strung a high wire from a really high telephone pole to the end, and this soap box slid down very quickly. I didn't have to build anything, I just used the soap.

Cándida Smith: That's nice. I wonder if you could describe your arts community in the 1970s, let's say. How big was it? What kind of institutions or places to be did it offer? Were there artist co-op galleries or artist spaces that were responding to the work that you and your friends, your generation was doing?

01-00:10:02

Leeson:

There wasn't an art community; it was really lacking. Eleanor Coppola and I were an art community because we had kids that were in the same nursery school and we carpoled and talked. She had studied art. We became cohorts in trying to do things outside of a system, because the system wouldn't accept us. It was almost impossible to show your work in those days. I think you may know that I took the identities of three critics that wrote about myself. That was the only way I got to show my work. I took these articles that talked about me and my work to galleries, and I published them in Europe. *Flash Art* and a number of magazines. So people saw that validation and that's how I got my first exhibition. But it was *very* difficult for women to show their work. Women would use their initials and send in slides, so that their gender wouldn't be outed. So there was no community. You, at best, were somebody's girlfriend and occasionally, you got to be in a group show. But you were *not* taken seriously. In order to do your work, you pretty much had to go outside of any mainstream possibility. I'm doing a film now on the history of feminist art and a lot of the seventies is in it. I take people to help me shoot it, and they can't believe the stories. Nancy Spero was thrown out of [Leo] Castelli Gallery when she tried to show them her work. They said, "Don't show us your work. Don't show us. Why are you coming here?" Story after story after story of other women who just had the doors closed. There was just no place whatsoever to exhibit. Some people survived, some people didn't.

Cándida Smith:

I can assume that the San Francisco Museum of Art had its doors pretty much closed, too?

01-00:12:07

Leeson:

They still do. The San Francisco museum still has their doors closed. Where are the women artists? How many are in their collections? How many are they buying? Also, at what price? It's not a matter of artists giving them the work, the museum should buy that work. It should be treated really with dignity, on an equal level and highly valued, because very important work by women, perhaps the most radical and certainly the most impressive politically, came out of the feminist movement.

Cándida Smith:

To what degree do you think it's a longstanding gender bias? The museum also seems to have an indifference to art that has a political edge.

01-00:12:56

Leeson:

I think it's both. I think it's not just the museum, it's the museum boards, it's collectors. It's also a cultural problem. And not just the United States. It's an international cultural bias that women, for many, many years, couldn't be heard, and therefore, not seen. And certainly, not collected—which is a big mistake because women's work right

now is *way* undervalued of what it's going to be in the next couple decades. So I would encourage museums to collect important work of the seventies, eighties, sixties.

Cándida Smith: Did you know anything about Grace McCann Morley, Jermaine MacAgy, or Ninfa Valvo?

01-00:13:44

Leeson: I'd only heard about them intermittently, but I didn't know them.

Cándida Smith: They would all have moved on by then. But it seems like they were the three people who created a space for modern art in Northern California.

01-00:14:02

Leeson: That's right.

Cándida Smith: But you had heard a little bit about them.

01-00:14:07

Leeson: Henry Hopkins was the director. I was trying very hard, in the seventies, to show my work. I think certainly, time has proved that the work I was doing was important. In fact, I just had a lot of those seventies pieces of mine acquired by the Tate and the Whitworth Art Gallery in England, work I was doing in the seventies—that I was trying to *give away* for free to SFMOMA, that they wouldn't take. Henry Hopkins told me I didn't know my place. Right to my face. He said, "Your problem is you don't know your place." What he meant was that I should stay in the background, that I should do the kind of work that doesn't make waves, and to do what everybody else was doing.

Cándida Smith: And yet he showed Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*.

01-00:15:04

Leeson: He showed *The Dinner Party*. *The Dinner Party* had a lot of problems afterwards, as you may know. Nobody would take it after that show. They passed a bill in Congress banning that piece, that had to be then overturned. But when you see my film, you'll see that footage.

Cándida Smith: Did you know Henry when you were down in Los Angeles? Had you met him in the sixties?

01-00:15:40

Leeson: No. Well, actually, I used to see him because I was going to UCLA and he was getting his degree at UCLA, so I'd see him in the elevator here and there. But I didn't know him.

Cándida Smith: Did you know Gerald Nordland at all?

01-00:15:53

Leeson: Yeah.

Cándida Smith: From your perspective, what kind of a director was he?

01-00:15:58

Leeson: He was a nice man, but he was about the same. Women artists did not exist. They would do the kind of shows that they felt the public would want, but they didn't take any real risks.

Cándida Smith: Jack Lane, did anything change with Jack Lane?

01-00:16:16

Leeson: I liked Jack Lane. He brought in Bob Riley, for one thing, and he started to take media art seriously. He was really open to new ideas, in a way that his predecessors weren't. And he had a sense of humor.

Cándida Smith: When did you have your first exhibit at the museum, or first presentation?

01-00:16:51

Leeson: The first time the San Francisco Museum of Art showed my work, that I can remember, was last December. I tried very hard to give them work, to be in shows, to have curators— I was not in the "010101" show, even though I founded that kind of work. I'm on record as the person who did that work before anyone else, in 1982, and really created the genre of computer interactive art. I was not in that exhibition. But Benjamin Weil commissioned a piece called *Agent Ruby*, and they showed that, but just on a computer screen, not as an installation, as it should have been.

Cándida Smith: It's supposed to be available online, but when I tried to watch it online, I couldn't.

01-00:17:46

Leeson: Are you going to agentruby.net?

Cándida Smith: I was following the links on the museum site and it didn't—

01-00:17:53

Leeson: It should be—

Cándida Smith: It brought the initial screen up, but then you couldn't do anything with it.

01-00:18:01

Leeson: Somebody pirated the name so they changed the name, but it should be okay. Bob Riley showed my film *Conceiving Ada* at the museum.

Cándida Smith: But it is actually surprising that *last year* was the first—

01-00:18:23

Leeson: Isn't it? They still don't own any of my work. I gave them *Agent Ruby*. I'm just in the process of giving them that now because they said they have no budget to pay me. When I think about all the works they turned down of mine, which are so valuable now, I guess I'm having the last laugh. But it wasn't so funny during the years that I was trying to get some sort of support. They have none of my photography. I have a few of these really important, seminal works, still. I have the artist proofs of them. All of them have been sold. They're in museums in Canada, in Spain, several in Germany and England. The museum here has none of them. I even offered some of those early pieces recently and they said, oh, we can't do that now. Even for free. You said to be candid.

Norton: Who is your dealer?

01-00:19:38

Leeson: Paule Anglim is my dealer. Paule Anglim has been my dealer in San Francisco since 1976, and Bitforms is my dealer in New York.

Cándida Smith: How well have you known the curators? Did you know Suzanne Foley, for example?

01-00:19:58

Leeson: She hated my work! She was one of them that didn't think women could do art. Actually, I think she did put some documentation of the *Dante* and *The Floating Museum* in that eighties show, but I couldn't get them to come to a studio visit.

Cándida Smith: Not even a studio visit.

01-00:20:20

Leeson: No. Wouldn't come. Same with the Kramlichs.

Cándida Smith: The Kramlichs wouldn't come?

01-00:20:26

Leeson: They would not come. I said to Pam, I said, "By the time you come, all these important pieces won't be available." They're not.

Cándida Smith: Did you know Rolando Castellón and the Mix program?

01-00:20:38

Leeson: He was good. He allowed me, actually, to put part of *The Floating Museum* into the museum. So the *Global Space Invasion* that we did as the conclusion of something, of a project called *The Floating Museum*, happened at the museum because of Rolando. He worked very hard.

Cándida Smith: Did you have alternative spaces?

01-00:21:25

Leeson: Did I have alternative spaces?

Cándida Smith: I know the artist's life is often very lonely, but in a sense, [spaces] where your work could be understood and observed. Obviously, you succeeded in that.

01-00:21:58

Leeson: There were no *real* alternative spaces that would show the work. I created some alternative spaces for other people to show work, that were doing alternative kinds of work, like *The Floating Museum*, which lasted for three years. But I didn't show my work through that. I generally just did what I needed to do, whether it was in prisons or in store windows in New York or wherever. I did find more help in New York, in being able to show my work. Then later, fortunately, in Europe.

Cándida Smith: Well, one of the questions I wanted to ask you is how you would assess this particular museum—which is regional and to some degree, provincial, but also wants to be a world-class museum—with other comparable institutions that you have worked with? It doesn't sound like they understand your work.

01-00:22:55

Leeson: It's really unfortunate. I had a retrospective that was *very* well received at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, that then traveled to Europe, and another one at Santa Monica Museum of Art, that was offered here and they turned it down. A retrospective of my work, of forty years of work, that is praised all over the world, was turned down in my hometown.

Cándida Smith: Can I ask you who you were dealing with?

01-00:23:22

Leeson: Everyone. Paule was begging them. It wasn't just SF museum—Berkeley, Oakland, de Young, San Francisco. It should have been at San Francisco, and we tried everybody. Nobody would take this work because I had never shown in the Bay Area. They didn't know the work. They just wouldn't do it. It says something about the culture here that it denies access to people who live here. If you're in Europe, they certainly support people that live in whatever province a museum is in. They respect that, no matter what the caliber of the work. They want to encourage and preserve work of that region. It seems to be the reverse here. If you're from this area, you can't be any good. It's like Groucho Marx's joke about the country club. So it's really too bad that there's such provincialism in the thinking.

Cándida Smith: A side story, but related. Arnold Schoenberg taught at UCLA. His papers were offered to UCLA and UCLA turned them down, on the grounds that if he taught here, he couldn't be very important.

01-00:24:42

Leeson: Well, I'll tell you about Theresa Orr-Cahall, I offered all the Roberts work to the Oakland Museum that was bought by the Whitworth for \$1.8 million appraisal value, and she said she wanted to throw it out. She said it wasn't any good. She wouldn't store it, she wouldn't keep it. Thank God, I took it back.

Cándida Smith: Did anything change when Bob Riley came, when the new media department—

01-00:25:19

Leeson: Bob kept talking about doing a show. He kept saying, "Lynn, you're really one of the geniuses of the Bay Area. I really want to do a show of your work." We talked about it about every six months, but he never did the show.

Cándida Smith: Because?

01-00:25:35

Leeson: I don't know. But I spent a lot of time talking about it.

Cándida Smith: From your perspective, did he seem to understand new media in the right way?

01-00:25:47

Leeson: I think Bob was good. I think that as new media progressed into network-based structures, that he was not as interested in that kind of a patterning world, global view that the work presented. But he was one of the early people who did at least acknowledge that this was important work.

Cándida Smith: Now, Benjamin Weil, he did move into web-based or internet—

01-00:26:18

Leeson: Benjamin was one of the first people that did it, and he was very good.

Cándida Smith: And you and he had interactions?

01-00:26:26

Leeson: Yes, he commissioned the *Ruby* piece for SFMOMA, and then he commissioned a more extended piece for Paris. Now we're talking about future pieces in Spain. He was encouraging, but he couldn't do more than a very limited amount.

Cándida Smith: I know with *Agent Ruby*, the date— and maybe this is just confusion on my part, but it was acquired 2008. So you gave the—

01-00:26:55

Leeson: I gave it to them.

Cándida Smith: It was commissioned by the museum, but—

01-00:26:59

Leeson: Partially commissioned.

Cándida Smith: The dates for the work were 1998 to 2002. Maybe it's just my limitations, but I found that a little confusing, that the work was created before it was commissioned.

01-00:27:15

Leeson: It takes a long time to finish one of these pieces. I had eighteen programmers. I had programmers in Iceland. I had programmers in Canada. This was the state of the art before any of this material was even available commercially. We were inventing artificial intelligence and the use of it, particularly in art on the Internet, but anywhere that artificial intelligence is used, in that the work— Nobody had done it. So I don't do any project that takes less than three years. They always take three to five years to do. So they can commission part of it, but I had already been working on it. I had already spent probably three times as much as they commissioned, at that point. But it helped me along the way because I did have to pay programmers.

Cándida Smith: Was there a particular reason why you decided to donate or give *Agent Ruby* to this museum as opposed to one of the institutions that might have been more supportive of your work?

01-00:28:15

Leeson: Well, there are very few institutions that collect web-based work or internet-based work. I think MoMA is beginning to now, but that's about it. Walker Art Center stopped doing that. So there're very few places. I finally wanted to get into their collection. Rudolf [Frieling] knows a lot about this kind of work and respects it. They said they didn't have any money. So I thought, well, at least that work will be preserved so I won't have to continue to pay to have it survive. At least it could be accessible, people could see it, and they'll keep the servers and programming stable. So it's really about preservation of the piece.

Cándida Smith: Were there other artists who were working in, let's say, parallel areas that you thought the museum was more receptive to?

01-00:29:20

Leeson: Bill Viola. Yeah, Bill Viola, Gary Hill. But they're very limited because they're only video-based. They don't do software-authored work.

Cándida Smith: I wanted to switch gears a little bit and talk to you about how you might use the museum, if you do, as a teacher, when you were teaching at UC Davis and now at the Art Institute. Is the museum, does it have programming, does it have a collection that fits your needs as a teacher?

01-00:30:16

Leeson: I think that the public programs are excellent, that the film programs are excellent. Once in a while, they have some radical shows. Not as much as they should or that I would like to see. But certainly, the show that Rudolf did was very important, and I brought students there quite a bit during that exhibition.

Cándida Smith: "The Art of Participation"?

01-00:30:44

Leeson: "The Art of Participation." It was a very smart show and a good show.

Cándida Smith: So you do regularly send your students there?

01-00:30:54

Leeson: Oh, sure. There's always something worth seeing. Absolutely.

Cándida Smith: So the big international exhibits that they bring around on a regular basis—let's say Olafur Eliasson, Matthew Barney, or Richard Tuttle—are those—

01-00:31:16

Leeson: I think that all of the exhibitions are worth seeing, if only to critique. If there are flaws in the work, or the way it's exhibited, that should be discussed, as well.

Cándida Smith: So *Life Squared* [(L^2)], that's the work that you contributed to "The Art of Participation." That's part of a larger set of works, or larger—I might not have the right vocabulary.

01-00:32:01

Leeson: When I showed it in Montreal, I had a two-way interactive system that was part of the work. They didn't put in this show because they felt that the technicians were overburdened as it was. So the piece wasn't complete. It was a part of a project we did to make a digital archive at Stanford that then resulted in this participatory artwork.

Cándida Smith: This was the first work of yours that was actually exhibited in the museum, in the museum space?

01-00:32:36

Leeson: Other than a film. A couple of blown-up photos in the eighties. I offered that piece to the museum, too. I offered *Life Squared*, for free, to the museum and they turned it down. I thought since they built the stations for it; I had all the computers; they bought the monitors for it; they had all the artifacts that would allow them to keep the piece. They said it was too complicated. So we're trying to sell it to a German museum instead.

Cándida Smith: It struck me that the new media collection has a lot of pieces that it never exhibits. There are a couple of pieces that Bob bought for the old building, which don't work in the new building, for whatever technical reason. What did you feel about the old building and the new building? Were you glad when they moved?

01-00:34:14

Leeson: I was happy that they were building a new museum that would be on its own. I feel that the design of the new museum could have been thought out differently. Brick isn't particularly a Northern California medium, in an earthquake-prone landscape. Again, I feel it's a little bit provincial to not go to a California architect like Frank Gehry and go to somebody in Switzerland who doesn't understand the environmental habits of this location. I would have wished that they had taken that leap.

Cándida Smith: How effectively would you say the museum has used new media, new forms of communication, to expand how it reaches out to different communities, to do the kinds of programming that isn't in the museum walls but is accessible online or through a DVD or through—?

01-00:35:52

Leeson: I don't think that the museum has really begun to scratch the surface of what the possibilities are for new media as an educational tool. Very few people have. The Tate is trying, with their webisodes, commissioned webisodes and DVD outreach projects. The museum here is, again, very limited in what they consider possible.

Cándida Smith: Has anybody from the education department talked to you about what you would imagine could be done?

01-00:36:30

Leeson: I have talked to Peter Samis, Frank Smigie, and Dominic [Willsdon] a little bit. But it's not one person, it's an organism.

Cándida Smith: I wanted to ask you about how or if the content in your work might have been impacted by your being here in the Bay Area, by you settling in the Bay Area.

01-00:37:04

Leeson:

Well, I think that one might say I didn't *settle*. I may have lived here, but I didn't settle. But I think if I had moved to New York, as I tried to do, I would not have started to do electronic and computer-based work. I think that's really indigenous to the Bay Area. The best work of its kind is coming from the Bay Area. You can breathe it here. You can find programmers here, you can see, really, the edge of where technology is going. So I think that that bent of my work of really understanding how technological work impacts our lives today and our future as global citizens only could happen here. Works like the artificial intelligence works, the pieces like the *Emotional Barometer* that used blog tags in order to take a temperature of the emotions of the globe could only have been done here because nobody else is experimenting with these kinds of ideas. Same thing with *Life Squared*, with Stanford researchers and the digital archives. I'm right now making a film which will have a 300 hour digital archive as part of the film. Nobody else is doing that. Nobody. So it's been a great advantage to be in the Bay Area.

Cándida Smith: What about the nature of the women's movement here and feminist art here? Was there a specifically Bay Area character?

01-00:38:52

Leeson:

There really wasn't a women's movement in the Bay Area. It was Los Angeles. A few women came up here, and there were a few individual artists who went down there, but this is one of the few places that it really didn't happen in a major way, even though it would happen sporadically across the country. Also simultaneously, it would come up kind of in that scene from—I think it's *Aliens*, where things just occurred. But there wasn't a big women's movement here.

Cándida Smith: So nothing comparable to The Women's Building?

01-00:39:24

Leeson:

No. The invasion of Cambodia was really what sparked a lot of this work. And you have something called Women's Art Group that Faith Ringgold started in New York, that was the first integrated action, that forced Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris and Carl Andre to put women in an exhibition. It had never happened before. They actually forced that [conversation?]. Or The Women's Building, or the Fresno program a few months later, or the [?] at the Corcoran a few months later, the Whitney protest—all came as a result of the invasion of Cambodia. There's nothing like that in the Bay Area at all. But they had the Free Speech Movement, and you can't separate the Free

Speech movement and what was happening in the late sixties with what happened both in the women's movement and then the women's art movement. It was all hybridized eventually, free speech, politics, the Panthers, and feminist art.

Cándida Smith: Do you think the museum's resistance to the kind of work you're doing is their emphasis on the classics, getting the classics of modern art? It's a speculative question, but—

01-00:40:47

Leeson: I can't say what the prejudices are of the varying directors or people making decisions for acquisition at the museum. But I think that they probably feel that there's so much that they don't have that is already recognized, why take a chance on something they can have that hasn't yet been validated? I think that they put their resources in trying to fill the old gaps, rather than taking advantage of being pioneers.

Cándida Smith: Do you think museums still have the role of defining what "civilization" is?

01-00:41:24

Leeson: Oh, no! The museums don't have the role of defining civilization *whatsoever*. I think that they're just hanging on. They're gasping, [as they're going under. Same thing with film distributors, with major studios. They don't know what's going on because they're not the center anymore. They're way at the edge, and culture's moving over them.

Cándida Smith: Well, this project is supposed to help document the museum's seventy-fifth anniversary, coming up next year, in three months. I'm curious, if you were in a position to be able to look forward to twenty-five years from now, the museum's hundredth anniversary, what kind of museum would you like to see? What would you want it to be in 2035?

01-00:42:25

Leeson: I would hope that by 2035, that some of the prejudices that museums have based their collections on will have succumbed to reason and be erased, that they will be able to view radical work and political work and work that's really reflective of the culture that they're living in—redefine that as something that should be preserved. My hope is that they will become enlightened and erase any kind of vestiges of prejudice that may have tinged their choices in the past.

Cándida Smith: Do you think there would still be a need for a building with physical objects in it?

01-00:43:15

Leeson:

I don't think we're going to change as fast as people think, and I think there's always a need to actually see the work itself. But I do think that there's a lot of virtual work, that was born virtually, that needs to be seen in that realm.

[End of Interview]

Richard Cándida Smith is professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, where he has directed the Regional Oral History Office since 2001. He is the author of *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, And Politics in California*; *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience*; and *Claiming Modern Culture: Artists and Their Publics in California*. He is the editor of *Art and the Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection*; and *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*.