

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

STEVEN OLIVER

Interviews conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2007

[Portions of this interview are sealed until January 2035]

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Interview #1: July 12, 2007

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01-00:00:00

Oliver: It was a big operation. I got into it because my sister's old friend from high school was the CEO. I merged Alta Bates into the Sutter Hospital system. Then I joined the Sutter Hospital board. I was on that for nine years and vice chair of that. Those were the two things that I did volunteer work for.

Rubens: Anything about health that particularly drew you?

01-00:00:30

Oliver: No, no. This individual was a friend of my sister's, and I went to do a little incidental thing. I joined his building committee, facilities committee. Then five years, ten years later, I was chair of the board. It was my town. I was born in that hospital. I was the first chairman to be born there to come back and chair it.

Rubens: But you started to get interested in the arts?

01-00:00:54

Oliver: On that board, I sat next to a guy by the name of John Perkins, who was an amazing guy, who was president of Columbia University and Dun and Bradstreet. He moved west because his wife developed asthma. His college roommate was a guy by the name of Ralph Hitch, the president of Cal—UC statewide. John Perkins came and became vice president of the University of California, statewide, administration. Fabulous guy. He was a painter. He loved to paint. He was quite a good painter. He had a solo show in a New York gallery and a gallery out here. He came to me one day. I mean, this was a guy who was this wonderful guy. You would've loved him. This is John Perkins. And he said, "I have been diagnosed with cancer that's inoperable. I have six months to live." He said, "I'm asking you for two favors." He said, "I want you to do something in the hospital and follow up on this after I'm gone." I said I would. He said, "I want you to go and join the board of a little college that I'm on called California College of Arts and Crafts that desperately needs leadership. It's a great jewel, but it's a nightmare right now. It's near bankruptcy." I said, "Okay, John." I joined that in 1980. To show you how weak that board was, I was chairman of the board in nine months. I agreed not to make any change for a year. The *Chronicle* called it the May Day massacre. In a year, 1981, '82, I fired the president, four of the five vice presidents, and thirty people in the business office, and I replaced them with a whole bunch of people. We had ninety days. They had spent all the money, it was just horrible. They had spent the endowment, they had spent the restricted funds, and they had ninety days of cash left, for an institution that had been in business seventy years. This is its hundredth anniversary this year. And never been healthier.

Rubens: Were you only in Oakland?

01-00:02:41

Oliver: It was just Oakland. I bought the San Francisco campus. So I started over again, we started over again, with this great history. And now, of course, it's just—I saw where *US News and World Report* had it ranked third in the nation.

Rubens: Is that right?

01-00:02:59

Oliver: Oh, it's fantastic. The Oakland Museum wasn't much better. My first day on the board at the Oakland Museum [of California], I was president of the board.

Rubens: I think you told me that.

01-00:03:14

Oliver: After I got CCA stabilized, balanced, making money—we raised \$10 million, and we got it balanced—I went to the Oakland Museum for two years, to straighten it out.

Rubens: So you go there when?

01-00:03:28

Oliver: In '87, '89. I still sit on the CCA board, I'm still on the CCA board now. But I got the Oakland Museum sort of turned around, then had this big battle with the city manager, where I resigned. That got the press. That's why Frances Bowes called me up one day and said, "We've met several times, I hope you remember. I saw in the newspaper that you just resigned, and all the board resigned the Oakland Museum." Everybody quit, there was a big blowup. She said, "Would you ever think about joining SFMOMA?" I'm sure they were thinking of a capital campaign, they were thinking of their new building. I said, "Let me think about it and I'll call you."

Rubens: Is [Jack] Lane there?

01-00:04:09

Oliver: Yes. He brought a new vision.

Rubens: They were already thinking about the capital campaign.

01-00:04:23

Oliver: He was there before me three or four years.

Rubens: So you think, "Why not?"

01-00:04:28

Oliver: Yeah, “Why not?” I was steamed at Oakland, CCA was really stabilized, doing well, and I thought I could join the San Francisco board and still keep an eye on them [CCA] to be sure they’re okay.

Rubens: In your own personal collecting at that point, there wasn’t the ranch?

01-00:04:44

Oliver: No, the ranch started in ’85. We bought the ranch in 1980. In ’85, we commissioned the first artist’s work.

Rubens: Had you had some vision of that?

01-00:04:56

Oliver: No, not at all. It’s a working sheep ranch. No, no. In fact, the first project was going to be it. We were just going to do one, and that was the end of it. So all of this was happening. The eighties were a real busy decade.

Rubens: Your business, I assume, was doing very well.

01-00:05:10

Oliver: Eighties were a boom decade. In the eighties, it was mostly office buildings. I laugh. I was telling somebody the other day that in the 1980s, we built eighty-five office buildings, from Orinda to Concord. Just in that slot. There was just an explosion of growth in the suburbs. You know what it really was? It was the maturity of BART. Executives who were making decisions and everything were living in Lafayette and Orinda, commuting to San Francisco. San Francisco rents were rising. They said, “Why don’t we move right out here?” They did.

Rubens: You always lived in San Francisco, though?

01-00:05:47

Oliver: No. In fact, we were living in Orinda. We had an apartment in the city, but we moved to Orinda and raised our children. The kids were in school. We had two kids, but we had a bunch of land out there, so we had sheep and goats and rabbits. A little zoo, you know? Then when my daughter went away to college, we bought the ranch; it was a retirement home for her sheep. They went up there. Then we started the sheep business, and then the art came later, five years later.

It was a great time. Really, it was incredible stress. The first guy that was president of CCA—they had one guy was there twenty-five years. Then the next guy was there one year. He was a friend of mine on the board of Alta Bates Hospital, who’d made a bunch of money on a high- tech company that he sold. He was sitting home. He’d sold the company. I said, “How’d you like to be a college president?” He said, “What?” His name was [Thomas] Toby Schwartzburg. I said, “I want you to be a college president for one year. I want you to get this train to run on time.” He came in and did it.

Rubens: The guy who's just left now, who—

01-00:06:51

Oliver: Michael Roth. He was fabulous! Brilliant. Brilliant.

Rubens: Took the word “crafts” out [of the name of the college].

01-00:06:57

Oliver: Took “crafts” out. I had been arguing for that for twenty-five years.

Rubens: You wanted it gone, too.

01-00:07:04

Oliver: Well, I was as passionate about it as he was. He said, “It just sends the wrong word.” We think craft is art. This segregates it to a second class status. So it's a good move. So by the time I got into the museum in '89, CCA was on track, the hospital had been merged into a new system, the Oakland Museum was behind me. It was a good time for me to concentrate on SFMOMA.

Rubens: Did you get off the hospital board?

01-00:08:10

Oliver: No, I stayed on the board, but when I merged it into Sutter, then I came on the Sutter board. Then we had twenty-eight hospitals and \$8 billion dollars in revenue, and so I had different responsibilities. I took charge of the facilities, chaired the facilities program for Sutter Health.

Rubens: What about the Smithsonian Hirshhorn [Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden]?

01-00:10:06

Oliver: I joined that after I left the presidency of SFMOMA. I was asked to join the Smithsonian Hirshhorn and I went there. Because I was doing less at the museum here, and Neal Benezra was the chief curator there. Jim Demetrian, who was an old friend, was the director.

Rubens: Why was Demetrian an old friend?

01-00:10:28

Oliver: We have good friends that we travel with a lot who are from Des Moines, Iowa. Jim Demetrian was the director of the Des Moines Museum. It's a very small world.

Rubens: Even Henry Hopkins says they should've had Demetrian as the head of MoMA [NY], but he didn't want it.

01-00:10:44

Oliver: No, he didn't want it. Went to the Hirshhorn. Jim Demetrian is one of the greatest there ever was. One of the greatest. The last of a generation. He was Neal Benezra's mentor. When he went to the Hirshhorn and became director

of the Hirshhorn, he took Neal with him. I went there to work with these dear old friends of mine that I knew. It was really a treat for me. Then as soon as I came, they both left. Jim retired, and Neal went back to Chicago as the deputy director of The Chicago Art Institute. It was too good a job for him to pass up.

I'd been in Washington in 1997 as a chair of the National Endowment for the Arts. The NEA has three divisions. Each year, one of the divisions is chaired by a volunteer. In '97, I chaired the biggest division, which has two-thirds of the budget. Creation and Presentation, it's called. I'd been on several panels in the NEA in the nineties, but in '97, they asked me if I would chair that. So I did, and I enjoyed it. I had been to Washington a lot, and I'd seen Jim Demetrian and Neal. I thought I would really enjoy it. After spending time on the Hirshhorn board, though, I didn't care for it. Then frankly, coming on as the chair of the board at SFMOMA gave me a good chance to get off of it. I mean, some of these boards, it's harder to get off than it is to get on. So I resigned saying, "Listen, my duties at SFMOMA are too big for me to continue this, and so I'm going to step off."

Rubens: Did you feel it put you in some kind of national context, though?

01-00:12:31

Oliver: It was a chance to see a museum in a different light. At that stage, I had been on SFMOMA's board for ten years or twelve years. It was a chance to do something different. It was just more curiosity than anything else. Plus, there were two guys there I knew, Jim Demetrian and Neal Benezra. So it was good for me.

Rubens: Then what is it? The Stuart Collection, San Diego.

01-00:13:26

Oliver: Oh, there's a woman named Mary Beebe, who I've known for a long time, who directs the Stuart Collection, which is the outdoor public sculpture collection at UC San Diego. Kind of like the ranch, in a public format. It's a fantastic collection.

Rubens: Not like UCLA's, which has a great collection.

01-00:13:44

Oliver: These works are all site-specific, commissioned, just like mine. I've been on their advisory board for many years. I've helped them raise money.

Rubens: You knew her—?

01-00:13:54

Oliver: I knew her through the art world. Then choosing a new artist, they run those through this advisory board. It's been a very positive thing. Then actually, it's such a small world, because Mary Beebe and Neal Benezra and I, and another woman by the name of Sandy Percival are buying all the art for the UCSF

campus. They interviewed fifty people, and they selected the four of us. So here all four of us are working together again.

Rubens: Oh, you mean the campus in Mission Bay?

01-00:14:33

Oliver: The campus in Mission Bay. We've spent \$6 million down there buying and commissioning new works of art for the whole campus. So that's really great.

Rubens: I think we have one more, co-chair of a PAC, American Arts Alliance. I don't know it.

01-00:14:45

Oliver: When I was on the Smithsonian, I got approached by—Well, when the NEA does its grants, they report—As a chairman, I would have to take mine to what was called the National Arts Council, which was a group of political appointees, appointed by the president. The political appointments always last six years, so that it can cross administrations. So in '97, I had the last of some Reagan appointees and the beginnings of Clinton appointees. I was a real trouble maker in Washington, which is no surprise. But in Washington, the Congress was controlled by Newt Gingrich's gang in '97. They spent most of my year attacking me. I remember one of the headlines in one of the papers was, "Another attack on American family values by appointing someone from Berkeley to chair the NEA." I mean, they were quite disappointed when I didn't have a headband on and a ponytail when I got appointed. But that year, the NEA lost the artist fellowships. When I made my final presentation to the National Council, I blasted them for this. One of the women on the National Council was a Clinton appointee, a woman by the name of Judy Rubin, who was Treasury Secretary Bob Rubin's wife. She was also the chair of the board of Roundabout Theater in New York. She came to me afterwards, and she said, "How would you like to help me raise money to replace this Congress?" I said, "Let's do it." So we formed a political action committee called the American Arts Alliance PAC, and we ran it for several years. It was a political action committee. It raised money to support congressional candidates who supported the arts. That's what we did.

Rubens: I haven't heard politics come up with you before.

01-00:16:52

Oliver: No, but they don't—I don't deal with politics. I try to avoid it.

Rubens: You support certain candidates.

01-00:16:57

Oliver: Exactly. I support certain candidates. But I've avoided it. It bores me, frankly.

Rubens: You haven't been in a political appointment?

01-00:17:04

Oliver: No, I've never been a political—

Rubens:

I was going to ask you if you ever served on the California State Council of the Arts.

01-00:17:09

Oliver: No. No, I never did. I never did.

Rubens:

So this went on for how long?

01-00:17:14

Oliver: It was really fantastic. It lasted about three years. It was interesting, because it was art museums, theaters, ballets, symphonies, operas. It was all the arts put together. It was a good thing, but then some of the executive directors started bickering with one another. As soon as that happened, all of us who were volunteers said, "Listen, you get your act together again. When you can come back together and agree, we'll support you."

Rubens:

Then the ranch, when does that really become a focal point?

01-00:17:47

Oliver: Well, really, the first artist worked from '85 to '88. She finished the project, and we had such a great time we thought, well, let's do one more. So the rest is history.

Rubens:

In the meantime, does the nature of your business change? Let me ask you this. You are a construction—

01-00:18:20

Oliver: We're in the construction business.

Rubens:

Are you developers, as well?

01-00:18:23

Oliver: Yeah, we're in development, as well. About 20 percent of what we build in a year is for our own account, our own company. We have our own development company. But we also build buildings for lots of other developers.

Rubens:

You work primarily—

01-00:18:34

Oliver: Northern California. Commercial, industrial work. Some multi-family.

Rubens:

Multi-family means?

01-00:18:41

Oliver: Apartment houses. We do a lot of affordable housing projects. About 50 percent of our work is for nonprofit organizations. Everybody in the company

is required—not required, we can't do that. Their bonus is dependent upon how long they're here and how much volunteer work they do outside the company.

Rubens: How old is the company?

01-00:19:02

Oliver: Sixty-one years. My father started it. Technically, he started it. But in 1989, I left that company and started this one, and then my father came to work for me a year later. I couldn't get my aggressions out. I ended up being boss. So it made for a few awkward Christmases and Easters and Thanksgivings. But the last twenty years of his life, he worked for me.

Rubens: I was going to ask you if he was still alive.

01-00:19:28

Oliver: No, he passed away ten years ago. He was a teacher for a few years at UC Berkeley.

Rubens: What did he teach?

01-00:19:39

Oliver: Actually, pen and ink and watercolor. Painting. He was a masters in architecture graduate. Graduated in the Depression. Couldn't get a job. So he came back and taught pen and ink and watercolor. I said, "Well, did he ever do any work?" I'm the youngest. I have all older sisters. The closest one to me is five years, so I probably was a mistake. But they said, "Oh, yeah. Don't you have any of his works?" I said, "No. Where'd you get them?"

Rubens: You mean they weren't particularly up around the house?

01-00:20:04

Oliver: No, because they had them. She said, "The paintings in the dining room were done by our father."

Rubens: And not a family that took you to the San Francisco Museum of Art or—?

01-00:20:14

Oliver: No, no, no.

Rubens: What did you do for fun?

01-00:20:18

Oliver: Well, I was the last kid in a family of all girls.

Rubens: Right, and runs off to race cars.

01-00:20:23

Oliver: Right. I was a bad boy.

Rubens: Was his family modestly successful?

01-00:20:29

Oliver: He came from a very poor family. Both my parents were from very modest means. I grew up that way. I mean, I thought we were okay. We all did. I would say 80 percent of the people that I deal with on the board have inherited their money and have never earned it themselves. I feel sorry for them. I don't envy any of them. I've got more houses than I need now and more money than I can spend. But I've got these terrific families here. I mean, the average tenure of our employees, out of a hundred people, is fourteen years. Out of the hundred, fourteen is the average. I have two people that retired this year who've never worked for another company in their life. I've got some forty-five years and forty-two years.

We have five nonprofit organizations that we support from the housing budget. We're building for three of them right now. We contribute. We support them. I was the lead in Northern California for the Prop 1C last year, which raised money for affordable housing. We raised the money to fund that.

Rubens: You were at Berkeley.

01-00:24:40

Oliver: Yes.

Rubens: Was that a significant time in your life, particularly?

01-00:24:43

Oliver: I was struggling because I was really into car racing, and I was trying to be an engineering student at the same time. It was hard work. I'd graduated from high school a year early, so I was too young for all this freedom. I struggled the first couple years there, but then finally got straightened out. It was a great experience. Great experience.

[material deleted]

01-00:30:23

Oliver: Don [Fisher] went through a recent little dustup with the museum, so he's not very happy with us. He was going to make a major gift, and we turned it down because it had so many strings attached to it that basically we couldn't do it. We couldn't do it. But Don's great redeeming virtue is that—probably because he comes up with one crazy idea a minute—is that he doesn't hold any grudges. So here we turned down this incredible collection that any other museum in the world would've said yes to. Two weeks later, he's back with another idea. I'll tell you a great story—Jack Lane probably will not tell you this story. Early on in my career at the museum, I went to a retreat, a board retreat, executive committee retreat. They took fifteen of us down to Monterey for a weekend. You enter some gate and you drove a half-an-hour before you even saw the house. Private land in Monterey Peninsula. We were all there.

Don Fisher said, "I've got a great idea. We need to increase our attendance." He said, "I will fund this, a show of original Disney drawings in the museum's contemporary galleries. We'll get the kids in there, and the ladies with strollers and that sort of stuff, and it will increase attendance."

Jack Lane said to him, "You know, you're absolutely right. Our attendance will be increased, with one exception." He said, "It'll slow down some, because everybody entering the museum will have to step over my dead body that's laying in the doorway."

Don was slightly offended, but by the next morning he was fine and laughing about it. So that was Jack Lane's great virtue, is he could say the most creative way of saying no to—This is his trustee, you know? He worked for this guy. He said no. He wanted to say, "You're crazy. I'm not going to do that."

[the remaining five minutes of this audio tape are sealed until January 2035]

[End Audio File 1]

Interview #2: February 4, 2008

[Begin Audio File 2]

Rubens: Could you tell me when you came on the board of the San Francisco Museum?

02-00:01:46

Oliver: I think it was 1989. I'm pretty sure it was '89.

Rubens: How did that come about?

02-00:01:54

Oliver: Well, it's kind of interesting. I was president of the board of the Oakland Museum. There was a big dustup with the city fathers and everything, and the whole board resigned, along with myself and others. It got a lot of press play. Someone from this board called and asked if I, now that I was free from those duties, would I like to join this board? They knew that I had a big interest in contemporary art. So it happened right almost within a few months of the resignation from the Oakland Museum. I'm still friendly with the museum. I still like the museum facilities a lot. But this was a battle between the board and the city leadership—the mayor and the city manager—and very difficult. So as president of the board, it was time for me to leave.

Rubens: So do you remember specifically who called you?

02-00:03:02

Oliver: Frances Bowes did.

Rubens: This is before, of course, the new building is—

02-00:03:11

Oliver: Yes. We were in the old building. I was in the old building for several years before we moved to this new location.

Rubens: Did you come in with a cohort? Were there other people who came on about when you came on?

02-00:03:25

Oliver: Probably there were, but if so, I don't remember. I was introduced as a new member, and I don't know who else was introduced at the same time.

Rubens: Was it clear that you would have a particular interest in the building committee?

02-00:03:45

Oliver: Well, I think that they knew I was obviously in the construction business. It's conceivable they were already thinking ahead to a new building, that I would serve on that building committee. It was funny, because when they finally came to building the new building, I was one of the three chairs of the capital

campaign—I had the last section—but I had absolutely nothing to do with the building. I was never involved with that. They had a number of people who were active in the construction and development business at the time, and so they apparently didn't feel as though they needed my involvement there.

Rubens: And just as an overview, you're on the board '89 until you become chair.

02-00:04:23

Oliver: Well, see, I became chair, must have been 2004. I did three years. So I retired in '07, so it was '04 to '07. I was president of the board late nineties, I guess. I don't remember the years; I would guess '97, '98. When did Elaine McKeon become chair? I was the first president under her chairmanship.

Rubens: I think she starts in '93 as chair.

02-00:04:56

Oliver: So I might have been, then, the president in '93, '94.

Rubens: So in a way, do you replace [Brooks] Walker?

02-00:05:02

Oliver: Well, no. See, the museum has always had two titles, a chairman of the board and the president of the board. The president of the board, interestingly enough, in Brooks Walker's tenure, he handled the business affairs, and Elaine handled the social side of it. It's not quite as clean as that, but in theory, that was some of the duties. When Elaine became chair, because her interest was more social than I, I did some of the financial and more traditional duties that, up till that time, had been handled by a male. It was chauvinistic, at best. But I did the finance committee, the building committee, facilities, that kind of thing, and Elaine handled—

Rubens: That was under your purview.

02-00:05:43

Oliver: Yeah. Right. So it changed then.

Rubens: I think what would be important for us to do, to back up a little—and if we have to interrupt this, we will—is that not only had you developed an interest in art, but you also had been on many boards. So I'm thinking maybe we should just back up and say just a little bit about you were born in the Bay Area, and—

02-00:06:08

Oliver: Born in Berkeley. I was the first chairman of the board of the hospital who was born in that hospital, and then came back many years later and became chairman of the board. I was always active in volunteer affairs, from the YMCA to the Red Cross to the local Rotary Club, and was the president of all those tasks, and then went to the Alta Bates Hospital and became chair of that board.

Rubens: All right, so let's just stop there. You're a Cal graduate?

02-00:06:33

Oliver: Yes.

Rubens: You're a younger generation than Don Fisher and Gerson [Bakar], but what did you major in at Cal?

02-00:06:42

Oliver: I was in engineering and business, in combination.

Rubens: Always knew you were going to be in building?

02-00:06:47

Oliver: Yes, my father was in the construction business, had a small firm, and I went—

Rubens: Where was it?

02-00:06:51

Oliver: In Berkeley. So I didn't fall very far from the tree.

Rubens: What were your years at Berkeley?

02-00:06:56

Oliver: I was there '59 to '64.

Rubens: Did you miss the Free Speech Movement?

02-00:07:01

Oliver: I missed it by ninety days. Mario Savio of the Free Speech Movement was September of '64. I had no idea what he was talking about. I didn't necessarily disagree with him philosophically, but I was the last of the fifties generation. I just didn't understand the issue.

Rubens: Although in your years, there was a bit of activity. There was the protest against the death penalty that students were involved in, there was the anti-HUAC things.

02-00:07:30

Oliver: There was a little bit of that, but it was really well confined. As an engineer, you were clear on the other side of campus. So it was very funny. There was a kind of Balkanization of the campus in those days. As an engineer, also, one of the reasons I started taking business classes is it was so boring. When you entered as a freshman, you knew every class you were going to take for five years. It's called a block schedule; they gave it to you.

Rubens: It was a pretty white male class, wasn't it? This was structural engineering?

02-00:08:02

Oliver: Actually, I was in something called industrial engineering. But it was white male, that's for sure. But it was not white Anglo-Saxon male; it was equal amount of Asian. A lot of Asian population in that school.

Rubens: Already?

02-00:08:19

Oliver: Already. I came from an interesting cultural background, because I went through all the public school system in Oakland. I was born in Berkeley, but my parents moved to Oakland. I went all the way, certainly, through high school, as a minority. It was a wonderful education, really fabulous education. So I entered Berkeley as a liberal, not out of a philosophical Berkeley bent, but out of a cultural milieu. My best friends in high school were black and Asian.

Rubens: What high school did you go to?

02-00:09:34

Oliver: I went to Oakland High School. Whites were a minority. They weren't a majority. There was no majority. It was black, Asian, and white, a great mix. You learned there was good and bad and every shape and size and—So it was a really wonderful upbringing. I'm sorry it doesn't exist anymore, because there has been this white flight to the suburbs. But it was a terrific education.

Rubens: I didn't know that about the engineering school being maybe half Asian. There certainly were only two Asian professors. I interviewed Ernie Kuh, who was the first in electrical engineering.

02-00:10:18

Oliver: I'm not sure it was half, but there was a large minority segment of the population that was in engineering.

Rubens: Where'd you live when you were on campus, by the way?

02-00:10:25

Oliver: I lived in a fraternity house on the north side for the first two years, and then I was on the south side. I lived on Channing Way, up until I got married.

Rubens: When did you get married?

02-00:10:35

Oliver: I got married with six months to go in school.

Rubens: Did you know then you would enter your father's business?

02-00:10:43

Oliver: The truth is, I was trying to race cars for a living, and that's how I wanted to make a living. I was looking for a European contract from a factory. I was

racing formula open-wheel, single-seat cars. I was having a bad season; I wasn't making much money. My wife made a deal with me, saying, "All right, I'll quit school. One of us ought to have a real job. You can keep doing this, but I get to go back to school. If we have children, when our youngest child goes to elementary school, I get to go back to school, and you have to help." So you make a deal with the devil and it always sounds pretty good, in those days. So I made that deal and finished school. Then when I finally got offered a job racing, I had been doing it so long that I finally gave it up. So then I went to work for my father. I worked there four years, and then I left and started my own company.

Rubens: Did she go back to school?

02-00:11:38

Oliver: That's how we got interested in art.

Rubens: Well, I want to get to that in one second. I thought you were going to say her deal was that you don't race cars anymore, if you're going to get married.

02-00:11:47

Oliver: Well, she wasn't very happy about it, but she knew that when she met me.

Rubens: Is she a local person, as well?

02-00:11:55

Oliver: No, no, she was from Detroit.

Rubens: Her name is?

02-00:11:57

Oliver: Nancy Oliver. Nancy Keenan, good Irish girl from Detroit. It was great to marry a woman from Detroit because if she threatened to go home, you knew she was bluffing. It's not the greatest city in the world. She's become a dyed-in-the wool Californian.

Rubens: So one more question, then we'll get to the interest in art. Did you ever come to the museum when you were in high school, college?

02-00:12:24

Oliver: College, and then the early years, occasionally. It would take some sort of blockbuster show, but I had really not much interest in art.

Rubens: Similarly, Oakland Museum. I forget when it opens.

02-00:12:42

Oliver: Well, it had been open quite a while by that time, but the board was in disarray. I'm not particularly proud of it, but my first day on the Oakland Museum board, I was president of the board.

Rubens: But I'm saying, when you were in college, would you ever go down to the Oakland Museum?

02-00:12:53

Oliver: Yes, I went down there, but actually, I got a great interest in the Oakland Museum very early on because when I left my father's company and started my company—So that's when the building was being built; it was being built in '68, '69, somewhere there.

Rubens: That late? I didn't realize that.

02-00:13:07

Oliver: The original contractor went broke, and my company, my new company, helped finish off parts of the museum. My wife became interested, she became a docent there. So we had early involvement in the Oakland Museum. But then we went away. We did that early on, but it wasn't interest in art. My interest then came much later, when I became a board member.

Rubens: What was your company called then, when you created your company?

02-00:13:33

Oliver: The first name was Oliver and Komes.

Rubens: You had a partner?

02-00:13:38

Oliver: Yep. Then later my father came to work for me. He worked for me the last twenty years of his life. Then John Komes retired in 1983, and it's been Oliver and Company since then.

[interruption]

Rubens: Did your interest in art precede your going on the Alta Bates board?

02-00:15:21

Oliver: No.

Rubens: So would you say that in terms of the first big board, important board that you were on, was that Alta Bates?

02-00:15:28

Oliver: Yes.

Rubens: How did you come—?

02-00:15:30

Oliver: The director of the hospital, president of the hospital is the professional staff leader, was a high school friend of my sister's. Because the hospital's always building stuff, we were actually doing some work for them. We were

constructing some things for them. He asked if I would join what they call the construction planning committee, which I did.

Rubens: Did he need to twist your arm?

02-00:15:59

Oliver: No, I did [it] because I thought it was good. It turned out to be bad for business, because then we had a conflict of interest, so I couldn't do any work for them anymore. But I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. Then I was on the committee for a year, then chaired the committee, and then joined the board, and then chaired the board for about five years. Then eventually, in about five years, I became chairman of the board. Then I did that for two years, then became chairman of Alta Bates Corporation, which was the holding company that owned—Alta Bates was a vertically integrated healthcare. So we own nursing homes and hospitals and all kinds of other businesses.

Rubens: Roughly what years are we talking about?

02-00:16:37

Oliver: I think I joined the board in '78. I was chairman of Alta Bates Corporation for almost ten years—which was probably longer than I should have been. I left that in the mid-nineties, when I negotiated, merged Alta Bates Corporation into Sutter Health. Then I joined the Sutter Health board, and I was on that board until just a few years ago.

Rubens: Just say one more sentence about the evolution. It's an extraordinary evolution of an institution. What was the point in merging with Sutter?

02-00:17:12

Oliver: Well, at the time, we went through a really dynamic period of healthcare in the United States. We were the old stand-alone, single-entity hospital. This was a non-profit hospital. They were all essentially going out of business. They were dying financially. We found a way to survive by, first, integrating within ourselves. Reinventing ourselves. Then Alta Bates started buying, acquiring other hospitals. Alta Bates bought, on my watch, Children's Hospital of San Francisco. Which tried for years and years and years to merge with PPMC, with what was then called Pacific Presbyterian. That's another whole—great story. Because the guy who was then the president of PPMC was a major chauvinist. He used to refer to "those girls." Because the Children's Hospital board was all women managed. They finally brought two men on, but they didn't give them the vote for two years after. It was male suffrage over there. The guys up on the hill here with PPMC were very chauvinistic. So Alta Bates swooped in and took over the hospital. That's how we got in Sutter, that was our wedge into Sutter, which was to give up our control of Children's. It was a great story.

Rubens: Are you the strategist, or one of the strategists?

02-00:18:30

Oliver: There were three or four of us. In fact, I'm having dinner tonight with my sister's old friend. An amazing guy, amazing guy, by the name of Bob Montgomery.

Rubens: He being the one who ran—?

02-00:18:46

Oliver: He was brought in as a junior administrator and essentially ran the program. Then left, went back east to run a big operation. Then when I became chairman of the board and we were in financial trouble, I went back and recruited him to come back. We were partners until I retired.

Rubens: We'll talk about him another time.

02-00:19:05

Oliver: I really got into arts volunteerism because of Alta Bates.

Rubens: That's what I understand. There was someone on the board with you.

02-00:19:10

Oliver: Right. My wife went back to college. She started going to museums at night, in classes she was taking. I didn't want her going alone, so we looked at museums.

Rubens: She went back not as an education student, then?

02-00:19:22

Oliver: No, her major was American studies, which is the study of history, art and culture of the Americas. So we went to museums at night, and I hated it. I just hated it.

Rubens: You're living where, at this point??

02-00:19:40

Oliver: We were living in Orinda. We had children, and the children were in school, so we were in Orinda. I said I went through three stages of art appreciation. First one was, I'd say, "That's not art. Come on, that's not art." Second stage was, "I could do that. It's just a red canvas with one line. I could do that." Then the third stage is the most insulting. You say, "Well, listen, a monkey could do that." Then somewhere along the line, you cross this threshold. I remember being at a show at SFMOMA, in San Francisco, with my wife one night, and being so annoyed that the next day I took time off work and went back to the museum to look at it again.

Rubens: What was the show?

02-00:20:16

Oliver: The show was an Ed Kienholz show. There's a line you cross somewhere, when you come from all that insulting kind of relationship to the contemporary visual arts, where all of a sudden, your bias ranges are pushed a little bit apart and you realize that he's trying to say something, that artist; he or she is trying to say something to you that you don't—But he's not using verbal communication, he's using this art as a way of expressing his or her interest and his view of the world.

Rubens: He was such a political person.

02-00:20:43

Oliver: Oh, yeah. I became fascinated with his work and searched out all of his work so I could see it. Then it just leads you down this wonderful path of discovery.

Rubens: Now, your wife, was she pushing you to move from the monkey, the three phases?

02-00:20:57

Oliver: No, no, she was just much more open. Always has been. She would go along. She'd say, "Well, no, come on. We'll go again." I would gripe and moan and complain and—

Rubens: When does she become a docent at the Oakland Museum?

02-00:21:08

Oliver: She was a docent at the Oakland Museum shortly after we did the construction, shortly after it opened. But it wasn't art. She was a natural science docent. So then our interest came ten years later, when our— Because we had children, and our kids went to school. We had to wait five years, till the youngest was in school. Or eight years till the youngest was in school.

Rubens: You have how many children?

02-00:21:25

Oliver: Two. She went to San Francisco State. She didn't go to Berkeley. The reason for that was, remember, this period of time was the seventies now. She was in one of these women's re-entry programs. All these things that came, were outgrowths of the women's movement in the sixties, were made available to her. So she came along at an ideal time. San Francisco State had an outreach program that she could go there one, two days a week, and still work on a degree program. It was a really good program for her, so she could still run the household and that sort of thing, and keep track of kids.

[interruption]

Oliver: Difference between healthcare and the arts, where they came together was in one spot, which was how I got into arts volunteerism. Somewhere in the eighties, I was chairman of the board of Alta Bates Hospital. A wonderful

gentleman by the name of John Perkins, who was vice chairman for the University of California state wide administration, former president of Columbia University, chairman of the board of Dun & Bradstreet—quite a powerful businessman—and was a painter. He sat next to me on the board of Alta Bates Hospital. One day he said, “I’d like to talk to you after the board meeting.” After the board meeting came to an end, he took me aside, we walked down towards the parking garage, and said, “I’ve been diagnosed with terminal cancer. I have six months to live. There’s one organization that I’m very worried about.” He said, “I think you can do a lot of good for them. They’ve agreed to let me nominate two people to the board.” That was California College of Arts and Crafts. He said, “I’m nominating you and A. Alan Post.” I don’t know if you recognize that name. He was a state legislative analyst for probably twenty years. Remarkable guy. A painter. His wife Helen was a painter, too. He said, “You and Alan can maybe save this institution.”

Rubens: We’re talking what year now? Must be ’84?

02-00:23:37

Oliver: No, earlier than that. Late seventies, early eighties. Must’ve been ’81, I would think. So I joined the board of CCAC.

Rubens: He nominated you.

02-00:23:47

Oliver: He nominated me. He came to only three more board meetings before he became too sick to go on, and he passed away almost six months from the day he talked to me.

Rubens: CCAC was only in Oakland at that time.

02-00:23:56

Oliver: Yes, only in Oakland.

Rubens: Your board meetings took place there?

02-00:23:59

Oliver: Board meetings took place there. Remarkable, remarkable guy.

Rubens: Who was the chairman of the board then? We can look that up, too.

02-00:24:04

Oliver: Yeah, a nice guy. I can’t think of his name right now.

Rubens: Was it a big board?

02-00:24:07

Oliver: Was maybe fifteen people.

Rubens: Men and women?

02-00:24:09

Oliver: Men and women. Mostly made up of golf foursomes from the Claremont Country Club. Essentially gave no money. The president of the college, a professional leader, and five vice presidents of the college. I came on the board. After a year, I was asked to be chairman of the board, which gives you an indication that it wasn't a very strong board. Or a lazy board. Then they asked me not to make any changes for a year. A year to the day, I fired the president, four of the five vice presidents, thirteen people in the business office, and I brought a friend of mine in who was running a high-tech company, had just sold it. We started looking at the books. They had spent the endowment, they had spent their reserve funds. This college had been in business seventy years, and they had ninety days of money left. They were going to be out of business.

Rubens: Who did you bring in?

02-00:25:02

Oliver: A friend of mine sold a high- tech company, and I said, "What are you going to do for the next year? You're going to sit home and count your money? Come and run this college for me."

Rubens: Is it important to say his name for this?

02-00:25:10

Oliver: Toby Schwartzberg. He was on the board at Alta Bates with me. So there was this big Alta Bates coup. The *Chronicle* called it "the May Day massacre in Oakland," when I fired all these people. Two of the vice presidents were drunks. I hadn't seen them, and I'd been on the board two years. Never met them. I had to go find them to fire them. It was a mess, but we got it turned around. In a year, we got it stabilized. We started to build the board. I went and searched for a new president, brought a new president in, and a bunch of other people. That probably got me as much notoriety as anything.

Rubens: Are you the one who had the idea to open up a campus here in—

02-00:25:49

Oliver: Yeah, I signed the first lease for the San Francisco campus, and negotiated the purchase of the campus where it is now.

Rubens: What year was that?

02-00:25:57

Oliver: Then our company built all the buildings in that campus and built several buildings on the Oakland campus. This was by 1985, '86.

Rubens: Okay, right before you come on the SFMOMA board.

02-00:26:06

Oliver: Well, just before I left the chairmanship. I was chair of CCA from '82 to '85, and then I—So actually, it was the Oakland Museum battle in 1989 that got my notoriety to Frances Bowes, who brought me on the board. That's what it was.

Rubens: Okay. This will be good for *you* to have. Let's just get clear about your buying the property here in San Francisco. What made you—

02-00:26:35

Oliver: First thing I did was lease the property here.

Rubens: What made you think that you needed to have a San Francisco campus?

02-00:26:39

Oliver: Well, it's easy. I'd been negotiating and acquired the Cogswell College School of Architecture. I bought it for a dollar. It was in San Francisco. But the agreement I had was that—They wanted \$250,000, and I negotiated, bought it for a dollar, because Cogswell Foundation had a requirement that they have a presence in San Francisco. I said, "I'll take on that obligation for you. I'll take on the obligation to finish up the education of your students." Because I knew that I wanted the college to be broader, deeper based. That school of architecture we bought was the fastest fully accredited architecture school in the United States, according to the accreditation team when they came in.

Rubens: What was it called at the time?

02-00:27:19

Oliver: It was then California College of Arts and Crafts, but it was the school of architecture.

Rubens: Got it. Did they have architecture over in Oakland?

02-00:27:25

Oliver: No. No. They said, "The day you're accredited, you're in the top ten in the United States." It's been a fantastic school. The reason it had to be in San Francisco was because most of the professors, teachers, were practicing architects who worked here in San Francisco. Parked their egos at their office, but came here and taught. So that's why it had to be here. So I leased spaced out at 16th Street, and then three years later, we bought the old Greyhound Bus facility.

Rubens: Now, when you're going through this rapid expansion and restructuring of CCAC—It remained that name until just recently.

02-00:27:57

Oliver: It was changed just three, four years ago.

Rubens: Are you now conforming with San Francisco Art Institute, any other art schools?

02-00:28:14

Oliver: Three times in that twenty-year period, we tried to merge with the Art Institute. It never happened.

Rubens: What is that about, on the short view?

02-00:28:28

Oliver: Well, their egos are bigger than anything else they brought to the table.

Rubens: Big, long history, and they're resting—

02-00:28:33

Oliver: They have a long history, and it's a little bit the asylum that's run by the inmates there. Its organization structure, its governance structure is flawed.

Rubens: So CCAC goes through this *amazing* transformation.

02-00:28:48

Oliver: It's an amazing institution right now, really.

Rubens: So when did Frances Bowes contact you?

02-00:28:55

Oliver: Four years later, after a big battle at the Oakland Museum that got a lot of press.

Rubens: What did you think about being asked to join?

02-00:29:03

Oliver: Well, I'd just stepped down as the president of the Oakland Museum board, and I was still on the CCA board. I was very interested in the visual arts. We'd been collecting for a long time. I'd started the project at the ranch in '85. The timing was perfect.

Rubens: So let's now just drop back and do a little bit more. What makes you start to collect? You've had this transformation earlier about that art is not just monkeys. Is Kienholz one of the first things that you did buy?

02-00:29:29

Oliver: No, no, it wasn't, actually. Jim Dine was the first thing we bought. I think it was you go to museums, and then you eventually go to galleries, and in galleries, you find things are for sale, and then you think, well, let's see, maybe I can afford one of those things. I remember it's this time when you make a decision what to do with discretionary income. I remember somebody saying, "Collecting art is just God's way of saying you have too much money." So probably, I had a little business success, so I had a little extra money, and so we decided to buy something. Then it becomes this sort of

obsession, and then you look for something else. You start looking more. So you start out very innocently. We've been collecting pretty seriously since the late seventies.

Rubens: *Late* seventies. So Jim Dine and—

02-00:30:13

Oliver: Mid- to late seventies. I think we bought our first piece in '76. So by ten years later, we were pretty well entrenched in it.

Rubens: Did you have anyone particularly advising you?

02-00:30:27

Oliver: Early on, I had an adviser who lived in Berkeley. Somebody I knew, and who did a really good job. What's nice now is that she calls me for ideas. She did a wonderful job for us.

Rubens: Do we want to name her?

02-00:30:38

Oliver: Tecoah Bruce was her name. Mississippi girl. She was a graduate of CCA. CCAC in those days. I remember I met her because she was president of the alumni council when I met her. And there was a representative of the board, so she was on our board for two years.

Rubens: Then how does the idea of the ranch come about?

02-00:30:59

Oliver: Well, the ranch came about because—

Rubens: You had the property.

02-00:31:03

Oliver: The property was a working sheep ranch we had started. Our kids were interested in animals. Then when my daughter went to college, the ranch was purchased as a retirement home for the sheep we had in Orinda. Then we got into business and produced more and more sheep. So that had its own life. But the art came about because by the mid-1980s, my wife and I, who have never sold any work of art ever—we've given it away—we were more distressed—We got tired of reading more about art on the financial pages than the critical pages. So we've said this before. It was sort of one auction record after another in the eighties, and we just got tired of it. So we thought we would commission a work of art at the ranch that would cease to have value. You couldn't move it, you couldn't sell it, you couldn't give it away, and it was just for the joy of the process. We thought we'd do one. When it was over with, we thought, well, we'll do just one more.

Rubens: So the first commission was those steps by—

02-00:32:03

Oliver: No, no, that was Bruce Nauman's; that was much later. The first commission was Judith Shea's work, this bronze figure down below the house. Had a big cast stone head and some columns.

Rubens: So are you saying that by the time Frances Bowes calls you, you were known for your collection? The ranch had started. How many commissions did you have?

02-00:32:23

Oliver: Probably, I was known amongst all the galleries in San Francisco. So I'm sure Frances, she was a mover and shaker, so she'd say, "Well, who's really actively collecting? Whose pocket can I get into?" I think we were notorious, let's say, in San Francisco, not outside that. But San Francisco was a fairly small collecting community.

Rubens: These are the years that, my understanding is, that Jack Lane was really developing collectors.

02-00:32:51

Oliver: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Rubens: I was wondering, did you know that community? The Fishers, the Schwabs?

02-00:32:56

Oliver: No, no. Well, I met a number of them, but I was really on my own. Then when I met Jack, Jack was terrific. Really terrific. You'd get really enthusiastic about just working with him. One of the best I've ever worked with.

Rubens: So Bowes brings you in. Do you have a memory of your first meeting? You had not met Jack Lane yet?

02-00:33:19

Oliver: I have a very vivid memory of my first meeting. I was sitting at the board when they announced they were going to raise \$85 million in the capital campaign. Around the table, a bunch of people stood up and gave \$25 or \$30 million. I was looking down the table, left and right, to see if everybody else was filling out their resignation forms. Then I found out later it was all rehearsed. It was just to get everybody going. So it was a great, very dramatic move. That kicked off the campaign.

Rubens: Now, the campaign—let me just get clear about this—was the first, not the final?

02-00:33:54

Oliver: But see, I was the last person. I was in the third part of it. My job was—

Rubens: Phase three was the new museum campaign in '92.

02-00:34:03

Oliver: Right, right.

Rubens: And responsible for the final \$5 million.

02-00:34:05

Oliver: It started in '89 or something like that, and then it went on. But it was announced earlier. But really, my job was to sort of get the small donations. We did really well with that segment of the campaign.

Rubens: How would you say your understanding of art, of the role of the museum, and even your own—Would we call it an institution or an enterprise? I don't know what you were calling it then.

02-00:34:34

Oliver: Collection.

Rubens: Endeavor.

02-00:34:35

Oliver: Collection. The ranch project.

Rubens: Well, the ranch project. How was that shaped by your role in the museum? Was it?

02-00:34:44

Oliver: Well, it was shaped only because when you were here, I saw more exhibitions, I learned more about them. There was this sort of ancillary education that went along with it. So you became a more critical thinker about art, because you were exposed to more of it, and exposed to more of the discussions. Curators would come in and talk about, or the director, why they chose this artist for this exhibition. It was just a great learning experience.

Rubens: Did you take any of the trips with Jack Lane?

02-00:35:17

Oliver: No. I never traveled with any of the museum groups, any of them.

Rubens: Were you invited to Frances Bowes'? Did you see her collection?

02-00:35:29

Oliver: I went to a lot of the evening dinners and the social events that were part of either, (A), raising money, or some sort of duty. I didn't travel with the museum. Some of that was because we had children; we were younger than a number of them, so I had child responsibilities.

Rubens: Plus you were developing the ranch.

02-00:35:47

Oliver: Plus I was growing my business, and the ranch was that. We had another house that we had bought with friends in Italy, so we tended to focus on this group, sort of our own travel group.

Rubens: Did any of the collectors particularly—Anderson, Fisher, Schwab, Bowes—were they trying to influence you to go in a certain direction of art?

02-00:36:13

Oliver: No. No, no. I'm not sure any of them tried to influence. Some, they may say different. I never saw a collector trying to influence another collector with anything, other than to say, "This is what I have, and I really like this artist and this artist and this artist." But Jack brought another whole aesthetic to this town that others didn't know about. We were primarily a regional museum collecting regional works of art, when Jack came on the scene. And Jack said, "There's another whole world out there. If you want to play with the big boys, you need to look at a broader set of issues."

Rubens: Did you switch gears? But you say, besides from the ranch—the ranch is one whole story—but does your personal collection center around a particular period?

02-00:37:02

Oliver: No, not necessarily. But what's interesting, I would say what the museum did was, where we started out prior to that as slightly more interested in regional, let's say the Bay Area figurative school, when I got involved with this institution and learned of the larger art world—particularly European artists and artists on the East Coast, here in the early eighties—when I first started visiting the museum, and then finally as I became a trustee, you can't say that your horizons aren't broadening. You started looking at different things. When I started the project at the ranch, though, we had been fairly sophisticated by—we had been collecting now ten years, at that stage; we knew the art world a little bit better. Certainly, knew New York very well. But the ranch project really didn't take off until 1990, when Richard Serra came to the ranch.

Rubens: Just what I was about to say.

02-00:37:50

Oliver: Then the reason for that was that Serra was sort of persona non grata in the art world, because he had this big battle with the city of New York and *Tilted Arc*, and essentially moved to Cape Breton in Nova Scotia, and essentially, turned his back on the United States. He was big in Europe, but he was not well thought of here—except by the insiders. Jack Lane and John Caldwell talked about him as this amazing guy. I got him to come to the ranch once in—

Rubens: Had the show happened yet here, where he does that casting the—

02-00:38:22

Oliver: Oh, no, that was much later. That was well after he did the project at the ranch. Our project at the ranch was the first one he'd done in the United States in a long time.

Rubens: Name the piece.

02-00:38:36

Oliver: *Snake Eyes and Box Cars* is the title of the piece at the ranch. It started in 1990. It wasn't finished until the fall of '93. By that time, by the fall of '93, his reputation rehabilitation had been pretty well completed, and he was doing work. Bowes bought his work and others bought his work.

Rubens: Had Fisher done the new building yet, where it's kind of built around?

02-00:39:00

Oliver: No, no, no. No, that was much later. Much later.

Rubens: Similarly, Mission Bay, of course, is much later.

02-00:39:05

Oliver: I'm chair of the board buying all the art for Mission Bay, that group of four of us. That happened much later, but the only reason that happened is because we had worked together and he had trust that we would protect his interests.

Rubens: What made you interested in Serra?

02-00:39:23

Oliver: Well, I fell in love with the work in looking at it in the eighties, and then realized they were just sort of controversial. He had a tough reputation. He came to the ranch, and the first day was a little rocky. Then the second day got a lot better. It was very interesting, because after he finally said, "I'll do something," he said, "But my real problem is, is that my wife just hates California." He said, "You'll have to convince her." So I said, "Bring her out." She came out and she was great. She'd never been to Northern California. Her dislike was Southern California.

Rubens: Now, did you have any influence? By you bringing him, do you think other people just started getting interested?

02-00:40:07

Oliver: Well, I think yeah. I think people were surprised. He had a very difficult reputation, but we just got along famously. As I say, it wasn't easy. He had to get to a spot where he trusted you. But even now, we talk on the phone once a month.

Rubens: I know you were at the opening of his big retrospective in New York. Well, then let's go back and pick up—Anything that you particularly think you have

a perspective on that you should comment on about the construction of the building?

02-00:40:35

Oliver: No. Not really.

Rubens: Walker was doing it, Gerson Bakar.

02-00:40:41

Oliver: Tom Swift and Gerson, yeah. I think in hindsight—they might disagree with me—in hindsight, I think they made some decisions to be assured that the project was on time and on budget, that in retrospect, we probably paid for later. We did something called value engineering, which is we saved some money initially that might have been a mistake later on.

Rubens: What's an example of that?

02-00:41:04

Oliver: Well, the best example's on the roof of the garage; they just put a seal coat up there instead of putting a roofing membrane over that, because they knew we were going to build something. Then water leaked through that roofing membrane and damaged twenty or thirty cars on the roof, the top parts of the top floor of the garage, which we paid for. There were little things like that. Who's to know? I might have made the same decisions. I'm not being critical of the decision, I'm just thinking when you look at it in retrospect, maybe— But it did finish on time and on budget, and I give them credit for that.

Rubens: Do you think maybe another whole set of offices—This was the beginning of the expansion of the museum. This was to have—

02-00:41:41

Oliver: Yeah. No, this building could have used—Never had a boardroom. If you've seen that trustees conference room on the third floor, that was the boardroom, in theory. Well, the board was bigger than that room would fit the day we were in here. So some things didn't work. There were too many decisions that we just didn't realize the impact.

Rubens: Who knew? Caldwell and Lane came in with a vision and catapulted.

02-00:42:05

Oliver: The thing is, without that vision, we wouldn't have this building.

Rubens: Then the whole economy takes off. So then nothing particularly to say about that? The building opens; it must have been very exciting for you.

02-00:42:15

Oliver: Yeah, it was great.

Rubens: Then when do you start—You're then really responsible, starting in '92. The museum doesn't open till '95, but '92—

02-00:42:25

Oliver: I became president of the board in the nineties somewhere, in the mid-nineties. That happened when Brooks Walker stepped down.

Rubens: Right, '94.

02-00:42:38

Oliver: Brooks came to me at a board retreat. I was on the board a relatively tender amount of time when I was asked to chair something called the committee on trustees, which at that stage, was the gatekeeper for the board. Which meant you couldn't even be nominated to the board unless you got past our committee.

Rubens: Was that a long-standing committee?

02-00:43:00

Oliver: Oh, yeah, it's been around forever.

Rubens: How big, roughly?

02-00:43:03

Oliver: Oh, five or six people. It was really the toughest committee. There was good parts to it and bad parts to it. It got a little gossipy, but—I think Brooks made several wise decisions. They didn't all pan out for him, but he made several wise appointments. I remember him saying that he thought I was socially incorruptible. That is, because I didn't care much about society, I couldn't be seduced by being invited to the right parties to get somebody in this. So I took that job, and I did that for two or three years. At a retreat in Monterey, a retreat of the executive committee, Brooks came to me and said, "I'm going to step down, and I'd like you to replace me as chair." This was in—

Rubens: '95.

02-00:43:46

Oliver: When did Elaine become chairman? '95?

Rubens: Yeah.

02-00:43:49

Oliver: '94, it must have been.

Rubens: McKeon served as board president from '89 to '94, and chair since '95.

02-00:43:58

Oliver: She became chair at the end of the '94. That's about right.

Rubens: Just as you're moving into the building.

02-00:44:04

Oliver:

Brooks had really done a marvelous job in leading it. He was just amazing. It was time to step down. But Brooks, again, was another generation. Lori Fogarty came to me one day and she said, "I heard that Brooks had asked you to do this." She says, "You cannot take this job. Elaine's been president for a while. Elaine would really like to be chair, and you can't do this." So I went back to Brooks and said, "Have you ever thought about Elaine doing it? I think she'd do a good job." All this came out of this committee on trustees, too, which we made recommendations for those officers. So Elaine went to Brooks and said, "I would really like the job." Brooks, to his credit, realized that it was appropriate, that it didn't have to be a male. Elaine came to me and said, "I want to be chairman, but I'd like you to be president." She said, "I only want to be chairman three years, and I'll step down, then you can have the chairmanship." I think she did that thinking that I really wanted it, whereas I didn't really want the job. I had plenty other things to do. I was growing my business, and my son was just entering the business and I needed to work with him. So I was perfectly happy to do that. I was president for two years or three years, whatever it was, I think it was, and then I stepped down and Elaine stayed on for, instead of three years, I think she stayed on ten. Because I followed her as chair, and I think I was only the fifth or sixth chairman in seventy years of the museum. Which is too few, actually, in my opinion. That's what I was saying. I think the problem is, is being chair for ten years—Elaine probably would disagree with me. But when you're chair for that long, it gets too engrained. First of all, you as a chair lose sight of when you cross into administration, as opposed to trusteeship. It's a really fine line. So do the employees. When you're around here, and you have an office, and you have a key to the door, just like the director does, sometimes the employees even don't know who to ask for something. I made it very clear they worked for the director of the museum, not the president, not the chairman of the board.

Rubens:

Were you at that retreat where Jack Lane finally said, "Look, I think it is time to resign."

02-00:46:42

Oliver:

No.

Rubens:

This was at Silverado. A retreat at Silverado. Then he stayed about six more months.

02-00:46:51

Oliver:

I don't remember that.

Rubens:

I think you'd remember.

02-00:46:54

Oliver:

When did Jack leave?

Rubens:

Jack left in '96.

02-00:46:59

Oliver: I wasn't president anymore.

Rubens: No. You weren't chair.

02-00:47:04

Oliver: No, I wasn't chair. I wasn't chair till just a few years ago. No, I was not at that. For some reason, I had stepped down as president. Probably, I'd gone back to one of the other volunteer duties that I had. But it was clear that Elaine was not going to step down as chairman, and I wasn't going to be chairman immediately. Which was just fine. There was no rancor on my part. I'm very happy with that. So I went back to my business and other volunteer activities. Well, I take it back. I chaired the National Endowment for the Arts in the late nineties, and I did a lot of duties in Washington, D.C.; I joined the board of the Smithsonian. I just went in different directions for a few years.

Rubens: So I want to ask about that. I want to ask about those positions reflecting on SFMOMA. But let me do it by this transition. Were you of the mind that it was time for Jack to go?

02-00:48:01

Oliver: No, not at all. I thought he was terrific. But I knew that others were. I think it's very hard for a director to go through this emotional upbringing, the birth of this new institution.

Rubens: He says that.

02-00:48:14

Oliver: A lot of the trustees said—[their] mentality was, "What have you done for me lately?" No, I felt bad about it. I liked Jack a lot. I thought he was terrific.

Rubens: The one thing that Jack says—I think this is public; we could discuss this later—is that there was something about Fisher and he that just didn't click. They just were abrasive, and that became apparent in the board, too.

02-00:48:37

Oliver: Don has great vices and great virtues, like all of us. But his great virtue is he has an idea a minute about what the museum should be doing. Half of them, or two-thirds, or 80 percent of them are crazy and make no sense. When you say no, then that's okay because then the next day he's got another four or five ideas. I remember a particular retreat that we were at the previous year. Don Fisher had had an idea about the fact that we needed to get the bridge-and-tunnel crowd in here, the stroller moms and that sort of stuff, and that we ought to have a show of original Disney drawings. I remember Jack Lane saying at this retreat that, "Don, you're right. That will increase admission. But it will also slow down admission, because everybody coming in is going to have to lift those strollers over my dead body that's going to be lying in the doorway." Everybody laughed. Even Don laughed. That was Jack's way of saying, "It's not going to happen on my watch." He and Don crossed swords

with some frequency. But Jack was just too independent for Don. He was bright, outspoken. He pushed back.

Rubens: So to follow up the incredible triumph, though, of Jack, to have this museum open.

02-00:50:09

Oliver: And put the city on the map. And probably did other things. He not only challenged some of the great collections in America today. You look at the top 200 collectors in the world. There's a list of them in *ARTnews* or *Art in America*, one of those magazines does every year. I ignore it. But for a city this size, I think six or eight of the top hundred are in this city. And none of them would've been there if it wasn't for Jack Lane. He challenged all of them and taught every one of them a new way to look at things. Every one of them. Without question.

Rubens: Then there's also the national presence. I think some of these people then begin to go on—

02-00:50:47

Oliver: To do other things.

Rubens: Well, also to serve on the council of the National Gallery, on the—

02-00:50:53

Oliver: Sure. The Dia, the New York MoMA. Two or three of our trustees are on New York MoMA's board. Those came out of the brilliance of his leadership—and his intellectual challenge offered to them.

Rubens: But we never brought MoMA people or New York people onto this board. Is that right?

02-00:51:12

Oliver: Right. No.

Rubens: Was that ever an option or discussion?

02-00:51:15

Oliver: No. No. That'd be like you being an adviser of a farm club on Triple A baseball instead of the big leagues. We're still San Francisco; we're not New York. We have aspirations, but that's it.

Rubens: You go on to the NEA and the Smithsonian. Those are wonderful stories in themselves, and prestigious positions. Are you—marketing is the wrong word. PR is not the—Are you doing PR? That's not quite right. But what's your sense of how they are looking at San Francisco? Maybe you just answered it. Maybe you just answered it right now, that it's still a region.

02-00:52:00

Oliver:

It's a regional institution. I came to those roles sort of backward, some ways. I chaired the NEA because I was fairly notorious in Washington, D.C., as the chairman of a national board of review of the Corcoran Museum, which cancelled the [Robert] Mapplethorpe show. Then the director was fired, and then there was great controversy. The NEA was almost killed because of that.

I chaired this national council, investigative council of the Corcoran, to study that. The reason I chaired that is because the head of the Corcoran was formerly the head of the Oakland Museum art department—Tina Orr-Cahall—and knew me from that and said, “Would you come back and chair this for me?” So I did that. She said, “I want to be treated in an even-handed way.” Our group came back with the recommendation that the board of the Corcoran had behaved so badly that they should all resign. They did the right thing, and fired us. But because it was a controversy, then the NEA learned about me. So then I served on several NEA panels, and then eventually chaired the NEA, one division. The NEA has three divisions, and I chaired the biggest division, had 60 percent of the budget, what's called Creation and Presentation, in 1997, which was a very tough year.

Rubens:

Why?

02-00:53:28

Oliver:

Well, there was a Newt Gingrich Congress. He was out to kill the NEA. I had to chair it, go through all the recommendations, go to all the meetings, and then take that to the national council and defend the recommendations against Newt and his Hitler Youth that were after me all the time. I thought I was very sophisticated, and I was back in short pants in about two days after I arrived in Washington. It is a venal place to do business. I was very happy to leave.

Rubens:

Have you ever been in politics?

02-00:53:58

Oliver:

Politics? No. No. Thank God.

Rubens:

Then the Smithsonian. How do you get to—

02-00:54:17

Oliver:

Well, let's see. Somebody knew me from one of those Washington, D.C., ventures. I really went to the Smithsonian because I was a huge fan of their director, a guy by the name of Jim Demetrion, an even bigger fan of their chief curator, who was Neal Benezra. That's the first chance I got to really work with Neal, in the nineties.

Rubens:

That's just what I was about to ask you.

02-00:54:41

Oliver:

I knew him socially through some mutual friends.

Rubens: Which one?

02-00:54:44

Oliver: Paul and Stacy Polydoran.

Rubens: No, no, I'm so sorry. I meant Jim or Neal?

02-00:54:49

Oliver: Neal. I'd known of Jim by reputation, which is why I wanted to work with him. I knew of Neal personally, because of these friends. People from Des Moines, where he used to be. Then when we got a chance to work together, it was just terrific.

Rubens: One of the things we are seeing as a pattern in this oral history project is there's a set of generational people. And Demetrian, coming out of L.A. and then moving to the Corcoran—

02-00:55:17

Oliver: He just was the best. He was really an old-school guy.

Rubens: Apparently, he really trained people. Just really trained people.

02-00:55:25

Oliver: He had a great eye. He wouldn't have survived in the world today, because he was too common socially. He didn't want to get dressed up and go to a dinner, he just wanted to talk to artists. But any institution he ever worked with has an absolutely extraordinary collection, when he was there. Because he had an eye, just the best eye in the world.

Rubens: Is he someone you would say trained you? Not trained you, but that you learned from?

02-00:55:50

Oliver: Absolutely, absolutely. I learned from people he taught, too, because there's a generation of people like Neal Benezra, who were totally mentored by him. There's others like that, too.

Rubens: There you are in this national setting--

02-00:56:09

Oliver: I was still here and supportive here, and the ranch project was growing, and growing in notoriety.

Rubens: Are you serving on a committee? You're on the board, but are you serving on the—

02-00:56:17

Oliver: I was probably on the executive committee and chairing something. I was still actively involved here, I just wasn't *as* active. Because it was clear that Elaine

was enjoying her tenure as chair, and she was going to stay with it for a while. I was perfectly happy for that, too.

Rubens: Again, are you feeling strongly about what the museum's going to collect?

02-00:56:44

Oliver: I worked on all those things. I chaired the facilities committee for many years. So all those things, I worked on. But we had a very competent board who was really doing a good job. We didn't balance our budget very often. We struggled a little bit financially during those years, until Neal came along.

Rubens: Well, let me ask you about that. Under David Ross, *boy!*

02-00:57:11

Oliver: We spent a lot of money.

Rubens: The economy is just flying high, stuff's coming on the market, the Japanese opportunity. It's just going great, and then there's the 2000 turn. Anything particular to say about that?

02-00:57:30

Oliver: I started this fund in '99, because I worried that San Francisco was losing a major non-profit, arts non-profit a month. Weekly, other organizations were hurting, with this dot-com explosion. I was worried about non-profits getting pushed out. So I started this fund. Sometimes it's better to be lucky than smart. I raised a bunch of money from individuals who were concerned, as I was. About the time I raised—

Rubens: What'd you call the fund?

02-00:58:03

Oliver: It was a venture philanthropy fund. Eventually, it just became a series of individuals who put up this money. They put up \$100 million of net worth to guarantee financing. We went and bought buildings for non-profits, to buy them the time to stabilize themselves, to buy them the time to get rid of us and buy us out. Essentially, they were long-term loans.

Rubens: Where did this idea come from?

02-00:58:30

Oliver: Pardon?

Rubens: Where did his idea come from?

02-00:58:33

Oliver: Well, desperation, probably. I had so many friends who their organizations were being driving out of San Francisco. I think Frameline, an example we were talking about earlier, was in a building where they were paying forty-

seven cents a square foot a month rent. They came back and offered new rent at four dollars a square foot, in one month.

Rubens: Is that Capp Street? Is that when that connection—

02-00:58:52

Oliver: No, no. Well, no, this was actually Frameline, Jewish Film Festival, Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, and Film Arts Foundation. Film Arts and Frameline. These four organizations were remarkable organizations. They shared space for a long time. They were the kind of organizations that make San Francisco a rich place to be, culturally rich. They were on the brink of getting forced out of business. I looked around and they were just symptomatic; there was a whole bunch of them that way. They weren't alone, they were in good company. The only thing that really made it work well was the big bust. I had raised this money, and then all these buildings all of a sudden were empty. The landlords were desperate. So we went out and bought buildings for ten cents on the dollars, twenty-five cents on the dollar, and turned around and leased them to these non-profits and said, "Okay, now, when you get ready, buy us out. Get rid of us."

Rubens: Have any of them bought you out?

02-00:59:43

Oliver: Everyone but one. We had six buildings, six non-profits, and every one but one has bought us out. The one that hasn't is the last one; they've only been there two or three years.

Rubens: Who are they?

02-00:59:53

Oliver: Actually, San José Museum of Quilts and Textiles. So it's gone all over the place. It was really a fun project to be involved in. And really terrific people. But every stripe and color and organizational interest. It's really good. We're trying to export it. I've talked about it in New York and Chicago and Boston, to organizations. Other people are trying to do it. It really needs to happen in a down market. You need to get it right at the cusp of when the market goes down. Now would be a good time to jump back in, in the next couple of years. The fund's still there, everybody's interested, everybody'll be supportive again, as soon as we find the right mix.

Rubens: Let's pull into this, also, Capp Street and—

02-00:60:37

Oliver: Oxbow.

Rubens: Oxbow. How do you get connected to that?

02-00:60:42

Oliver:

I can blame the same woman for all of that. The most remarkable woman, by the name of Ann Hatch, who I think is Brooks Walker's cousin. She is the child of Brooks' sister. Remarkable lady, and a real interest in the arts. Again, no big ego, no social interest. Zero social interest. She heard that we were like-minded thinkers. She asked me to come on and help her with Capp Street Project.

Rubens:

How do you describe it?

02-00:61:15

Oliver:

Well, Capp Street's an urban arts residency program. We're out on Fourteenth Street and Mission. It got a little dangerous when I first joined the board. Well, actually, they were someplace else, then we moved there, and I joined the board. I finally said, "Ann, let's move downtown." So we bought a building, Ann and I, for Capp Street at Second Street and South Park. We moved there.

Rubens:

Wasn't it originally under the freeway?

02-00:61:40

Oliver:

Well, they were originally on Fourteenth. It started on Capp Street, actually. Out between Fourteenth and Fifteenth. Then moved to Fourteenth Street and Mission, between Mission and Howard. Then came to Second Street. It stayed on Second Street, really, until Ann decided to merge it into CCA's exhibition program. I introduced her to people at CCA, and we negotiated a chance for it to merge. The reason I did that is because Ann then, by that time, after running this thing for twenty years, was on to Oxbow and the formation of Oxbow.

Rubens:

It's really her idea?

02-00:62:15

Oliver:

Then she dragged me into Oxbow for the founding of that. With the Mondavis, Stephen Thomas, and a number of people we knew, we started that. It really struggled for the first few years.

Rubens:

For the record, let's say what Oxbow is.

02-00:62:26

Oliver:

Oxbow is a residency program for high school students in their junior year of high school, to come there for six months and study all of the high school subjects, but with a particular emphasis on art. So that let's say you're taking Spanish. The Spanish would be co-taught by a Spanish teacher and an art teacher. It's this remarkable education. It was for high school students in their junior year of high school.

[End Audio File 2]

[Begin Audio File 3]

Rubens: Who picks the architect for Oxbow? What's the decision?

03-00:00:10

Oliver: Ann did. She had worked with Stanley Saitowitz before on a couple projects—in fact, on her house, which I built for her. I hate doing houses, but I couldn't—She moved next door to me on Telegraph Hill, when we lived on Telegraph Hill. She was my next-door neighbor, too.

Rubens: When did you move to San Francisco?

03-00:00:29

Oliver: Mid-nineties, I guess. I'd have to look. I spent seven years building my dream house up on Telegraph Hill. My wife moved into it and hated it from the day she moved in.

Rubens: She had seen the plans?

03-00:00:39

Oliver: Yes, but she didn't read the plans. I had a fool for a client for those seven years, which was me. I owned the construction company, so I never had to sign anything. It was a crazy thing to do. But it was a wonderful house.

Rubens: Who was the architect?

03-00:00:52

Oliver: Jim Jennings. It won every kind of award it could possibly win, and was the poster child for exuberant architecture. She just hated it. We lived there three years, two and a half years, and she said, "Get me out of there."

Rubens: But you wanted to be in San Francisco. Your kids were grown up, it's a little closer to—

03-00:01:08

Oliver: The kids were gone, they were in college.

Rubens: Easier to go to Napa. But your construction company's over in—

03-00:01:13

Oliver: The construction company is in the East Bay, the ranch is in Sonoma County. So it was an easy thing. I was here.

Rubens: It's a good commute, to go there.

03-00:01:19

Oliver: I had a reverse commute; it was good.

Rubens: You're saying Ann Hatch moved in next to—

03-00:01:23

Oliver: Ann built a house next door.

Rubens: Now, the question I want to ask you, as you're doing this venture, non-profit, philanthropy, you're doing Oxbow, you're involved with the Smithsonian and other things, are people at the museum pulling on your coat strings? Are you doing enough here that they're happy?

03-00:02:10

Oliver: I think so. I think that Elaine was so involved in everything here for all of her tenure that I wasn't missed. I don't mean that negatively. I think that I came for the things that needed to be done on facilities or finance or whatever.

Rubens: You were a good board member.

03-00:02:26

Oliver: I was a good board member. I thought I was a good board member. It really wasn't until she decided to step down and they needed a chair that they came back to me. She did the right thing. She and Neal took me out to breakfast and asked me for a million dollars. They said, "Well, if you won't do that, how about being chair?" So it's just like hitting somebody with a stick and then saying, "Well, that's painful; how about this less painful task?" So I said I would do it for three years. Actually, I said, "Let me think about it." This is damning somebody with faint praise, but it was actually a very good thing, in some ways, for me, because some boards that you get onto, or volunteer organizations you get on, it's much tougher to get off than it is to get on. So it was much easier for me. I resigned from seven boards when I took on the chairmanship here. Six of them, I'd been looking for a way to get off for a long time. So it was much easier to call and say, "Listen, I've taken on this new task, and I really am going to step down from your board. I love you still, but I'm really going to step down." It was the right thing to do. So it was very, very good for me. This was a big job. This was a big job, but if you take another big job, you have the right to organize your life a little bit. It was a good chance for me to get out of some things. So the timing was good for me.

Rubens: Right before we talk about that and maybe what happened under your chairmanship—maybe we'll have to do that another time. Board development. You represented a new younger force.

03-00:04:01

Oliver: It's scary when you're sixty-five and the "younger". No, you're right. The first people of color that came on this board came under my direction.

Rubens: That's exactly what I wanted to get to. I know that it was you.

03-00:04:12

Oliver: I went after all of them. This was a bunch of old white men, is what it was. I was really struck by that, because I went to the seventy-fifth anniversary recently, of the ballet's opening. They brought out all the Lew Christensen

Award winners, which is this annual award. These tottering old white men just like me came out on stage, and that's what it was. It was so completely obvious that it was not a diverse board. We needed it. We're a diverse community. Then I came with that Berkeley mentality, I'm sure, some people said. But it was time. It was good for this board to look at that.

Rubens: How did you go about that?

03-00:04:48

Oliver: Recruited. I started asking people, "Who of color, who of diverse background is interested in the visual arts?" I went to every gallery dealer in the Bay Area that I knew, and other volunteers. I scanned other boards. The problem is I felt sorry for—if you were an active, philanthropically-minded minority in San Francisco, you're just deluged with options. You have lots of options. So I had to find people that were interested, but also I had to do a little salesmanship, too. So I went out. To my great joy, the first two recruits are still on the board.

Rubens: They are?

03-00:05:25

Oliver: Dennis Wong and Chuck Collins.

Rubens: Chuck Collins. Did you have to sell this hard to the board?

03-00:05:35

Oliver: No. They recognized it. The problem is the board was so social that they only knew each other—either their business or social connections. Often, those people weren't in those same sets.

Rubens: Pretty much, it was, again, an older generation. I've asked several people—

03-00:05:52

Oliver: I'm not being critical, it's the nature of how they were brought up. I remember a great story. Jack Lane transformed the board in several ways. When he came and told these people, "Listen, you've been collecting the wrong thing for twenty years," half of them quit. They thought Jack was wrong. The other half that stayed on said, "Well, maybe you're right." But the big thing is, when the decision was to move to this building South of Market, I remember seeing in the archives, letters, resignations from some of the little old ladies that wore white gloves to the board meetings that I remember, saying their mother told them never to cross Market Street and they weren't about to cross Market Street and go to that museum. Now, how generational is that?

Rubens: Very.

03-00:06:29

Oliver: In their mothers' era, they probably *didn't* cross Market Street. I think we just started an effort to find younger members, more active members.

Rubens: Never success—not speaking of you, but the board in general—of getting dot-comers.

03-00:07:02

Oliver: No. We've always had a problem with that.

Rubens: Just not an area they—

03-00:07:05

Oliver: Well, now, I think that some of the dilemma is—you can go to the San José Museum and Stanford and some of those; they didn't have much success either—that money is just too new. No, it's just too new. It's too new. They're not philanthropic. They need some aging on their success in order to understand that you have responsibilities to give it away.

Rubens: Whereas Elaine McKeon's daughter, or Woolsey's children, or—

03-00:07:29

Oliver: They were raised in a philanthropic home. They understood it. Most of these guys were still jeans and t-shirts, and they were working in their garage, inventing these things.

Rubens: Are you first-generation philanthropic? I don't know if your father—

03-00:07:42

Oliver: My parents, they didn't have much money, but they did a lot of volunteer work. Wrote checks. But they were writing twenty-five and fifty dollar checks, when it meant something to them.

Rubens: So you were raised somewhat with that sense of community.

03-00:07:55

Oliver: I understood that I had a responsibility. I had some success, I had to give back.

[the remainder of this audio file is sealed until 2035]

Interview #3: February 28, 2008

[Begin Audio File 4]

04-00:00:27

Oliver: It could be. Could be. I have so little interest in that kind of stuff. It's probably generational. It's probably generational because those guys who are successful businessmen that are half a generation older than I, or even a generation—I'm considered a youngster on the museum board, which is really frightening, if you think about it. That generation ahead, that's say older than me, does two things that I don't do. They like boys' clubs, and they play golf. I don't do either. You don't play golf, then you don't belong to country clubs and all these other things that. I've been invited. I just don't care about it. I never had the time for it. That's really a generational thing, as much as anything.

Rubens: Jack Lane mentions in his oral history that he had never been to as many black-tie affairs as when he came to San Francisco. He's at Harvard, et cetera.

04-00:01:46

Oliver: I did tell you, did I not, in a fit of honesty, that one of the things I negotiated before I took the job as chairmanship, was that I would only do that twice a year.

Rubens: For SFMOMA.

04-00:01:55

Oliver: For SFMOMA. The funny thing that I was going to that night— Did I tell you what I was going to?

Rubens: I don't think so.

04-00:02:03

Oliver: It was something called the East Bay 100, which is the one hundred most important men in the East Bay. It meets once a year. One dinner a year, black-tie dinner, at the Claremont Country Club. We pay \$500 or \$1,000 for this ticket. I resisted it for twenty-five years. Finally, I had two or three people say, "If you'd come to this, it'd be the only time we'd see you all year." So I did it. This is my third year. I did the first year. I didn't do the second year. I went this year, and it was fun to see people that I did business with. Mostly, for me, it was people I'd done business with who were all retired. I don't see them except for this event. I wish I could see them some other way, but so I went, not because I wanted to, but because it was fun to see these people that I wouldn't see.

Rubens: Does that mean that someone has to die to clear space?

04-00:02:58

Oliver: Supposedly. Supposedly. I didn't even ask who got carried out of the room when I came in. I didn't want to know. I'm not antisocial at all, but I just am

not—It's something that doesn't interest me. Drinking with the boys doesn't interest me.

Rubens: We discussed last time that that was why you were an ideal president and then chair.

04-00:03:19

Oliver: In some ways, I'm a great solution for them because I haven't taken money from any of them on the golf course or ticked them off at some social event, because I'm not there—which is best. I'm a real neutral person, which is great.

Rubens: Such wonderful changes are beginning just now. We just interviewed Neal [Benezra] in his office. Right behind him, we could see this gargantuan crane. You're starting building on the sculpture garden. Gerson Bakar, I guess, basically, had pulled off the ownership of the—

04-00:04:05

Oliver: Gerson certainly started us. He challenged us to do it, gave us some money to get some preliminary planning done, and he was a generous contributor, amongst several other people who were really paying for it. There's some remarkable generosity. The museum raised the money quietly amongst four or five people to do the whole thing.

Rubens: We're talking about the sculpture garden being on top of the—

04-00:04:28

Oliver: The roof of the garage.

Rubens: The garage.

04-00:04:30

Oliver: The agreement we had when we put the garage together is that we would own the garage parking area 50/50, 50 percent each, with the phone company. But the roof, we would have in perpetuity for the museum. Essentially we brought the approval power and the authority to the arrangement. Not that AT&T needed power, but they needed our—the museum asking for something in this town is easier to get than AT&T asking for something. Just being practical. They needed parking. It was a good [partnership]. They treated us fine. It was a fine partnership. We have no objection to it at all.

Rubens: So the parking garage was built.

04-00:05:10

Oliver: Oh, no question about it. We built it together.

Rubens: "Together" means *financially* together?

04-00:05:16

Oliver: Yes.

Rubens: I should have the date, and I don't have it right here.

04-00:05:22

Oliver: Well after the museum. The museum was probably eight or nine years old before the parking lot was built. AT&T owned the ground. It was an on-grade parking lot. We built the building, five or six stories, we together.

Rubens: Now what I understand is that there's going to be a connection between the sculpture garden—

04-00:05:42

Oliver: Yes. AT&T had the right at any time, if they wanted to, buy out our share, which they did. Generously, very nicely gave us money that replaces the income we lost. They took the garage back and sold it, with the building, the AT&T building around the front on New Montgomery, 140 New Montgomery.

Rubens: That old beautiful white building.

04-00:06:01

Oliver: But we retained in perpetuity the rights to the roof. Because we had always planned the sculpture garden. Gerson had always wanted to do it, and that's great. He challenged us to get it back on the front burner. We did. We went through this architectural competition. This brilliant young architect won the competition, Mark Jensen, and designed it. The design was so really wonderful that raising the money was easier than we thought, actually. A bunch of wonderful philanthropists came forward and it was all paid for before we broke ground.

Rubens: Is Jensen local?

04-00:06:34

Oliver: Yes, San Francisco-based. I've done many, many buildings with him, wearing my construction hat. He's just a wonderful guy to work with and a really bright star in the design field here.

Rubens: My understanding is that usually—and maybe you could point to when this changes—that commissioned buildings, important buildings, have not been San Francisco architects. Obviously, the [Mario] Botta building was part of a whole new trend of having a signature. We have [Renzo] Piano and we have—

04-00:07:08

Oliver: I think that's right. We had a discussion when we started the sculpture garden discussion, should we go back to Botta? This is no criticism of Botta; he did a brilliant job for us here. But two things. A gentleman by the name of David

Meckel, who I had hired years ago as the dean of architecture, and helped me found the architecture school at CCA. Wonderful guy. He, as a sideline, does competition advising. We decided to have an architectural competition. We had a lot of discussion with David, and David, quite rightly, convinced Neal and I—and it was not much trouble convincing me, or Neal, for that matter—that San Francisco has this group of young design firms, some of the best in the country and that we should limit this competition to San Francisco firms who had never done a public building, were never a FAIA—which is a fellow—sort of the gray-haired side of the architecture world—and that we're to take one of these Young Turk firms and give them a chance to do something special. He put together a magical list of some of the best and brightest in the Bay Area, had this fabulous competition, and Jensen won. I give all the credit to David Meckel. It was his idea, and I think he was right on target. It was great for San Francisco to have one of their home-grown kids do this work. Mark's hardly a kid. He's probably forty now, but he just really has a very bright future.

Rubens: Is Meckel a local—?

04-00:08:40

Oliver: I think he's Southern California. When I hired him, he was working for a firm in Los Angeles. He was in charge of the design for the Olympics in Los Angeles.

Rubens: How did you know of him?

04-00:08:50

Oliver: I met him through a guy that I knew from the CEO of the college, who came out of a Los Angeles art school. He told me about him. He was one of the best people we ever hired.

Rubens: Is he still there?

04-00:09:11

Oliver: He's not the dean. I think his title now is special assistant to the president. But he is a fixture on the Bay Area architecture scene. Really an amazing guy. If you ever need a public speaker, he's a great public speaker. He's a very interesting, funny guy. It's really just great to have him in the Bay Area.

Rubens: To move South of Market was already a bold thing. It was understandable that one would have international competition.

04-00:09:46

Oliver: I think we needed to put the museum on the map. We needed that. But the museum was on the map, so it was a chance to turn inward, which was really great.

Rubens: So this will be done in a year.

- 04-00:09:55
Oliver: It should. Maybe the end of this year.
- Rubens: It will connect to—one will walk out—
- 04-00:10:01
Oliver: You'll come to the fifth floor, go out of the elevators, turn left, and you'll walk across a bridge that'll take you into the pavilion that's on top of the roof, and then through the pavilion, out to the garden itself.
- Rubens: Whatever ownership changes that may take place—because did you just say—forgive me. Did AT&T sell that?
- 04-00:10:28
Oliver: They sold the garage to a developer, but the roof is in perpetuity ours, the museum's.
- Rubens: At the very end of the conversation with Neal today, we were talking about fractional gifts, and the debate over—
- 04-00:10:41
Oliver: The problem with them?
- Rubens: Why he couldn't get the Sam Francis that was 70/30. So this is not fractional, this is all—
- 04-00:10:49
Oliver: 100 percent ours. Yep.
- Rubens: In your mind, having played such a role in building around the Bay Area—I just *love* the story about that you were involved with the Oakland Museum. I just didn't know that. I mean in building, not when you came—
- 04-00:11:07
Oliver: It's what put me in business.
- Rubens: What is your sense about how much the Yerba Buena can tolerate? And let me just refine the question a bit. So much is going on right now. The Piano is going to be—No, the Piano is the—
- 04-00:11:27
Oliver: At Golden Gate Park?
- Rubens: At the Golden Gate Park. But it's a [Daniel] Libeskind that will be the—
- 04-00:11:31
Oliver: Libeskind will be the new Contemporary Jewish Museum that opens in June.
- Rubens: I guess the Mexican American Museum, the Mexican Museum is still—

04-00:11:45

Oliver: That's probably stalled. Sadly. It would be great to have it here. [Ricardo] Legorreta, the architect, is a brilliant architect. It just probably isn't going to happen. At least not in the near term.

Rubens: The other kind of development on the horizon, before we get to Fisher, is the San Francisco Historical Society, which is going into the Old Mint.

04-00:12:12

Oliver: I built the building they're in now for them, built that for the Historical Society. On Mission Street.

Rubens: The California Historical Society?

04-00:12:24

Oliver: California Historical. Oh, there's a San Francisco—I'm sorry. There is a City of San Francisco museum.

Rubens: Well, let's just get this. You built the California Historical Society?

04-00:12:30

Oliver: The facility on Mission Street.

Rubens: Was there anything there before?

04-00:12:33

Oliver: It was a hardware store that when I first went into business, I used to buy door hardware and locks there, called Huntley Hardware. They went out of business and actually moved. They moved South of Market, further South of Market. The California Historical Society took that over. I thought that's what you were saying. I think it's the City of San Francisco Museum, not California, that's going in the Mint.

[material deleted]

04-00:15:49

Oliver: No, but San Francisco's really changing, because certainly, Yerba Buena, what's happened here is good. You could take this progression and move it all the way down Second Street or Third Street, and Fourth, and out into Mission Bay, into the ballpark, and look at UCSF. Just drive down King Street, drive along the Embarcadero and go on 280 and just see. There's whole neighborhoods down there that didn't exist before. It's really quite wonderful. I live down there, and so I've just seen this. I built the building there that I live in, that was the tallest building South of Market, which was a twelve-story building. Now we're like midgets in there. The one across the street from me is sixty-five stories. It's just changed.

Rubens: Twelve stories was the tallest?

04-00:16:30

Oliver: This was eight or nine, ten years ago. We forget that that was a one-story warehouse building, something like that. It's just *exploded*.

[material deleted]

04-00:17:06

Oliver: I had that site in escrow. If you remember what was there before, was that used to be Union 76 tower, with the clock there. I had bought that and had it in escrow to give to the college, CCA, for their San Francisco campus. They did some studies and decided it wasn't safe. This is ten years ago. This is before we bought the San Francisco campus where we are now. There was a lot of crime, street crime in the area. Pickpockets and car break-ins, things like that. Because they could break in, or mug somebody on the street, and get right on the bridge and disappear. The college decided they couldn't have young people—girls, women, particularly—leaving campus at night, walking to their car. We gave it back to the owner. It probably was a good idea because where they moved was much better. Bigger and better.

Rubens: The general question here is how much saturation can this area take? Neal was saying, in terms of his vision for the next ten years—he hoped it wasn't fifteen years—that there would still be more space. But he felt that it had to be adjacent.

04-00:18:19

Oliver: For the museum's expansion?

Rubens: Yes.

04-00:18:21

Oliver: No question about that. I think he's right. We may begin to make that move by acquiring some adjacent space, but it's so much better if we could expand here contiguous to the existing space. We're working on it.

Rubens: So to be discussed?

04-00:18:39

Oliver: To be continued. To be continued. We're raising some money so that if an opportunity to expand is available to us, we'll take advantage of it.

Rubens: What is right next door?

04-00:18:49

Oliver: We bought the building that's on Howard Street, where Heald's College was.

Rubens: That abuts?

04-00:18:55

Oliver: The museum owns out into Natoma Street, and it backs up to Natoma Street. We'd have to bridge over it, but it would work. We're very excited about it.

Rubens: Heald's used to be at the ILWU building.

04-00:19:09

Oliver: It's one of the last things of my administration. With the generosity of individuals, that was purchased.

[material deleted]

Rubens: You are not in as leadership a position as you were. You've come in twice, filled great gaps, raised money. But you're on the board. Are you on any committees?

04-00:20:27

Oliver: I'm on the executive committee. I'm on the compensation committee.

Rubens: The trustees committee.

04-00:20:34

Oliver: The committee on trustees, right, for new trustees. The executive committee, I'm still involved. And miscellaneous strategic committees. They don't let you get away. It's much harder to get off this board than it is to get on.

Rubens: How many meetings would you say you go to a month?

04-00:20:55

Oliver: Four or five now. Instead of four or five a week, I'm going to four or five a month.

Rubens: Madeleine Grynsztejn would have a presentation four times a year, I think. Originally, it was once a year. Are those the kind of things that you would go to hear?

04-00:21:27

Oliver: If I can. Oftentimes now at the board meetings, we're trying to make it more interesting by having curators come and talk to the group when they're there.

Rubens: I thought that's what Madeleine did.

04-00:21:39

Oliver: She did, but mostly what Madeleine focused on was talking to what's called the accessions committee, the committee that buys art for the museum. So those are some very pointed things that she did multiple times a year.

Rubens: But she did do one—?

04-00:21:55

Oliver: At the beginning of the year, she would usually talk about their missions and what she saw as the future—

Rubens: To the whole board?

04-00:21:59

Oliver: Yes, right.

Rubens: That was a bit unusual? Most curators didn't do that?

04-00:22:05

Oliver: Well, it's something we started probably three or four years ago because without that, the board meetings are sort of a—[pause] I can say this is no reflection on my predecessor or the person who followed me. The board meetings are not the most exciting part of the museum because they end up being sort of a reporting-out session of committees' work. The most important, the most interesting work is at the committees because that's the time you can actually discuss something. Then all the committee chairs come together and report out at the board. We tried to change that so that the board would be better attended and more interesting.

Rubens: When you're saying "we," you mean—

04-00:22:42

Oliver: Well, Neal and I. We tried two or three different things, with varying degrees of success. We had two or three meetings during my tenure where we broke into four or five groups. The whole meeting was devoted to discussion, in smaller groups of five or six or eight people, of a single topic. At the end of that, they reported out what their recommendation was.

Rubens: Did you have a facilitator for those groups?

04-00:23:07

Oliver: There was a staff person at each table. It was really a trustee issue, as opposed to, should we buy a red one or a blue one? It was more a programmatic or a high-level decision. Some people loved those, and some people hated them. We tried just different things to make it more interesting. We brought in curators to give reports on upcoming exhibitions or discuss recent acquisitions and things like that. So we tried to mix it up. Chuck's continued some of that. We're doing some of that in Chuck's tenure too, which is good. Having been to a thousand board meetings in my life, of various organizations, it's very difficult to make them interesting.

Rubens: I do want to ask you about a sixty-member board. Isn't that a bit unusual?

04-00:23:57

Oliver: To have a board that big, you mean?

Rubens: Yes.

04-00:23:59

Oliver: Oh, there's some boards in this city that are bigger than that, believe it or not. But I'll tell you what it does do is it makes the board meetings not interactive at all. With a sixty-member board, almost no board member speaks up during the meeting.

Rubens: It's a receiving, it's a reporting out. You said that. Okay.

04-00:24:13

Oliver: Yeah, it's a reporting thing. That gets old after a while. The cut off has to be fifteen or twenty, if you're going to get people to have a discussion.

Rubens: Well, that's what the committees are.

04-00:24:23

Oliver: That's what the committees are for. But the problem, the danger of that is that people go to the committees, their committee, and then they don't go to the board meetings because it's boring and they don't hear what the other committees are doing.

Rubens: The annual reports, of course, they're as detailed.

04-00:24:39

Oliver: But that's always after the fact. If you want people involved, trustees, you've got to find a way to get them involved. Now, in this current structure we're in, with a sixty-member board, the involvement is almost all at the committee level.

Rubens: I was going to ask you, is there a way of saying how many of the sixty attend?

04-00:24:56

Oliver: I'd be surprised if, at any board meeting, there's much more than 50 or 60 percent of the board members.

Rubens: But do you think that's about normal?

04-00:25:05

Oliver: It's not that unusual. Well, I take it back. On smaller boards that I'm on, where the board membership is twenty or twenty-five, then it goes up to 75 or 80 percent.

Rubens: It's very noticeable.

04-00:25:13

Oliver: Yes, it's very noticeable.

Rubens: I understand that. That's exactly what I would have thought. But there's never been any discussion of—you couldn't possibly—

04-00:25:22

Oliver: No, but we've had pressure on occasions to raise the number of the board members. There are boards in this town that are seventy and eighty board members.

Rubens: Give me an example.

04-00:25:33

Oliver: Well, I think the symphony or the ballet. The major performing arts organizations. I'm not critical of it. I think you either have to be seventy or eighty *or* twenty. The models are just different ways of running an organization.

Rubens: When I asked you about board presentations, you're someone who talked in the first interview about how you got interested in art, how you educated yourself. Then you had a national experience. Do you have a few museums that you would like to just point to that you think are really exciting? Understanding that you're not undercutting SFMOMA, but that are pole stars for you?

04-00:26:17

Oliver: There's a couple. I go to them for different reasons. Some, I go to for the collection, and some I go to because I like the physical character of the space. My favorite museum in the United States is, without question, the de Menil Museum in Houston. I just like the way it looks and feels when I'm there. I feel [it's] accessible, it's a beautiful space, I feel as though I can see it all. My favorite museum as an experience in the United States—and this is funny, coming from this museum—is the Neue Galerie in New York.

Rubens: I haven't seen it. The Klimt?

04-00:26:52

Oliver: Yes, right, where the Klimt is. It's just a wonderful space. It's worth a trip to New York. Because it's a very small museum. It's basically German-Austrian work from the turn of the century into the 1920s.

Rubens: So you're saying the de Menil as an experience, and the Neue as a—

04-00:27:21

Oliver: As another experience. But if I'm going just to see the art, then you really have to go to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. L.A. County.

Rubens: Were you at the opening?

04-00:27:34

Oliver: No, I wasn't. Other than San Francisco.

Rubens: I'm looking forward to seeing Des Moines [Art Center] and Walker [Art Center] and—

04-00:27:43

Oliver: The Walker is a great museum. I wish I liked the building better, but I think the artwork is really great.

Rubens: Then do you pay attention to the outreach, the programmatic outreach that the museum does? You yourself have been so keen to be working with community groups because of what you did with the nonprofit, what you did with CCA, and then of course, board development.

04-00:28:17

Oliver: I'm on the mailing list of probably six or eight museums, and probably eight or ten non-profit arts organizations. I look at everything they do to see if there's somebody doing something interesting and new. I look at it as saying, is this an idea I want to take back to an organization I'm currently very involved in? Or have I seen this before? You're making judgments about that all the time.

Rubens: So that's the final follow-up question regarding other museums that you're interested in. Do you see programmatic things that—

04-00:28:49

Oliver: That we should be doing?

Rubens: —for one reason or another, have not quite developed as fully here.

04-00:28:53

Oliver: Here? No. No. Some museums are quite small, can do things differently than museums that have this sort of baggage that they have to drag around. But I don't think SFMOMA—and here I've been involved twenty years—has ever been as strong administratively as it is now. Neal is brilliant, a great joy to work with. The only thing I miss, absolutely the only thing I miss about stepping down from chairmanship is spending time with him. I think he's that good. I think he's surrounded himself with really terrific staff, some of the best and brightest that I've ever worked with. So the museum's in a really terrific spot right now, from an administrative—I've been around so long that there have always been holes. Someone has just left and they're trying to find somebody almost as good, because the museum has been blessed with great staff.

Rubens: Who have then been recruited elsewhere.

04-00:29:49

Oliver: Exactly, exactly. I think Neal has brought together, in his tenure here of four or five years, terrific people.

Rubens: Speaking of education, per se—

04-00:29:58

Oliver: I don't see a single hiring error. I think he's really done a terrific job. The problem is, he's got people that are good enough that are probably not going to stay here, they're going to go on to something else.

Rubens: Well, Grynsztejn.

04-00:30:06

Oliver: Madeleine and Jay and—

Rubens: And [John] Weber went to—

04-00:30:09

Oliver: And John Weber and Jay and—those are all terrific people. I'm lucky, in Jay's case, because he went to Sonoma County and an organization I'm very involved in, so I'll get a chance to work with him up there.

Rubens: Jay?

04-00:30:22

Oliver: Jay Mullinequx, who was the director of development here for a long time, has moved and now is in that same position with the Sonoma County Community Foundation, which I've done a lot of work with.

[material deleted]

Rubens: I have only a few more questions. I want to know in general, how you would articulate a vision for where this museum is going to go in the next four or five years.

04-00:32:47

Oliver: Well, Neal and I have talked a lot about this, that it will come down to a physical plan that we get. This museum desperately needs two or three things. It needs more gallery space. It needs some flexible gallery space. This building is quite beautiful, but it's all finished space. We need a rougher space, a kind of a warehouse that artists could come in and transform some way, whereas these galleries are all quite finished. This building, there's some really wonderful parts to it, but what it needs is some flexible space. I think in the new plan that we're talking about, that would build a building out here behind me, we're talking about those kinds of things—which is a new physical vision for the museum. Not removing any of the formality that we see now, but adding some flexibility, and maybe bringing office staff, where we now rent space, back into a new building. So to save us money in the long run, we build a new building. Because we spend a fair amount of money renting off-site space for things now. The building as originally conceived ten, twelve years ago was brilliant. We've just matured in it. In that maturation process, we need to now add to the original vision. Not change the original vision, but add to it, filling in the blanks of things that we didn't do the first time, the first time around.

Rubens: When you articulate that, in your mind, what are the publics or the communities that the museum is serving? Is it time to tap into others, as well?

04-00:34:31

Oliver: If I had a disappointment with some things that didn't get done—and you may hear some about this—is that if you come in here on a Thursday, Friday, Saturday afternoon, in a time when there's a holiday period or when this museum is likely to be busy, an awful lot of people look like you and me. When you come in here on a free Tuesday or a half-price day or something, there's a lot of diversity that is missing on the other days. I'd love to see that diversity here all the time. It's expensive. To come here and pay the admission price is not an inexpensive thing. If you are a mother, father, and two or three kids, it's almost prohibitive. So what happens is we take the art world in, but if we continue this, we perpetuate this elitist myth [that] only *we* see it and understand it, which just isn't the case, as you know. There's lots of diversity in the art world. If you look at artists, not just artists who work at the ranch, but artists in the art world, it's a very diverse world. There's no barrier to someone *being* an artist. The barrier seems to develop around the visiting of it. I'd like to see that change. It's a challenging thing to do because admission, while it's not the biggest part of our income, we need income, some income coming from admission. It's something we'll struggle with. I think all museums do. We're not alone. But if I was to say, that's something that I'd like to see grow, change here, that—I must confess, not everybody agrees with me. So that's all right. It's my bad Berkeley upbringing.

Rubens: But it seems like a problem of the times, in the sense that there is such a fragmentation of institutions. There is a Mexican American, it doesn't have a space yet. There is the [Museum of the African]Diaspora, even if it doesn't have a place.

04-00:36:41

Oliver: Well, there's another dilemma. If you talk to people—I've been doing this for so long that I have a number of friends, who I have enormous respect for, who are part of my generation, or even more senior than my generation, who came out of the museum world, who if you asked them today to talk about the state of the museum world in the United States, would be quite depressed about it. If they were to say that—five years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago, decisions about what a museum should buy and show were made by the curators and directors of museums. I can't say I subscribe to it 100 percent, but there certainly is some truth in it, that today, what a museum should buy or show is not dictated as much by the museum as it is by big donors, wealthy collectors, powerful galleries, et cetera. If that is true, if you even believe part of that, that's a sad commentary on the state of our museum world, where the money is dictating what we see, as opposed to the professional eye. There's a lot of disenfranchised leadership in museums of America today because of that. Now, those are primarily art museums; those aren't museums of science and industry, but they are art museums. It could be just a bubble we're going

through. In the eighties, there was a bubble. The ranch project for me started because we saw similar characteristics—this was in the eighties—and we were so dismayed by it that we essentially opted out of—

[End Audio File 4]

[Begin Audio File 5]

Rubens: When we were changing tapes, you were saying that you have strong opinions about where—

05-00:01:33

Oliver: Oh, well, this is just a philosophical issue. I have strong opinions about where volunteer leadership ends and professional leadership takes over. I don't believe that trustees, volunteer leadership, cross over and begin to micromanage non-profit institutions. I'm philosophically against that. I tried to bring that philosophy when I was chair. I think Chuck is continuing that, which I think is good. I don't mean this as criticism of any of my predecessors, I think I'm only the fifth or sixth chairman in the history of a seventy-five-year-old institution. I don't mean by this to criticize previous leadership at all because there was always good reasons why they were there. But I think it's really important to change leadership every three or four or five years because it gives new people a chance to participate and take ownership and pride of possession, and philosophic changes. I think it also gives the professional leadership a change as well, so the professional leadership is dealing with a different personality. See, the idea that I said that I would do the job, but not more than three years, and Chuck to say that he'd do the job, but not more than three years. While both of our leadership styles and characters are very different, it's a chance that three years from now, somebody new will do it.

Rubens: How would you characterize Chuck?

05-00:03:01

Oliver: He's a little more corporate and distant. I don't mean that in a negative way, but because he's a busy, active professional who travels more than I do. I was busy and active, but I was local, so I was more accessible because I was here. He's even more hands off than I am. It couldn't come at a better time. He's got great professional leadership here, so he feels confident in that, and that's great. I don't see a difficulty with that. But I think the idea that it changes, that it is going to change every ten years gives a chance for more people to come on and feel as though they have a chance to have a leadership stake, which I think is great. Great.

Rubens: I'd like to end going back to your ranch. I know that you showed us and talked about the Nauman being the first. Right? Is that right?

05-00:03:53

Oliver: The very first work was by Judith Shea.

Rubens:

Judith Shea is the first. The steps. The steps are the Nauman.

05-00:03:57

Oliver: The Nauman steps, the Bruce Nauman steps, right. They were done in the mid-nineties.

Rubens:

What I hadn't put together was Neal's interest in him. Was that a coincidence? You didn't know.

05-00:04:13

Oliver: No, no, I had no idea of that.

Rubens:

What made you interested?

05-00:04:19

Oliver: Two or three of the artists that I selected are some of Neal's favorites. Bruce Nauman; Miroslav Balka, the Polish artist, is one of Neal's favorites. In fact, Neal and I both have a very wonderful relationship with this quite wonderful Polish artist. Enough that Neal and I went together alone, both of us, down to Santa Fe, to his opening in Santa Fe last summer, summer before last. It's so interesting because Neal and I independently had come to this great interest in these same artists.

Rubens:

Who's the third?

05-00:04:55

Oliver: Well, the third is a wonderful gentleman who, sadly, passed away quite tragically, by the name of Juan Muñoz, who was going to be the artist who followed Ann Hamilton at the ranch. Then he died. He's just this amazing artist, really amazing.

Rubens:

I didn't know about Muñoz until I studied Neal and read his writings, catalogs.

05-00:05:15

Oliver: He did a show. The great Juan Muñoz show was done by Neal. Juan was going to be the next artist at the ranch. We talked about it, he'd visited. So—

Rubens:

Say a few words about who Muñoz was.

05-00:05:28

Oliver: Well, Juan Muñoz was this extraordinary Spanish artist who passed away quite tragically of a ruptured aorta, I think, when he was on vacation on the island of Ibiza, in the Mediterranean, and couldn't get health care, couldn't get medical care fast enough, and died. His wife, Cristina Iglesias, is a wonderful artist. They lived in Madrid. It's a great loss.

Rubens: How did you come to—

05-00:05:54

Oliver: I had followed his work for years and was fascinated by it. All I have, actually, are some drawings of his. But it's a great loss to the art world, a loss to me personally, because I was looking forward to working with him. Juan Muñoz was actually interesting in that he was a writer as well, a critic, and had written quite interesting, and was fascinated with Richard Serra's work. So he came to the ranch, actually, to see the Serra there. So it's a real tragic loss. The Tate Museum in London just opened a new retrospective of his work. Neal just came back from London, at that show. He's a wonderful, really extraordinary artist. Died way before his time. I think he was probably in his forties when he had this tragic accident.

Rubens: Is it public yet? Are you working on a new installation or—?

05-00:06:52

Oliver: We're not public yet, but I'm going to New York next weekend to have a meeting with an artist, and we're hoping we'll come to something that can be public.

[material deleted]

Rubens: The original mission of the museum, Grace McCann Morley had a vision of the new Pacific. She was traveling throughout Latin America, and then she had representatives who were going through Asia. That sense of San Francisco being the new modern cosmopolitan and reaching out. I'm just wondering if you share some of that.

05-00:08:19

Oliver: I'm sure somebody has said to you along the way the great and most amazing part of Grace McCann Morley's role here is that in most great urban situations, the museums were started by wealthy women who hired a male museum director to build a museum, where in San Francisco, this was started by wealthy men who hired a great female museum director. Which is quite extraordinary, and in some ways, symptomatic of San Francisco. We were always a little bit different, doing things that were maybe not wholly acceptable. Acceptable is probably the wrong word, but we were groundbreaking. We were not as steeped in old world prejudices here. San Francisco never has been.

Rubens: Well, they showed the *Guernica* here first.

05-00:09:07

Oliver: Absolutely. So those kinds of things were just groundbreaking things here. Look at Pollock. Jackson Pollock had his first museum show here. Because Grace McCann Morley was able to break through what was the traditional models. So in some ways, it is so great to be part of that history.

Rubens: But I want to ask you about, do you see an effort to get into Latin America or into Asia now?

05-00:09:47

Oliver: Clearly, that we're positioned to do that. In some ways, it starts with collectors being interested in it, and supporting the museum, and urging the museum to go in that direction. One of the great collectors who was associated here now lives in Colorado, but he has invested quite heavily in Asian art. We're going to be doing a show of that here, from his collection, early collection, a selection from Asian, Chinese contemporary art. That's the [Kent and Vicki] Logans. You could ask Neal about that, if you're going to talk to him again. I think that's great. Here in a few months, we're going to be having this great Frida Kahlo show here. One of the few places in the United States where it will be.

Rubens: One thing Neal said is that in an effort to balance the budget, he cut back on the number of exhibitions.

05-00:10:42

Oliver: Yep. It's always a difficult thing to do.

Rubens: Therefore, how many experts can you have traveling to Asia and traveling to Argentina and Latin America. But the Berkeley Art Museum does have the Chagoya [retrospective]. It could have been here.

05-00:10:56

Oliver: I'm a big fan of Enrique Chagoya. Neal and I went to his gallery opening in New York together. I own Enrique's work. I think he's a brilliant artist. Sometimes there just aren't enough hours in the day, or money to hire—I think Neal would *love* to have both a Latin and Asian specialist. It's a dollars and cents issue.

Rubens: So hopefully—

05-00:11:23

Oliver: Someday, someday.

[End of Interview]

Lisa Rubens is an historian with the Regional Oral History Office. She directs projects on California Culture and the Arts, Architecture and Land Use development, University History and the History of Social Movements. Dr. Rubens earned her Ph.D in History, as well as a Masters in City Planning, at UC Berkeley. She has published monographs on women in California and on international exhibitions and is currently completing a book on San Francisco's 1939 Worlds Fair.

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