THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**JOHN B. HIGHTOWER (JH)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
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TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: For the record, John, why don't you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your background.

JH: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, May 23, 1933, and was moved with my family of Georgians to New York City a little over a year after I was born. My memory of the South is only what I gleaned from visits in summertime and family lore, which was pretty strong.

SZ: On both sides you were from southern families?

JH: Yes. My mother was from Athens, Georgia, and my father was from Sparta, Georgia. I have two brothers who live in Atlanta now, and my father went back to Atlanta when he retired, and died there.

SZ: You still have a southern accent.

JH: If it is, it's because it's protective coloration in Virginia.

SZ: So why did they move away?

JH: My father got an assignment with the company he was working for in Atlanta. During the Depression you were so thrilled to have a job, so that when they asked him to

move up to headquarters in New York City, he was thrilled, because it was a promotion for him at the time. I grew up on Long Island, went to public schools there.

SZ: Where?

JH: Westbury, and Floral Park was the focal point for most of my early years.

SZ: So that was through the [Second World] war?

JH: Yes. Then I went off to Mount Herman School in Massachusetts, the Northfield Mount Herman Schools they are known as now, and graduated from there in 1951 and entered Yale in the fall of that year. I graduated from Yale in 1955.

SZ: So it was not part of the family tradition to go to a northern boarding school?

JH: No, no, no, no. Actually, the University of Georgia was a strong influence in the family pattern, and of course my mother lived in the university town. Both my mother and father went to the University of Georgia, but I think it was only for two years, and when they married, she was eighteen, and he was twenty. They came north, in time, after the birth of two sons (prior to me) and a daughter. So I have three siblings.

SZ: Tell me, as a boy, what you were interested in. I presume you had been sort of turned into more of a northern kid.

JH: Music, but peripherally, not as a discipline to pursue. And words and writing -- that's the strongest interest and influence. Sports were sort of a nominal, modest intrusion. I was reasonably good at them, so I didn't have to take them too seriously. And Yale was absolutely a marvelous, wonderful experience for me, just terrifically exciting and intellectually stimulating. Lots of the bing-bang of ideas and expressing them, learning how to express them.

SZ: I have heard that at Yale at that time, because there were so many older, former GI's at school as well, that there was a kind of intellectual exchange and excitement.

JH: Maybe. I was a little after that. I graduated in 1955 and I think most of the guys came immediately after the war, in '49 and '50. Maybe there were some still lingering in '51, but they were probably in graduate school more than undergraduate. The interesting group that matriculated with my class at Yale -- it may have been the first class -- was the Ford Scholars, these very young kids who were absolutely brilliant. As it turned out, the valedictorian and the salutatorian of my class were both Ford Scholars. They were about eighteen when they graduated. The valedictorian was just astonishing, Jan Deutsch was his name.

SZ: Whatever happened to him?

JH: He teaches law at the Yale Law School. It was written up in *The* [*New York*] *Times* when he graduated from law school as first in his class and simultaneously got a Ph.D. in history. That's really scary.

SZ: Serious brilliance. So anyway, you were telling me about Yale and what it was for you.

JH: Yes. And different insights, people and experiences, things I had never had a chance to exposed to before. Wonderful professors who were incredibly stimulating and exciting, who would regularly receive applause after the end of a lecture.

SZ: And not out of politeness. [Laughter]

JH: [Laughing] No, not because we were being polite. That we were awake was a certain amazing accomplishment.

SZ: And you studied what?

JH: English, initially.

SZ: So what about the visual arts in all of this?

JH: Not terribly strong an influence at all. I mean, I took the obligatory Vince Scully course on architecture. I didn't take an art history course, which I still regret to this day, and wish I had. I was choosing my courses by virtue of who taught them, and I don't remember if there was a particularly exciting professor of art history, although there must have been.

SZ: But it wasn't something that you were particularly interested in at the time.

JH: No.

SZ: Was Robert Penn Warren there then?

JH: Yes, he was, and Cleanthe Brooks, Maynard Mack, and an absolutely wonderful man by the name of Richard Sewall. After Yale, I went into the Marine Corps for two years. Another seminal experience, as they say. Two years in the Marine Corps had as dramatic an effect on me as four years of Yale.

SZ: In a different way [laughing].

JH: In a much different way. It was a powerfully lasting, lingering experience. That you could always go about two or three more miles on any project that you were engaged in than you thought you could. Giving up was never an allowable excuse. And also, being responsible for young kids not a whole lot younger than I was at the time.

SZ: You went in as an officer?

JH: Yes.

SZ: Were you ROTC?

JH: We had something called PLC at the time, a much less intrusive program than ROTC.

SZ: In terms of the college experience?

JH: Yes. No courses required during the college year.

SZ: Is that something kids routinely did?

JH: They did at that particular time because the Korean War was in full flight, and one wanted to make sure you were protected during the four years you were in college, as opposed to being drafted. And if you were in an active program, that guaranteed that you would have four years of college.

SZ: When you were in the Marine Corps, where were you stationed?

JH: Quantico, Virginia and Camp Lejeune, the most centrally isolated spot in the United States, or so it seemed to a lad of twenty-two. [Laughter]

SZ: Two very long years?

JH: Two very long years, yes. [Laughter]

SZ: And then, I guess, you got out in '57?

JH: I got out in '57 and my father, who remarried, after the death of my mother, very cleverly married a woman who had a one-room apartment on the corner of 49th Street and Second Avenue. Oh god, it was wonderful.

SZ: And the El was still up, yes?

JH: No, the El was not up; it was down by then. The 49th Street bus stop was right below my window on the third floor. It was just a terrific, terrific little apartment off an inner courtyard. I guess I was there probably about eight years or so.

SZ: So you came to New York...

JH: Right smack out of the Marine Corps.

SZ: Did you have a plan?

JH: [Laughter] Of course not! With a degree in English literature. [Laughter] My plan was to get a job. [Laughter] I succeeded in that. Very soon thereafter, with the then National City Bank, now Citicorp. And oh god, how miserable that was. It was just awful. I was two years with them.

SZ: They put you in the training program?

JH: Yes. Then from there I went to work for a petrochemical firm that was owned by an uncle of a close friend who was also working there, a roommate from college. That was about two years or so. And then I began to take a turn that made a little more sense. I went to work for American Heritage Magazine. I don't remember the dates.

SZ: This was all just sort of accidental?

JH: Yes, pretty much.

SZ: So you went to work for National City Bank but you knew pretty soon thereafter that...

JH: That I doubted that I'd be a banker. Although I applied for the banking training programs -- Chase and National City and Brown Brothers Harriman, all of those things. I don't know why I thought that was such a good idea. If you weren't at the Harvard Business School, you were down on Wall Street, bumming around banks, trying to figure out what they were all about. [Laughter]

SZ: So American Heritage Magazine was the first...

JH: That was the first [move that] started to make some sense. I was assistant to the president there, a guy by the name of Jim Parton. He was one of the three founders of American Heritage after the original Historical Society let go of it. That was fun. I didn't find any assignment there that I was particularly good at [laughing], but it didn't seem to matter much. I was finally urged to seek employment elsewhere. I had gotten to know the executive director of the New York State Arts Council. He asked me to take a job.

SZ: His name was?

JH: John McFadyen. That must have been in 1962 or ‘63. And that just took off. I was barely there a year and I became executive director. It was a very small agency but a wonderfully exciting one. The budget was about $500,000.

SZ: Which would be moderate? Or small?

JH: Very modest. One of the smallest agencies in the state. When I left, seven years later, it was at $22 million. And that was just an extraordinary, wonderfully formative, absolutely spoiling [laughing] experience. It was just terrific. It was a very young staff. I don't think there was a person there who was over thirty-five. I've been trying to figure out what made it work so well [laughing], ever since.

SZ: What was its history? It was established after the Second World War?

JH: No. It was established in 1961 by Nelson Rockefeller when he became governor. He hired Lawrence Roberts, a cousin and a scholar, a former director of the Brooklyn Museum, to do, essentially, the initial survey and frame the Council and its mission. Legislation was passed and Roberts left, as agreed. Roberts did his survey for the governor in 1960, and then John McFadyen became executive director in 1961. In 1964, I became executive director.

SZ: I guess what I'm trying to get at is what the history of state support for the arts was.

JH: It didn't exist.

SZ: So this tied very much to Nelson Rockefeller and his interests.

JH: Absolutely. He had tried to start a national council for the arts when he was Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs in the Roosevelt administration, but it was too soon after the agonies of the WPA projects in the arts to take hold. It really framed the paradigm, the model, for the National Council for the Arts and preceded the National Endowment. We had wonderful success with the programs that were initiated, in large part because we were very conscious of the fact that it was a political entity. As a government agency and a public agency it had to be politically sensitive. We were infinitely more cautious and aware of political influence and ways to guard against it than the history of the National Endowment ultimately became. Those lessons learned from the federal theater project in the 1930's were very quickly forgotten during everybody's romance with Nancy Hanks, because she made it all seem so effortless. But she was extremely savvy politically and very, very protective and careful of not getting the National Endowment for the Arts embroiled in any kind of potentially political disaster. And the State Arts Council had been set up that way. She had been an advisor to Nelson Rockefeller. She was very much involved in some of the early planning of the State Arts Council in New York.

SZ: So what you're saying is that those potential pitfalls were very much on everyone's mind?

JH: Yes, absolutely. We established programs to avoid [them]. We would send a list of agreed-upon artistic groups to tour throughout the state, and the local agency made the choice from that list. We didn't make the choice. So the burden, if anyone was offended in Middletown, New York by a performance, Middletown was the one that didn't know what they were doing, not the State of New York.

SZ: That in some way then precluded any sort of a grand vision for what this kind of state support should be, right?

JH: I think so. It was important for the State Arts Council not to make the choices directly. Not to put its stamp of approval on any one group. When we got involved in what was called the CAPS program -- the Community Artists for Public Service -- that worried me more than any of the other programs we established, because I was fearful that we would be seen as virtually endorsing artists' lifestyles and anybody who wanted to have a field day with that could really go to town. Nothing happened as a result, but it was, again, set up as a contract for individual artists to provide a public service to the state by doing essential what they do, producing works of art.

SZ: You said that just about within a year of your coming you became the executive director. Tell me about your contact with [Nelson] Rockefeller; what his feelings were for what was being done.

JH: Well, he was extremely enthusiastic about what we were doing and the agency became a very active and creative agency, putting on programs in every single community in the state, including even what we called at the time a "ghetto arts" program that provided performances in inner cities during the '60's riots when every major city in the state and country was blowing up and burning. It was the only program in the state at the time that was working within those inner cities. Again, the

way we went about it was thoughtful and seemingly obvious to us, but of course, it evidently wasn't obvious to others. We figured that if you wanted to have programs in the inner cities that they ought to be run by blacks, who knew what they're doing, and if the communication with the government agency was uncomfortable, then we had to figure out a way to bridge that gap with another telephone system or whatever it took. Which we did, and we had a group of absolutely wonderful blacks who became a part of the staff, who were just fabulous. A woman by the name of Vinnette Carroll, who wrote *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope* and *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*. Vinnette was just sensational. She would say things like, "This is a program of riches, not of poverty." And a woman by the name of Barbara Lawrence, and Don Harper, who died suddenly and tragically. And having the State Arts Council's programs work so effectively, we really did become the darlings of state government; our dinky little budget was getting phenomenal mileage. And Rockefeller was, of course, I mean, the political benefits were legion. He had an effective entre into the black community which translated into political support, and he was very enthusiastic about the Council and the job we were doing as well as the members of the Council, who were wonderful. Seymour Knox was the chairman of the Albright Knox Gallery of Buffalo; Henry Allen Moe, who had been a long friend of the Governor's, worked with him as Inter-American Coordinator, head of the Guggenheim Foundation, and, in fact, its designer; Dorothy Rodgers, Richard Rodgers, Helen Hayes; a couple of labor guys, the head of the Musicians Union and Actors Guild.

SZ: So the Council as a group would essentially rubber-stamp decisions you had made, or make decisions together about what would get funded?

JH: They would set the policy and direction of the Council from year to year, and we did that through what was essentially a series of retreats, for want a better way of describing it. We would go over some of the programs where we felt there were potential pitfalls and ask ourselves soul-searching questions about them and make determinations about whether or not we should alter them or keep them as they were. And most of the time we reassured ourselves that we were doing the right thing about

most of this stuff. Council members also were actively involved in making the determinations on the individual grants, with a panel of experts. The Council had to approve the recommendations of the peer panels; the panels were not allowed to achieve the degree of autonomy that they did at the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts].

SZ: [Nelson] Rockefeller didn't have any place in that?

JH: No. He was very careful to make sure that no one intruded on the process, politically.

SZ: You said that there was concern in the beginning about staying out of politics, and yet, in the mid-'60s when everything started to burn, you ended up using the arts as a political tool.

JH: Yes, we did. That's probably where I took a wrong turn. I thought the arts were potentially the most powerful, positive force on earth, and was willing to let the Governor know that if there were any social problems he wanted solved in the State of New York, he should use the State Arts Council [Laughter]. He would occasionally say, "John, you just take care of the Arts Council; leave the politics of the state up to me." He was terrific. He really was wonderful.

SZ: You mean you knew him pretty well?

JH: Yes, I got to know him pretty well. But particularly, it was always a couple of times a year around budget time, and at other more social occasions. And Nelson Rockefeller was somebody who you felt you had known your entire life after being with him for about two minutes. He was incredibly warm. His communications skills were not wonderful verbally, but boy, for body language he couldn't have been beaten. Then I got to know him pretty well on the Latin American mission, too. I guess it's called the Rockefeller Mission to Latin America in 1969. He asked me to be one of the arts' representatives on that. Tom Hoving was one, Monroe Wheeler was

another. That was exciting. It was a graduate crash course in Latin American affairs. I only got to go on two of the four trips, but they included Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, Jamaica, Barbados, Dominican Republic.

SZ: That was in 1969, really before the whole growth of the international money markets, anyway. It must have been interesting.

JH: In 1969, that's when the State Arts Council made the spectacular leap in terms of funding. In the budget for 1970, the Governor requested an appropriation of $22 million dollars.

SZ: So that was a jump from ...

JH: Just a little bit over $2 million dollars. And he said to me, "Now you have to see that we have the support for this." Oh boy, great, I know how to do that [laughing]! I'll call up everybody that's ever been given a grant and say go [laughing]." It was phenomenal. We unleashed this incredible monster, which has been the basis of the political constituency from thereon since. It was the year in which abortion reform was first debated, and there was more mail and communication generated by the arts for the arts appropriation than that first legislative debate about abortion.

SZ: What was, in your mind, the real impetus for this great increase at that time? What was going on to explain it?

JH: I think the Governor felt that there was a really strong political constituency which he had tapped that was very enthusiastic about his leadership as a result. His secretary -- Secretary to the Governor is the title of the position, it's really Deputy Governor, Al Marshall -- Alton Marshall -- he suggested during the budgeting session to Nelson that the appropriation for the [New York] State Council [on the Arts] should be revisited and increased $12 million dollars. This was down in Puerto Rico, at the Dorado Beach Hotel, and the governor reputedly told him, "Al, I never thought I'd hear you

enthusiastic about the arts. If we're going to do it, let's do it; let's make it $25 million dollars." And Lieutenant Governor Malcolm Wilson said, from what I understand, "Nelson, you're out of your mind. $25 million dollars for the arts in an election year? That's madness!" And he [Nelson] said, "Okay, Malcolm, we'll compromise. We'll make it $20 million." [Laughter] And then, in 1970, I was asked to be director [of the Museum of Modern Art].

SZ: Right after your agency got all of this money.

JH: Yes. I had stayed on at the Arts Council to engineer the campaign to make sure we succeeded.

SZ: Just to finish off this part of it, so in the seven or eight years that you were with the State Council, how do you describe the changes, what you saw percolating out there?

JH: Well, it was, first of all, the Sixties. That in and of itself probably says a lot.

SZ: Well, to me it does. [Laughter]

JH: We heard about these people who were going to put on this big concert up there in New York somewhere, and said, oh, what they need is technical assistance, about three hundred dollars worth of experts. One of the guys who was involved in it drove up and suddenly realized it would take him about an hour to get to where the concert was taking place because of the traffic. He wrote the most incredible report on Woodstock. “You cannot possibly imagine what the sound of 250,000 people clapping is”, I remember him writing in his report There was that whole aspect of the period. But there were also other parts of the experience in those years. We seemed somehow to be able to touch a chord both in terms of the ghettos of the city with black and Hispanic programs, on their own terms. This was not fine art, this was street stuff, and very, very rich. On the other side, we had an Architecture Worth Saving program which for some reason galvanized the rural communities of the state.

It was a strange phenomenon; they were so deeply caring about the quality and texture of their community, which had been eroded and erased and blotted out by various decades of abuse. And when we came along with the Architecture Worth Saving program, it was as if we were Henry Hill coming into town selling band uniforms.

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SZ: The vitality of it had as much to do with the setting in which it was all taking place. You were talking about this as a very political time, which was not necessarily the original intention.

JH: Our agency seemed to be particularly in tune to what was happening in the '60s and capable, because of the people who were there on the staff, and the members of the Council, too, of striking a positive and resonant chord with communities throughout the state, whether it was with symphony orchestra concerts in small communities or these individual cultural projects that tapped the roots of individual communities in one way or another.

SZ: You traveled a lot, I presume.

JH: Yes, a lot, an awful lot.

SZ: But your headquarters were in Manhattan?

JH: Yes, in the Fisk Building over on 250 West 57th Street.

SZ: So tell me how the offer [from the Museum] came to you.

JH: After the mission to Latin America, and having gotten to know [Governor Rockefeller] better, there was a search for a director of the Modern after Bates Lowry was dismissed.

SZ: Did you have some familiarity with all of what was going on here? Did you have contact with the Museum?

JH: Not on a day to day basis, but I knew Dick Koch and I didn't know too many of the curators at the time. I had known René d'Harnoncourt. We lived in the same building on the Upper West Side.

SZ: 333 [Central Park West]. See I know everything! [Laughter]

JH: What a building. A wonderful building... The usual interviews. I didn't think my point of view was going to be particularly sympathetic to the Museum. I thought I was pretty careful about articulating what it was, essentially, that I was interested in the arts as an active, positive force for change in American society.

SZ: Were you a Rockefeller Republican?

JH: No, I was a Democrat.

JH: An Adlai Stevenson Democrat.

SZ: Had you been aware of the whole “Harlem On My Mind” controversy at the Met?

JH: Oh yes. We were deeply involved in that. Allon Schoener was head of the visual arts program at the State Arts Council when I was the director. We supported it. Allon made a wrong turn for the right reasons, and there were a couple of things that got away from him. He had an inexperienced young woman write the preface [to the catalogue] which got him into the soup. But even the black staff members at the State

Arts Council were concerned that he wasn't giving as positive a portrayal of Harlem as he could have, and that they were concerned about that. Now, that didn't stop blacks from going to The Metropolitan Museum in a way they had never gone before, in vast numbers, so on the basis of that it couldn't have been all bad, I guess.

SZ: It was a precedent for political content in an art museum and an interested trustee body.

JH: Yes. That was the introduction of sorts of the social, and perhaps political, side of the arts into the arena of fine arts. And it was an unhappy fit, and it wasn't ever going to be particularly easy.

SZ: So the prospect of being director of the Museum for you was...

JH: Terrific. It was irresistible. Although I didn't want to take it on false pretenses. That's a very naive remark, because it doesn't have anything to do with that. What I realized soon after I got there is that you're hired to perform a task, you're not necessarily hired to bring a particular socio-political-cultural point of view to the job. If I was a little older and a lot less naive, and a whole lot less arrogant, I would have figured that out. It's an entirely different institution from the State Arts Council, and the success of the State Arts Council was not necessarily going to be achieved at The Museum of Modern Art by doing the same things that the State Arts Council could do. It's a public agency, for one thing, concerned about public activity.

SZ: The Museum had no public money.

JH: At the time, no, and studiously avoided seeking it. That's also a carryover from the '30s, from the Federal Theater Project.

SZ: So you said you had the usual round of interviews. I guess [William] Paley was President and David Rockefeller was Chairman at the time.

JH: Yes.

SZ: You met them?

JH: Yes, and Bill [William A.M.] Burden and Blanchette Rockefeller and Liza Parkinson [Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Cobb] and Philip Johnson. I think the most critical exchange I had during that period of time was with Philip Johnson. I said something like, “I think a museum should be more than a warehouse for elegant gems.” And Johnson said, "Oh, no, I don't. I think that's exactly what it should be, and no more.” And he was right. So with all of my thirty-something hubris, lack of experience and naiveté, I walked into the director's office on May 1, 1970. It was a Friday, I think. That weekend Cambodia was bombed. The Tuesday thereafter the Kent State shootings occurred. The Friday or the Saturday of the following weekend was the huge march on Washington. And, of course, at the time, The Museum of Modern Art was the focal point for all of the angst and agony and frustration of the artists' community in the city about the war in Vietnam.

SZ: There had been some stuff before you got there, right?

JH: Yes, a lot. Sustained demonstrations every weekend, mostly about the Vietnam war. Also, I think it was one of the first weeks I was at MoMA, the American Association of Museums conference was in New York City. Foolishly I was asked to speak at one gathering at The Brooklyn Museum.

SZ: You mean foolishly you did?

JH: Foolishly I did, yes.

SZ: Why was that?

JH: The Art Workers Coalition was in the process of trashing the whole show. I gave a mea culpa for museums: we may not be as socially conscious or constructive as we could be, but, there is a possibility that that could change, words to that effect. I would certainly give a different speech now than I gave that night. I think that was the second week I was there [laughing]. Right smack in there at some point I got a call at 2:30 in the morning saying that there were going to be demonstrators against the Museum and that they were going to block people from coming into the Museum. I wrote a manifesto and we had it pasted across the front of the Museum, essentially saying, whether from the left or the right, limits to artistic freedom are no more correct regardless of their intentions, and the Museum will be open free today to the public, which blunted the attempt to close the Museum.

SZ: Do you feel you had a mandate from the trustees? A charge? Was it clear?

JH: I thought I did, but it wasn't clear. They seemed, at least what I heard, which could have been selective hearing, was that they were concerned that the Museum had lost its direction and its cutting edge that it had had in the '30s and particularly in the '40s, and that they weren't sure how to get it back or even whether they wanted to get it back, or whether it should try to become active or be more reflective. Philosophically, with my infinite capacity to rationalize everything, if I provided one critical service to The Museum of Modern Art it was to allow it to realize the kind of institution it wanted to be, and what kind it didn't want to be. It did not want to be active, it wanted to be reflective. It was more comfortable and more capable of that. That first three to four weeks were so incredibly critical. Within that period of time, I had lost whatever advantage and confidence I brought to the table.

SZ: Because?

JH: I think because... I was more interested in change than in making the place work better. Essentially that's what Nelson Rockefeller said to me at one point afterwards.

He said, "I should have told you to try to make it work better before you tried to change it."

SZ: Would you have listened to him had he told you that?

JH: I don't know. Yes, coming from him, I think I would. I would have recognized the soundness of that advice.

SZ: So understanding that you lost this sort of critical advantage, is that something you understood at the time or is that hindsight?

JH: Hindsight. I certainly felt embattled right from the beginning.

SZ: Well, I can't image why. [Laughter]

JH: It was compounded by the fact that my then wife's sister was marching with picket in hand up and down in front of The Museum of Modern Art. “Hey Anne, how are you? How are the kids? Give them my love, will you?” My nieces [laughing].

SZ: You were young, too.

JH: Oh god, I was impossibly young. I was thirty-seven. [Laughter] I was not well-seasoned. If I had known then what I know now, [laughing] I could have been a contender.

SZ: Describe the character of the Museum from your point of view. You were in the middle of labor problems as well.

JH: Yes. That was percolating before I got there, but it really came to full blossom after I arrived.

SZ: I imagine the opinions on the right to organize varied tremendously, too.

JH: Yes. And I think, again, I know a lot more about labor negotiations and strategy now than I did then. God, what did I know? Dealing with the Mafia at South Street taught me a lot. But I certainly would have been much, much tougher, not so agreeable to allowing them to meet on the premises; I would have made them meet in the union hall, which would have probably had an effect on some of the members of the staff at the time. The place was just unbelievably bloated, too. The size of the staff had gone from about 290 to 540 over the course of a very short period of time.

SZ: Probably from the time the new building opened in 1964.

JH: The new building opened, Bates Lowry became the director, and boom, this huge complement of very young, able, bright, willing, energetic people were hired and then given absolutely nothing to do, realizing that the senior curators in each of the departments had all of the authority - that's where all of the action was, and they weren't easily going to relinquish it or turn it over to any young whippersnapper. The one great exception was John Szarkowski, who just is a consummate gent and teacher. Whatever he knows he wants other people to know. I mean this was only two years, but I can't imagine more happening. It was also the great clash of Chinese warlords, as they were called, -- Bill [William S.] Rubin and Bill [William S.] Lieberman; the two Bills, ay-yi-yi. Actually, that situation, I thought I handled pretty well [laughing] by getting an outside committee to come in and deal with the difficulties between the two. It was strange. Terribly treacherous, dealing with their separate power blocks. I can remember Bill Rubin putting together the Picasso exhibition *[Picasso in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art*; MoMA Exh.#993; Feb. 3 - April 2, 1972] from the collection and of promised gifts to The Museum of Modern Art; it seems to me it was Picasso's 90th birthday. I remember the day I called Zurich, Bali, Acapulco and Munich, trying to get permission to release eight Picassos that were in Wolfgang and Florene Schoenborn's apartment in the Westbury for the exhibition at the Modern twenty blocks away. And, P.S., those paintings normally, at that time of year, would

have been at The Museum of Modern Art in storage as a courtesy to the Schoenborns. I did not get the paintings because Florene was very upset about what was happening to her friend, Bill Lieberman.

SZ: What was happening?

JH: Bill Lieberman had the title, interestingly enough, I mean, symbolically he occupied the director's office and he was Curator of the Department of Paintings, Sculpture and Works on Paper. It was an enormous assignment. It was really two-thirds or so of the entire curatorial responsibility of the place. And of course, it infuriated Rubin, particularly if it intruded on Rubin's ability to get something done, which it did, upon occasion. It was clear that there had to be a realignment of the assignment, but Lieberman was jealously guarding his territory, and Rubin was tenaciously trying to whittle away at it. So the exercise was to make a more equitable distribution of responsibility between the two, and also to make Bill Lieberman's responsibilities more realistic. He had really gotten kind of carried away with his prominence.

SZ: Did it come down to which collectors backed whom?

JH: Sure, the showdown. Those were the people that were called in to battle in one way or another, like Florene Schoenborn withholding her Picassos for this big Picasso exhibition because it was Rubin's exhibition and she didn't want to give Rubin any advantage when Bill Lieberman was apparently or ostensibly "suffering".

SZ: During your tenure it wasn't really resolved; I think it was in '73, if I'm right, the official realignment.

JH: They were at each other during my brief period of time there, and the process had begun to realign.

SZ: So they put you right in the middle of that?

JH: Oh yes. [Laughing] It was great. Bill Rubin, whom I really am very, very fond of, is such a marvelously outrageous fellow. I remember him storming into my office. This was the summer of the strike and all of this stuff. He came back looking sunned and relaxed from the south of France, having written chapters of his book from his garden in Provence. I don't know what set him off, but he came in and made a wonderful remark, furious, "I can't stand it any more. I've had it with these prima donnas around here. Everybody in here thinks they're a prima donna. I am a prima donna, but I deserve to be a prima donna. Most of these people don't deserve it." [Laughing] There was something kind of errantly beguiling about that [laughing]. Oh dear.

SZ: So here was this institution in the middle of all this. There was Lieberman and Rubin, and then there was John Szarkowski, and Arthur Drexler, and Willard Van Dyke.

JH: Yes. Drexler, I was firmly convinced and still am, that he was a corrosive, almost toxic influence on the institution. Brilliantly negative. Could take the creative risk out of anything, almost any idea or situation, and render it seemingly silly. I decided, because I didn't know any better, that if the Museum was going to be a more positive and active place, that Arthur Drexler just could not remain at the Museum any longer. Well [laughing], what an absolutely stupid conclusion to come to [laughing]. So I actually asked Arthur Drexler to resign. We met at the Century Club and I asked him if he would consider resigning. He said, "No, absolutely not. You'll have to fire me." I thought, "This conversation is not going the way I had planned it" [laughing]. Soon thereafter I knew exactly what he meant, of course. He had his coterie of protecting trustees and donors. Somewhere along in there it became evident, and I mentioned it to Nelson Rockefeller. I said, "I feel like the CEO of a corporation, all of whose vice presidents have more controlling shares in the corporation than I do." It really was quite evident that The Museum of Modern Art was a combination of four or five museums that were centrally administrated.

SZ: That's interesting. So in fact, and I guess it's hard to know why, you had these various curators/department heads, who had been around, some of them for a long time and had real power, had their power blocks or whatever, and I guess that it was hard to come in and establish your hegemony [laughing].

JH: [Laughing] It sure was. [Laughter]

SZ: But were you conscious of the need to do that?

JH: Well, I wasn't conscious of the need to do that because I had had this idyllic experience at the State Arts Council, and it really just didn't serve me very well. It was too ideal. That's the way it should be.

SZ: Allegedly, Arthur was disappointed because he had hoped to have been appointed director. Was that something you knew?

JH: Yes, I did know that. That made me uneasy. Although I don't think his candidacy was seriously considered by the trustees. At least that's the impression they gave.

SZ: And Riva [Castleman] wasn't really department head yet. Waldo Rasmussen? I'm thinking of all the major players here.

JH: Waldo, that was a very agreeable relationship. He had a wonderful program and was doing it very well. Riva Castleman, I was responsible for making full curator and there was some objection about that. Not because anyone thought she didn't deserve it but because their confidence in me had diminished so much that if I was recommending her for a full curator, it was worth questioning. Wilder Green...

SZ: Who had been part of that triumvirate.

JH: Walter Bareiss, Wilder Green, and Dick Koch. I thought Wilder was an immensely decent fellow. Not particularly strong at all. Not too long after I arrived he took the job at the American Federation of Arts. Dick Koch was a more complicated relationship for me. I really did some things that showed remarkably bad judgment that affected his ability to do his job, like getting rid of the head of security at an early stage over, now I can't even remember what the reason for it was. But it was a very strained relationship in the early period of time I was there and it became a very considerable and quite strong bond towards the end.

SZ: Supportive, you mean.

JH: Yes, extremely supportive. He is just a really extraordinary gent. Walter Bareiss was an interesting person. I could never quite figure out his agenda. It seemed responsible and supportive and dutiful in terms of his role as a trustee, but I always thought there was something else, another reason, and I didn't particularly want to find out what it was. But I never felt quite comfortable about him, for instinctive reasons, not anything more than that.

SZ: I personally can't remember now who was head of the Film Department.

JH: It was Willard Van Dyke. I liked him immensely. A wonderful photographer.

SZ: Those were the major curatorial players.

JH: Right. John Szarkowski, Arthur Drexler, Bill Rubin, Bill Lieberman, Willard Van Dyke.

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: Well, exhibitions. Thinking of this whole experience as a force for change, how much input did you have in exhibition planning?

JH: Not an awful lot, except for one concept that's still there. It started out as, it's working title was ‘Curator's Choice’. It's now the ‘Projects’ series. That was started when I was there with a fair amount of insistence on my part. I really feel as if I had a considerable hand to play in initiating that series. And that I feel really pleased about, especially since it continues. It did exactly what we wanted it to do. It gave the Museum a little bit of opportunity to exhibit really contemporary, cutting edge stuff, and I was less enthusiastic of continuing the blockbuster show -- every two or three years another Picasso show. I don't feel that way any more because...

SZ: Because you're not 38 [laughing].

JH: Because I'm not 38 [laughing]. There's a reason the St. Matthew Passion is played all the time [laughter]. It's just wonderful [laughter].

SZ: Did you have a lot of support from the young staff to create something like ‘Projects’?

JH: Yes, particularly Kynaston McShine and Jennifer Licht.

SZ: Here I have a few other things that happened during your tenure. The pay-what-you-wish arrangement?

JH: Oh, yes.

SZ: Which you could or couldn't see as a political act.

JH: [Laughing] Yes.

SZ: Anything about instituting that, that comes to mind?

JH: Not particularly. We were increasing admission at seemingly regular intervals, and this seemed a way to sort of take the edge off that insistence. And also the

Metropolitan was having terrific success with theirs. But of course, they started from no admission. The numbers are kind of fascinating. Every time the suggested price was raised the actual contribution would come up a percentage. I don't know that it was a relative percentage, but a little bit.

SZ: "What's Happening?," which was a film program which showed films with political and social content. "Summergarden", putting that together.

JH: Yes, I felt very pleased about that. In fact when that series of jazz concerts was no longer continued at The Museum of Modern Art, I brought it to South Street Seaport, Summer-Pier.

SZ: And then computerization of the catalogue, the beginning of it, anyway.

JH: No, actually I had more to do with that before I got to the Modern than after. We were very interested in that at the State Arts Council. We were helping that computer consortium with whatever it was they were doing and wanted to do.

SZ: Was it something where you just sort of foresaw, that [a] museum would just become sort of an experience with playing on computers?

JH: Yes. "Are Art Galleries Obsolete?," I think was the thing, where you could just call up...

SZ: Oh, isn't that interesting. And that was long ago.

JH: [Laughing] Yes. Have you seen the micro gallery at the National Gallery? I haven't either but it's scary. That's what you do -- push buttons and you see. And that CD ROM of the Barnes Collection is just astonishing.

SZ: It's not the same experience.

JH: No, it isn't. It isn't at all.

SZ: But it's an interesting tool.

JH: Yes.

SZ: OK, here are some shows. The Information show [*Information*; MoMA Exh.#934; July 2 - Sept. 20, 1970].

JH: That was also right at the beginning. Man, oh man, what a monster. Defending to my death [laughing] the right to artistic expression. There were a couple of elements of that that were really just horribly difficult. One was, of course, that David Rockefeller felt that it was -- he seriously objected to the exhibition, unfortunately after it was already up and exhibited, and wanted an explanation as to why and how the Museum was involved in that sort of thing, which I wrote. It didn't satisfy him one bit [laughing]. And to compound it, there was this piece by -- gosh, it's a Freudian block of his name, the artist who -- it was a ballot box [Hans Haacke]. The question on the ballot box was, "Does Nelson Rockefeller's refusing to denounce the war in Vietnam affect your willingness to vote for him in the coming election?", or something like that. His office called up and said, "John, this thing is driving us nuts. You've got to get that out of there. You've got to kill that element of the exhibition." And I said, "Not on your life. If I do that, it will have infinitely more attention than it's receiving now. If you think it's bad now, if I pull that thing, having put the exhibition up and on public view already, it'll just be a nightmare." And luckily, the Press Secretary to the Governor said, "You probably have a point", and they didn't force me to take it down. The artist was the same guy who created such a flap at the Guggenheim [Hans Haacke]. He was trying to provoke a censorship issue. Most of what he did, his fine arts pieces rather than his political arts pieces, were quite glacial and very, very beautiful, having to do with almost visually looking as if they were ice forms. Anyway, it was a very difficult exhibition to administrate my way through.

SZ: It had been presented and planned before you came.

JH: Yes. Starting at least three years before I got there.

SZ: And yet you were still held accountable for it.

JH: Sure. As a friend of mine in Virginia said over a recent flap at the Mariners' Museum -- Hunter Andrews is the name. He was the Senate majority leader in Virginia for thirty-two years, ruled with an iron fist and an acid tongue, and he said, "John, you should know, when things are going well everybody is responsible for making it happen. When things aren't going very well, you're the only one who is responsible." [laughing] The Gertrude Stein exhibition [*Four Americans in Paris: The Collection of Gertrude Stein and her Family*; MoMA Exh.#950; Dec. 19, 1970 - March 1, 1971] opened then. The one that I had a reasonable degree of input on was the Italian design exhibition with Emilio [Ambasz] *[Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*; MoMA Exh.#1004; May 26 - Sept. 11, 1972]. No particular anecdotes or anything. Although the Gertrude Stein exhibition occurred just prior to huge cutbacks of the staff.

SZ: Which is what got you into trouble, right?

JH: It was one [laughing] of many things. [Laughter] And certainly forced the formation of the union. The curator [Margaret Potter] who put the Gertrude Stein exhibition together was asked to resign at that time.

SZ: Was that the first firing that the union glommed onto?

JH: Yes. It was massive. There were about one hundred fifty positions eliminated.

SZ: Yes, but in the very beginning there was one person who was let go, right? There was someone, according to the staff's literature, somebody who had been there for

maybe five years, was let go, and then replaced by someone junior. Whether that was a question of just saving a little money on salary or whether there was another issue, I don't know.

JH: That could have been a woman who was running the Study Center [Anne Coffin Hanson].

SZ: Who had come with Bates Lowry, as I remember.

JH: Yes.

SZ: Then there were sixteen slots slated to go, and that's what became a central issue.

JH: Sixteen curatorial slots, but a whole bunch of other positions. We were running an $800,000 to $1 million deficit annually. I think that had been a fairly steady pattern prior to the time I got there. That's why I was so startled by the fact that there were five hundred forty positions on the staff in 1970, and there had only been two hundred ninety two or three years earlier, a very short time before.

SZ: They dismissed twelve. What I have here says that, in September of '70, it was one staff person who had been there for five years, and then December 15th, twelve people were slated for dismissal, plus there were other things going to be closed. The library was going to be closed to the public, and there were a whole bunch of measures. I guess in the next few months they really organized and got a lawyer.

JH: Yes. And then they had the election and they passed it. And it still exists, right?

SZ: Yes. And the strike? Was that a difficult thing to manage?

JH: Oh, yes.

SZ: [Laughing] Are you getting tired of this?

JH: [Laughing] Oh my god, it still makes me giddy.

SZ: I'm sorry [laughter]. That's why it's much nicer to spread these things out over [laughter] two or three sessions.

JH: I had forgotten all this stuff. [Laughing] It was really a nightmare. Going back through it, I know I could get through most of it pretty well now, but I don't think I could have survived all of it even now with a whole lot more sophisticated and knowledgeable approach of what's doing and how to get it done before you do it. I think the combination of ingredients that fell in place over that period of time was just amazing [laughing].

SZ: Yes, it is; totally. [Laughter] Maybe I should ask you this: Did you have any fun while you were there? [Laughter]

JH: [Pause] Not a lot. Not a lot. [Pause] Everything seemed like pushing a heavy lead uphill, with the possible exception of some moments with John Szarkowski, one of the sainted men of our day, a splendid fellow. I also absolutely adored Blanchette Rockefeller. I just thought she was glorious, a wonderful, wonderful woman, with consummate grace and easy, gentle wisdom.

SZ: And so the denouement of this brief tenure?

JH: [Laughing] Was that I had learned a very great deal in a very short period of time, and hopefully it would serve me well somewhere else. And I think it has. I certainly didn't think that The Museum of Modern Art did the wrong thing by getting rid of me by the time they did.

SZ: You didn't? Were you ready to go?

JH: I was so relieved it was unbelievable.

SZ: So you weren't surprised?

JH: Certainly not. I wasn't surprised and I wasn't bitter, and I didn't feel they'd done me wrong. I just thought I was, well, Russell Lynes put it really well: I was the wrong person in the wrong job at the wrong time. [Laughter] Or maybe the right person in the wrong job at the wrong time. Who knows.

SZ: What happened to your relationship to Nelson Rockefeller once you left? Was he mentorly about this all?

JH: Yes, he was. I didn't get a chance to see an awful lot of him, but he was still very supportive. At one point I went to see him and he said, "I hear it's not going very well." I said, “No, it's not." He said, "The trustees don't think you like them." I said, "I like them. I like them better than they like one another." I said, “I don't like all of them. I can't honestly tell you that I think Philip Johnson is a wonderful human being.” And Nelson Rockefeller made a killer of a remark, He said, "You know, Philip, Philip, he'll cut your throat soon as look at you. Hell, he'll even cut my throat." [Laughing] And I guess I said, "I still think I can do the job." And he said, "Oh, I know you can do the job, but they're not going to let you." Meaning -- he didn't say it in so many words -- but meaning that I had lost too much confidence. And ever since, I have had a very keen antenna that tells me when things are shifting and it's time to start moving on. And again, to quote Nelson Rockefeller when there was a taxpayers' revolt in Albany and he made the wonderful remark, "When you're gonna be run out of town, you want to look as if you're leading a parade."

SZ: Was it really inexperience and what you call naiveté, when you came in? For instance, you didn’t know which trustees to court or how to do that, or politically, at that time, if

you were thinking at all politically, that was sort of something that you wouldn't want to do, or wouldn't think you'd need to do?

JH: Yes, I suppose I didn't think I needed to do it; that I had been given a mandate. But yes, it was naiveté, and then also, there were the number of fairly sophisticated administrative situations that I really had had no experience dealing with. The labor union was one. The artists' demonstrations, I felt more sure-footed about. But again, I would have given a different explanation. The Museum of Modern Art was not established as a foundation to support the livelihood and lifestyles of artists. It's an institution to support the works that artists produce. "Don't ask us to take care of your lives." And other things. I keep picking up pieces of compelling sayings that would have changed the course of action. There was one that happened when I was at South Street. The staff was about a hundred and we cut back sixty-five positions to thirty-five people, and the former director and founder said, "Well, we must all remember that a job is not a right. It's a privilege." Nice. I wish I had had that phrase during the formation of the PASTAMOMA.

SZ: So when you left you went to...?

JH: American Council for the Arts, and was there for a couple of years. I established "Advocates for the Arts". That was the contribution I made there, which really didn't take off. [Laughing] We launched this campaign, a sort of Common-Cause mail-type campaign and it was, again May, May of '74 maybe. It was the month when it was clear that Richard Nixon was either going to resign the presidency or be impeached. 1974. Not that that had a whole lot to do with it, but it was not a positive time to launch a lobbying effort for the arts when worrying about the Republic's future.

SZ: Then you were Director of South Street.

JH: Yes. For seven years or so. Then I went up to Norwalk to put that Maritime Center together, which was a kick. By that time I had become more savvy, and I realized by

about the second month I was there that I was going to have to leave as soon as the project was complete, and I announced that then. I stayed on a little longer than I should have, but I still got out with my intention and dignity intact. But that was a kick. There were two of us in a storefront office, and four years later there were seventy-five people on the payroll and a ninety thousand square foot complex. It was wonderfully satisfying. At that point I thought, "I can do anything."

SZ: So you went to...?

JH: I went to the University of Virginia on an assignment. The Director of Planning and Development for the Arts and I were putting together a big complex for the arts just as the State ran out of money. There was no way it could have been put together in a reasonable amount of time. But I got the job at the Mariners' Museum, which is a wonderfully well-endowed institution with a great collection. And in fact, John Szarkowski is doing a project with me. And Richard Benson, a photographer friend of John's, a brilliant photographic printer.

SZ: Oh yes. John talked to me about him.

JH: He invented a process. He calls it tri-tone, instead of duo-tone.

SZ: So you've had a life in the arts.

JH: Yes.

SZ: And you have survived it.

JH: [Laughing} Still banging away at it. I hope that this is my last gig. I'm about to be sixty-three. I don't have too many evaluation reviews left.

SZ: Do you like it down there?

JH: I like it a lot. I like the institution enormously.

SZ: Semi-southern, semi-northern, right?

JH: It's southern, it's definitely southern. The problem is the sensibilities and sophistication are just so different. It shows up in terms of the staffing for the institution. There's no collective kind of community or collegiality where you're sharing views with other curators. There aren't any other curators, or very few, so you don't have that kind of pool of professionals that are constantly in touch with one another and feeding off one another, complementing one another, an awareness of what's going on.

SZ: I assume you come to New York and you stay current with what's happening.

JH: I try to, and I certainly try to stay as current as possible with the restaurants in particular. Newport News is a culinary wasteland. It is just awful. [Laughing] I come up and I have three lunches a day in New York.

SZ: Let me just say, thank you, John, for a very good interview.

END INTERVIEW