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

Larry Sultan

Interview conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2007

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Larry Sultan

Interviewed by Jess Rigelhaupt, ROHO, at Sultan's home in Greenbrae, California

Interview #1: October 19, 2007

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Rigelhaupt: Could describe your first visit to SFMOMA?

Sultan: My first visit as an artist taking my work in, or my first visit—

Rigelhaupt: Just your first visit in general.

Sultan: When I moved up here in 1970 I went to the museum, which was on Van Ness, in the War Memorial Building. I went to see a show—I think it was a show of the San Francisco Art Institute because I was considering going to school there and they had a show of their students. I remember walking down those long corridors that actually were the galleries as well and seeing a photographer's work that truly moved me and just inspired me. The building itself was kind of musty and institutional and truly what you would imagine when somebody says, "Let's go to the War Memorial Building." But the work there was really quite wonderful and bright, and in this case, really inspiring. That was my very first visit.

Rigelhaupt: Whose work did you see that was inspiring?

Sultan: Larry John, a young photographer who really has kind of moved on from photography to something else. But I never had seen anything quite like that.

Rigelhaupt: Can you say a little bit more about that exhibit?

Sultan: Everything recedes except for that one diptych picture. I have no other recollection. The next memory I have is actually in the curator's office, John Humphrey, showing him photographs. He was smoking a Camel cigarette. As he was looking at these pictures, the ash got bigger and bigger. The picture was a one-of-a-kind file photo from a police department, and I remember thinking, oh my God, this is like double evidence, the evidence of the pictures and the evidence of the curator, who was a wonderfully crusty old guy who smoked in his office looking at pictures.

Rigelhaupt: That exhibit was in '77?

Sultan: That exhibit opened in '76 or '77, yeah, one of the two. That was probably '74 or '75 that I was there showing him the work. I'm trying to remember how I got there and why I was let in and all of those things because I didn't have any real relationship to the museum previous to that. Except they had a really good book collection, and I'd go to their library. The library was open to the public. But I never had spoken to any of the curators.

Rigelhaupt: Other than that exhibition you saw in 1970, do you remember if there were any other works in the permanent collection that were particularly significant in your memory? Thinking, again, from your earliest interactions with the museum.

Sultan: Really trying to think about what I saw there. I know that I must have been there before with Humphrey, having him show me something, because I had some rapport. But I really don't have a great memory of those early years at SFMOMA. I remember distinctly thinking that San Francisco didn't have very interesting museums. The de Young was a shambles, and SFMOMA was—Maybe because I was so interested in photography, and it always took place, I felt, on the bargain basement

of the museum. It was on the third floor, and near the offices, and it just seemed like a really insignificant place to show artwork.

Rigelhaupt: Well, if you compare and contrast, then, SFMOMA and its exhibition of photography, what museums were doing more cutting edge photography exhibitions in those years?

Sultan: Well, I'm actually trying to remember what John was doing at that time, because I don't think that photography was—I should have done my research, just to jog my memory. But I don't remember photography being that interesting at SFMOMA. I think John had been there for quite a few years. What impressed me was that they had a collection. Just the fact that they had a collection was really remarkable. Certainly, the Museum of Modern Art in New York was the standard for a museum that really supported photography, that thought of photography as a legitimate and coequal art form. Whether it was the New Documents show with [Lee] Friedlander and [Diane] Arbus and [Garry] Winogrand, or the Robert Frank shows, it was a serious museum that way. I felt that SFMOMA, just by virtue of the fact they were even showing the photographs—Although the Met had an equally serious problem, because they would show them in hallways, as well. It just was a state—We didn't take ourselves very seriously, and museums didn't take us seriously either. It was great that John Humphrey—I think he had an unpaid position, if I'm correct; at least he alluded to the fact that initially, he was a volunteer—had helped build this collection that was quite substantial in terms of nineteenth-century photography. He was willing to collect photographs. I was in a portfolio when I went to graduate school in 1972 that the graduate seminar did. The museum bought one for $15. That was pretty significant, to be in their collection. That was my first work in their collection.

Rigelhaupt: What else do you remember about who they were collecting around that time period?

Sultan: I remember seeing some nineteenth-century architectural photography that I thought was pretty dry, that I knew I was supposed to like. But I don't have a recollection, really. I was in graduate school, I was doing public art. I was really kind of trying to redefine who I was as an artist. I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about the museum. This is in the period from '70 to '74, '75.

Rigelhaupt: Was it an institution that brought in events or lectures that attracted artists from the San Francisco Art Institute and students?

Sultan: In those years, I didn't think of it that way. I felt that there was a real support for the local community, for artists. I felt that. There was a wonderful man named [Robert] Whyte, who was the head of education. He was a marvelous man. They were open to—I remember teaching. I taught a class at SFMOMA that I kind of invented for adults, trying to think about their photographic archives. It was a class on archiving, on the snapshot, and on how to make better pictures, really, without a darkroom. They were open for me to pitch that class to them, and it was one of my first teaching jobs, working with the education department. It was a friendly institution. It was accessible. We could go to the library, we could use their copy camera to make slides of books for teaching. The fact that I could go in and show the curators work, just walk in, make an appointment. It didn't have the kind of institutional elite closed-door policy, where you felt it was the ivory tower or outside of your reach. Having said that, it didn't seem like the most exciting place in the world, either. Maybe it was too neighborhood-ish. But that might have been my own shortcomings. I really don't remember being inspired by much of the work I was

seeing in San Francisco, except at—[pause] Oh, there might be one show that stuck out. Again, I'm really bad at—we're talking about thirty-three years ago. Tom Marioni had a show. It was called, I think, "Art in Conversation." It was based on the Museum of Conceptual Art that he had started. I think he just filled that whole big gallery on the fourth floor with cases of beer. You could go into a slightly darkened room and drink, sit at a table and have a conversation, if there was someone else there. I thought that was a really radical act for the museum to do. That was much more interesting to me than—This could have been late seventies, early eighties, too. I don't think it was the early seventies.

Rigelhaupt: I definitely have questions about conceptual art and its relationship to the museum, so I will get there. So I'll come back to that. Well, at this point, how do you think SFMOMA was perceived in other parts of the country? Say in New York and Los Angeles.

Sultan: I have no idea. I have no idea. I remember coming to the Bay Area, and it was just then—1960s, 1970—that I had started to define myself as an artist. Other than that, I was really fairly disinterested in museums. Popular culture was much more interesting. If anything, it was the small artist-run spaces, both in LA and here, that were the most interesting. Places where you can go look at experimental film—Kenneth Anger films and Jack Smith. It was LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art] in LA County. There was a real interesting change in culture going on, and how the beat culture was seeping into alternative spaces. It was just the beginnings of that. So museums were never that interesting to me, to be honest. I lived and grew up in Los Angeles, and for me, it was more interesting to go look at the billboards than to go to LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. It was just too tiring to sit in a stuffy museum. I'm trying to

think of what were the great shows they did in the seventies. What I remember most distinctly, in terms of—and they all tend to be around my own experience—was I was hired to photograph Nathan Oliveira's show. I was doing that to make a living; I was photographing artwork—until I dropped a painting and realized that I shouldn't be doing this. I was too clumsy. I was hired to photograph—I don't know whether it was for a catalogue or PR, but I got to spend an enormous amount of time in the museum and with that work, and that was pretty exciting. But it just wasn't a place where we'd go.

Rigelhaupt: Is that one of the ways that the museum was able to help support photographers, was to offer positions photographing some of the paintings for catalogues or documentation, for whatever they might have needed those photographs for?

Sultan: I doubt if very many people did that. But there was a sense at that museum at that time that if you were doing things, you could go there and show them to a curator. The curators, the education department, the staff—the whole vibe of the place was supportive. Amazingly supportive. It started a relationship with me where I felt the museum was this wonderful support structure, a place that has a commitment and just good will. It has plain good will. That almost, it's hard to see the museum outside of that personal relation. Certainly, when the new building was built, I was very happy that they had a substantial space to show work and that the building started to mirror their aspirations. I never liked the architecture, personally; I thought it was a bit state architecture, a brutish quality that I didn't like. But there's the museum, and then there's this personal relationship to the museum. I think the personal relationship was remarkably supportive. I think it was because the curators, starting with John Humphrey and then Louise—What's Louise's last name? I forgot her name. Let's see, I have it. She did a couple of curating projects. And Sandy Phillips. My relationship

was interrupted severely with Van Deren Coke, who I never got along with. But the curators have always been remarkable.

Rigelhaupt: So you were describing an open door policy, in many respects, between curators at SFMOMA and artists. I'm wondering if you could talk about how you think that impacted the development of arts and culture in the Bay Area.

Sultan: Well, museums have multiple obligations and aspirations. To show local artists, especially in a city that has a bad reputation of being regional or provincial, probably put the curators in a real conflicted set of relations, because they *were* very supportive and there *was* a lot of interesting art going on here. The same time, not a lot of the art shown here was being shown elsewhere. People who were doing well in San Francisco usually left. *Artforum* is a good example of an institution that was begun here and drifted, ended up in New York. A lot of the artists I knew, throughout my life, have left the Bay Area. So for those of us who stayed, there were a number of support systems. One was the art schools, certainly, being able to make a living and teach. The alternative spaces, whether it was Langton Arts—it was called 80 Langton Street—and then eventually the Headlands [Headlands Center for the Arts], Intersection for the Arts. What else was really big in those early years? I think those were the main ones. Southern Exposure came along later. Then the museum. So you could go from alternative space to a museum show, or to be included in a museum show, that legitimized, really gave legitimacy. My first one-person show at the museum, the show that Mike [Mike Mandel] and I did, called "Evidence," it started at SFMOMA. It was so daring of the curators to allow the pictures to be, in a sense, presented outside of the museumification. None of the mats, none of the frames, none of the apparatus that museumifies a piece of work. They really allowed us to do what we wanted to do. That became a traveling show. It was

purchased for the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona. It traveled all over the country, went to seven or eight museums. It started a major controversy because they had presented it very differently than SFMOMA. SFMOMA was the *only* museum that presented it in the kind of fashion that we felt was appropriate to appropriated, found- file photographs, eight-by-tens, that we wanted to keep that objecthood. True, it was in a hallway. But still, that kind of support was so—One, it legitimized being an artist. Whereas Langton Arts was still—Outside of the area, no one had heard of it, really. Maybe in LA. We were being legitimized in ways that actually were accurate to the practice we were doing. It wasn't that we were doing one kind of art and then it was presented in a museum context looking like another. There was a really profound sensitivity to the problems of presentation that I thought, that's very significant for a museum to do that.

Rigelhaupt: Can you describe a little bit more how the photographs from "Evidence" were exhibited?

Sultan: Well, the photographs from Evidence are taken literally from files, from aerospace and all of the research facilities that are really rich in the Bay Area. So Stanford Research Institute and UC Berkeley's high-energy physics, Santa Clara Police. They're eight-by-tens. We felt that they should be just put behind glass as eight-by-ten. Very simple. But that meant that the pictures themselves were up against glass—things that usually, conservators wouldn't want to do. Now, perhaps it's because the museum didn't own the pictures, we did. When we sold the pictures to the center, all of a sudden they're in the role of caretaker, and so they were framed and floated in mats. But the museum presented them—Mike and I edited them with John Humphrey. We created one fictitious picture that we bet John a bottle

of Chivas that he couldn't—Because these are all authentic records. So we made one and challenged John to find that one. He did. To his credit, he actually chose it, and we bought him a bottle of scotch and drank it with him. John Davis from the Oakland Police Department wrote the intro. It was a very straightforward and simple affair. It was fabulous. For me, it was my first museum show. It was fabulous. The party, the celebration, the idea that this kind of work was being supported. For its time, it was fairly radical work. Certainly, within the tradition of conceptual art, the found object, but still, I don't think that SFMOMA was showing a lot of work like that.

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe a little bit your first meetings with John Humphrey about "Evidence"?

Sultan: He didn't know what to make of it. He liked the pictures. He was looking at a few of them upside-down, with that ash threatening to drop on the picture. He was intrigued. He was intrigued by the pictures. He didn't know what to make of them. He invited us to come back and show him more. He was interested, but I don't think. We had no hopes of showing the work there at the museum. It just seemed like he didn't get it that deeply, and we weren't very convincing because we didn't know what we were doing yet. But I think the second time we came back we had gotten an NEA grant. We were publishing the book. Things were moving. We had made a little bit more of a name for ourselves doing billboards, and we had published a book previously. This is all self-published work. I don't know how legitimized we were by these self-published books. But *Evidence* was published in '76, if I'm not mistaken. I don't know whether it was published in '76 and shown at SFMOMA in '77 or—I think the book was out by the time they showed the work. In fact, I'm sure of it. John said, "Let's do it. Let's show this." We said, "Okay, but this how we would like to do

it." He seemed completely open. Just eight-by-ten photographs, with glass, with little brads to hold them against the wall. I think we showed eighty-nine pictures. Long hallway of pictures.

Rigelhaupt: Henry Hopkins was director at the time?

Sultan: I'm pretty sure Henry was director at the time.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember his response to the exhibition?

Sultan: He just seemed like a nice guy. He seemed like a fund-raiser. Very friendly. But I don't remember anything where he really came and spoke to the work. The head of education, Bob Whyte, he was remarkable because he really wanted to be able to speak about the work. I remember the education department, and this is really before all this push for outreach. It's an oblique project, it's a difficult project. I remember people really trying to understand it, the docents trying to understand it. That was, I thought, very generous of them.

Rigelhaupt: So am I correct that you first came in around '75 to begin showing the "Evidence" photographs to John Humphrey?

Sultan: I think '75. I had a handful of pictures.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember how many visits it took or how the planning went to actually put the exhibition together?

Sultan: I think we went in twice. John pretty much let us do what we wanted to do. We had almost no budget. It was totally different than the way you work on a museum show now. It was just so wonderful. We got

this hallway, and we got some glass. The lighting's a little dim, but you guys want to put your work up? It was low key.

Rigelhaupt: Well, then if we jump forward a little bit, being part of the exhibition "Real Fictions [Recent Color Photographs by Bill Dane, John Harding and Larry Sultan"] with Sandra Phillips, how would you compare and contrast that relationship and the development of that exhibition with "Evidence"?

Sultan: Very early in projects, it's crucial to get some kind of feedback, some support or clarification. I was really embarking on, I thought, pretty risky work, because it was so personal, 1983, '84. When I showed it to Sandy Phillips, she immediately responded. She was great. She said, "We have to show this work!"

I didn't know what form it would take, but just saying that, when many curators were not open to that work, Sandy's initial support was amazing. To contrast that, I had had a relationship with New York MoMA, and they had actually supported me on the Guggenheim I had received to do this project. When I brought the pictures back to New York MoMA, to the curators, who had collected my work—in fact, I think they were collecting my work before SFMOMA was—[John] Szarkowski wouldn't even see me. When I did run into him in the elevator, he just looked at me, he said, "Loosen up. This work is too tight." I thought, this is not street photography; this is about theater and it's about this problem of staged and candid, and the hybrid of that. Sandy got it immediately. It took the New York MoMA, Peter Galassi and John really had no—Susan Kismaric was very supportive. But finally, Peter did that show "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort," six years later, and featured my work very prominently. But it took that kind of time for them to think that one could make pictures around one's family, very personal pictures, where Sandy got it immediately. I think it took several years to find the right venue for

that work. I have to say that I was not really thrilled with the way the work was installed. Part of it was my problem. How to work in a hallway, long corridors, was a real challenge. I don't think that show was—For me, it showed what I shouldn't do. On a real positive note, it gave me a test case, a first run, to really try out some ideas of installation, how different kinds of pictures might work together. I was encouraged and allowed to take real major risks, at least within how I was showing the work. Whether I liked the show or not, isn't as significant to me as what I learned from doing that. The kind of generosity they had to say, "Look, just try it. Try painting this wall black and showing a grid of forty pictures, and then breaking it up with different scale pictures." It was a really interesting kind of blank check.

Rigelhaupt: Well, can you describe that a little bit more? If there were people you were working with, assistance you got. How does that working relationship develop? Is there staff that helps with hanging? Are there curators down there actively involved?

Sultan: What happens in a show like that, or in subsequent shows, the curators, at least the ones I have worked with—I have worked with three different curators, I think. Maybe four, but three that come to mind. There's always a kind of sense of, well, let's see what you come up with. Here's the space. There's a bit of negotiating about that. More recently than it was. But I wanted to paint walls black and try some things out. There's a sense of, well, okay, go ahead and come up with a plan. Then that gets worked through with the curator, and decisions are then refined and made. But they start with me. Then there's a whole staff of preparators. I think [Kent Roberts], this guy is great! He's been there forever. I think I have installed three different shows with him. He's fabulous. It's collaborative, on that sense. But it really puts the artist first. I never felt that they made the selection. It was always my selection, and then they would say, "Well, what about this

or this?" Or, "Don't you think you might want to consider that?" It's a good working relationship, but it's artist-centered.

Rigelhaupt: Well, actually, speaking of both "Evidence" and "Real Fictions," if we stay with those two exhibitions in particular for a moment, were there more or less images and pieces that you wanted included? Or how did that negotiation work with the curators about which specific photographs would be in the exhibition?

Sultan: I think it was really up to me. With "Evidence," we really edited it down to which pictures we felt were essential. Same with when they showed "Pictures from Home." My only issue was that I didn't really want to be in that context. I didn't want a three-person show. I felt that work needed its own terms. I would have preferred—I don't mean to sound ungracious, but I didn't feel like it was helped by the two other artists I was with. That was difficult. In terms of what finally went in the show, decisions about space, installation, everybody was just great, was very supportive, and whatever I wanted to do. I probably could have used, in fact, a bit more resistance. To test those ideas, to really push me, to say, "Are you sure you want to do that?" Maybe if anything, maybe there was too much trust at that point, because I had only shown it once before, and the work was evolving. When I finally did a traveling show, the work was remarkably more—I had found the kind of right balance between installation and objects, between text and the image, between kinds of images and the kind of rooms that I needed to play this out in. So SFMOMA, and I had shown it at MoMA New York, in a show called "Photography in California," which was a much smaller sampling of the work. Then a bigger show at WPA in D.C. Each of those, they help develop one's ideas. But I could have used a good kick in the butt. The work could have been pushed against a little bit further. Again, my issue was, are you sure this is the right

context for this work? I like Bill Dane's work and I like John Harding's work; it just didn't feel like it was the right context.

Rigelhaupt: Now, this was the work that was included in the "Pictures from Home"?

Sultan: This was the "Real Fictions" show. I think it was three of us.

Rigelhaupt: But is it work that then became part of the *Pictures from Home* book, or is that completely separate?

Sultan: No, this was what I showed. The "Pictures from Home" was what my part of "Real Fictions."

Rigelhaupt: Had the book already been published?

Sultan: No. No, no. This was in '88. I was still shooting. I was still developing ideas. I didn't publish the book till '92. So I use exhibitions—At least I did; not so much anymore. But I was using museum exhibitions, or exhibitions anywhere, to help develop ideas. You put work up and you really begin to notice what's missing and what the limits of a particular project are, and how you would shape it. It was an incredible generative show. I got clear about what was working and what wasn't.

Rigelhaupt: Well, how would you compare and contrast that to the "Evidence" exhibition? Because as you said, the book was already published. If you could talk about the role of exhibitions in your work.

Sultan: Well, "The Valley," recently, that's maybe the—Because I remember that the most, that's the freshest, that's just been a few years ago. I'd shown in "Evidence"—in *all* of these, there's a number of—there's five or six or seven venues for each of these, so I get to see them in

different places. I get to rethink the installation. Subsequently to when the traveling show for that same work in “Real Fictions” was occurring, the book was finished. So by the time a book is out, there’s a sense of—hopefully, there’s a sense of closure. The project is over. Installation, presentation becomes a performative issue. How do you play the score that you just finished, or finished a year ago? It’s kind of exciting because each place has its own set of possibilities and limits. In the case of “The Valley,” SFMOMA was perfect for it because I actually printed it and designed it for that space. Whereas “Pictures from Home” was not designed for SFMOMA; it was designed for San José Museum of Art, and then it traveled to different museums. So “The Valley,” working with Sandy, working with the staff there, making maquettes, building the space, deciding on the size of the prints, editing the show to the fifty pictures that can fit in those rooms—I think there were six rooms—coming up with the right paint color, the right kind of signage, thinking about the show in terms of which pictures work best together and how to sequence or create segments—all that is really a wonderful opportunity. That’s more likely to occur when there’s a host institution, when it’s the beginning of a traveling show. Or at least the museum approaches you and says, “Let’s show this work for the first time.” That’s a really wonderful experience. Then “Evidence” was shown. By the time that was occurring, they were reframed and lost some of their edge. “The Valley” has been shown in mostly more—No other institution has shown that many of them. There was a show in Switzerland that had thirty-eight, as opposed to fifty-something. It just looked so good. It finishes the work. I think work is finished, for me, when I get to watch people looking at it, when I get to look at people looking at it. Then it has almost nothing to do with me at that point. It’s finished. It’s out. It has a life. To give it its life, there’s a book and there’s an exhibition. They both are very different and very important. The kind of spectacle

that an exhibition can become, where you can actually eavesdrop on people and watch people looking and look yourself, I think that kind of distance is crucial to that sense of closure. It's a wonderful privilege that someone gives you that chance to really finish your work. Otherwise, you just abandon a project. I don't think projects are ever finished, you just abandon them. You just get tired of them, or they have run their course. Each time you go back, there's diminishing returns, you get less and less. So how you end something is crucial. That's the function, in my mind, of an exhibition and a book.

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe the beginnings of working on "The Valley" with SFMOMA?

Sultan: I'm trying to remember. [pause] I'm trying to remember when I first brought those pictures in. I don't remember the very first—[pause] I just remember Sandy being enthused. It's funny, because I remember every other beginning. The only thing that I remember is that, I think it was somewhere around 2002—2001, 2002; I wasn't finished with the project—I remember a lot of support, but there was a question, when would I be ready? I didn't know how to gauge that because I was in the midst of shooting still. You don't want to do a show or plan a show before you're finished. We kept on delaying it because there was more work to do. I remember a great deal of graciousness, in terms of planning it. We were planning it—We definitely had to have the book finished. There was a lot of coordinating issues. I remember Sandy being very open about that and not too worried about her schedule. The problem I had was that preceding my show was Reagan Louis's show ["Reagan Louis: Sex Work in Asia]", which was about sexuality in Asia. I thought it was really poor timing and that the museum was going to be thought of as a venue for middle-aged men to deal with their sexuality. That worried me. But that's just the luck of what

happens—or the bad luck—when you put your show off, and there's a slot, and the slot changes. But that was the only real issue there.

Rigelhaupt: Was there any connecting of the two exhibitions in the press or critically?

Sultan: No. I think in a few reviews, it was mentioned. But people have such short memories.

Rigelhaupt: So could you describe a little bit about some of the decisions that were made on how the exhibition was going to be put together? If you remember anything about it. Because you said the paint color, how they were going to be placed and—

Sultan: Well, there were several big decisions to make. One is, what do we do with the work that's a bit raw? Because it does deal with sexuality. How do we contextualize that properly. I never felt the work was pornography or that the adult sets that I shot in were the foreground of that work. I felt that they were a crucial decoy into the uncanny of the suburban house. So I didn't want them to be highlighted or made into a spectacle. I think the issue for the museum was, how do we show this stuff, when this is a family museum? So how to use rooms, how to create somewhat of a narrative—Not narrative in any sense of story, but a psychological sequence that would highlight and foreground the more interesting issues, the ones that both Sandy and I felt were at the heart of my work. So she was very deeply engaged in these questions. Which picture to put as you walk in; what to do with that first room; how to create an orientation or a setting of the house as a stage set; to introduce people next; and then as you get deeper in the exhibition, to embed some of the more difficult pictures there so that someone would have already looked at twenty, thirty pictures and had, hopefully, an impression of what the work was, what the connotations were, so that these would have the proper weight, symbolic weight. So we worked

each room in terms of themes or motifs or melody lines. You start with which pictures are in, which pictures are out. That's an interesting argument. You plea bargain, you horse trade there. But I would say that we shared a fairly similar sensibility about the pictures—as opposed to the publisher, who kept on pushing me in directions that I finally did feel comfortable going. The distinction, I think, is important, because I didn't feel that the curators were pushing the work away from what it wanted to be; they were helping it find its nature, and helping me to find the nature of that work.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any particular pieces that you wanted in the show that—

Sultan: That didn't make it in? No, I don't think there was that. I remember some of the more blander images—Yes, there were one or two that, right on the side of being truly banal, truly undramatic. I would have pushed for the less dramatic images, the ones that are so ordinary that you can miss them. Because I felt that near the end of the show there was such a momentum that you could put a photograph of a piece of paper on the ground, and it would have carried a kind of narrative momentum. That where the arguments were, the discussions were, is how much room to create for pictures that don't look very good. I think Sandy is more of a formalist than I am, perhaps. But we were really in synch throughout most of the exhibition. The sequencing, I thought was perfect. I felt it was the best venue for that work so far. The height of the ceilings, all of that, the volume of the room, the lighting—it was really quite wonderful. Also the fact that it was broken up; it wasn't just a huge room of photos. Pictures are rather big; they're sixty inches. They needed the kind of space. But they needed intimacy at the same time. That blend, I thought, was pretty interesting.

Rigelhaupt: When you say pictures that didn't look very good, what do you mean by that?

Sultan: Well, they don't look like—One hopes that one can make pictures that don't look like—that in the act of making pictures, you discover what you don't know. There's a discovery process. Part of that discovery process is a formal question, what should a picture look like? Or what does a picture look like? What is interesting? Sometimes those take place—they don't look like good pictures. They're clumsy or they're awkward or they're wonderfully simple, and they detonate a little later. Their release time, their detonation isn't necessarily so immediate. They work on you. Part of what I hope I'm doing as an artist is not only discovering things for myself, but for other people as well; that what we think of between that—if you go back to John Cage, between noise and music, between the banality and drama or theater, finding a frame for the mundane, for the ordinary, for the everyday—which is what my work is about, to a certain extent—is really exciting when it stays in that ambiguous place where it doesn't look like art yet.

Of course, on a museum wall with a big frame and fancy lighting, *anything* looks like an artwork. But that's what's so exciting, is to use that context. Same with "Evidence." These were non-art made in a perfect Duchampian strategy. By the context they were in and the way that we presented them, without captions, they became something else. But that ambiguity and that play between the ordinary and the surreal or the extraordinary is really the edge that I'm hoping for. So when I photograph a kitchen that looks like a normal kitchen, and you realize slowly that maybe it's fabricated, the whole kitchen is fabricated, it raises the question, well, why is this picture here? What's interesting about it? So that, hopefully, encourages people to look, to inspect, and to stay with the picture a little bit. It doesn't confirm that they're

looking at good pictures. It makes that problematic. It makes it challenging. Why is this there? What do we know? What can we tell from the picture? In that sense, I think finding that room to make pictures that don't jump off the wall as, or detonate as dramatic, either in lighting or in form or in composition or in subject matter, but more ordinary, that's the challenge.

Rigelhaupt: How has that idea been received by museums? Obviously, you said "The Valley" and the work with Sandra Phillips was well received from the beginning. But how do these ideas play out in other venues?

Sultan: Well, you never quite know, because no one's really telling you what they're thinking. The experience I had that was most telling was early on, "Pictures from Home." I started it in 1983. Jock Reynolds, who was in the Bay Area and had just taken over WPA, and then was over at the Corcoran, showed it. He was the first person to show it. Any of the museums that had shown me just closed the door right in my face. To do work that was this personal? What's so interesting about your family? Or why are your photographing your family? Those questions were part of the problem of me getting a show. I couldn't get a show of that work. I had worked for, let's see, six years before I had a museum show. Five or six years. SFMOMA was the first museum; WPA was an artists space. Then MoMA showed it in two different forms. One was "Photography in California," one was "Domestic Comforts." Then the show traveled in the nineties. But that was pretty radical to show that, for Sandy to show that work, to say, "This is interesting." Whether it's a subject that was not being received as a valid subject matter, or the approach or whatever—In the same way, I can say that in the "Photography in California" show, the museum approached us to do a billboard, which I thought—That's what Mike and I were doing, we were doing billboards. I thought that was really

quite amazing that they did that. That was the first museum to ever really think of what we were doing as a viable form of presentation. Whether it's the documentation or whether it was the actual billboard. Do you know that story about the Bill Brown? Probably not.

[End Audio File 1]

[Begin Audio File 2 10-19-2007.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: You were talking about the billboard.

Sultan: You asked me a question about support, lack of support, how SFMOMA might be, how their support helped us. For most of the seventies, until the early eighties, Mike and I were working outside of institutions. We were doing a lot of public art. Recognizing that, the museum asked us to not only be in the show "Photography in California," but to do a billboard for it. Which was a crisis, because our work was never promotional for anything. It was, if anything, to create a sense of minor confusion, to use images that looked like they made sense, but not to make sense. They appropriated the language of advertising, but fell flat. They didn't go anywhere. So what we did, being uncomfortable with promoting a show, we said to the curator, "We will do this if you give us absolute rights. If you give us complete freedom, we will do it." They agreed to it. They said, "Absolutely. As long as you don't do anything that's obscene, you can do anything you want." So what we did is we found one—It was kind of interesting that the show "Photography in California," it was thirty-five years of photography, 1948 to '83 or something. It was a long period. I don't think there were any people of color. Certainly, in the late seventies, early late eighties, issues of race and diversity were on everyone's mind. So this seemed like a very narrow idea of photography in California. So we went out and found a billboard, a Newport ad that

said, “Alive with pleasure.” It was a picture of an African American woman with very colorful gloves on, holding her hand in front of the eyes of a black male. So we just painted out the text, “Alive with pleasure,” and put the title of the show, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I think it’s called “Photography in California.” It was like people looking like that. In the same typeface, same colors. We just took and made those billboards throughout town, and no one was very happy with that. The museum wasn’t very happy with it. I don’t think anyone was happy with it. *We* were happy with it because it looked—You knew that was a Newport ad. It was iconic enough. One had seen it enough to know exactly what it was. So why would the museum use that to advertise their show? We are invisible in all these billboards; our name was never associated, so it doesn’t look like our work. So I thought it was pretty interesting that we could create that kind of transformation and have it be the museum’s voice rather than our own. But they had them up. They didn’t stop it. To their credit, they were up all over town.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember hearing anything from, say, directors or trustees about their responses to the billboards?

Sultan: No, I heard that there was a great deal of displeasure. That was the only thing I heard. That was vague; it didn’t have a source. It didn’t say, “Well, this person’s displeased.” I thought it was pretty funny.

Rigelhaupt: Well, these three shows together—”Evidence,” “Real Fictions”, and “The Valley,” how would you characterize their impact in your career?

Sultan: Well, I think they have been really seminal. In each case, it’s really the first major time out, the first major chance to show that work together. It builds momentum, it creates legitimacy. It helps me to think through

the problems of presentation. It gives that sense of being a real artist. Part of the problem of being an artist is that if no one shows your work, you don't feel like one; you just feel like you're struggling endlessly. Those have been really valuable, remarkably valuable shows. I have taught here, I have worked here for thirty-five, thirty-seven years. This is my community, this is my home. To have that possibility of the response from colleagues and friends and acquaintances, it's just a major, major—not only pleasure, but it's of major importance. The work has—in each case, it's been a stepping stone to a number of other venues. All of the work has traveled and been shown in a lot of other museums. It isn't that SFMOMA is showing a local artist and that's your venue. My work, I'm very lucky that it has support in this country and elsewhere. So I don't feel this is my one chance. But it's a really crucial—Working with Sandy, working with John, it's just more intimate than working, quite often, with other curators, because you can go back. I'm not flying to Munich to work on a show, I'm right here. So yeah, it's been really significant to my work. To the point where recently, when I'm starting new work, I take it to the curators—whether it's Corey [Keller] or Sandy—well, more particular, those two. Not with any interest of showing it, but just to get clear, just to find a point of conversation around, is this working? What do you think? That's candid conversation. I don't know who else to go to quite often. Sometimes I'll go to friends, but I don't feel that I have to keep up a— There's an empathy about what it is to be an artist and how difficult it is to make pictures or to make work that is convincing to oneself and to others. So there's a great deal of support on an emotional level. Not just on showing your work, but talking about your work, too. So I feel very fortunate to have that, establish that relationship over time. That, I think, characterizes it. Each curator has functioned in that regard. We were going to do a show at SFMOMA, our new show that we ended up showing at the University Art Museum, and that was because of

problems with Van Deren Coke. He had bigger fish to fry. He really was not that interested. I think he maybe felt that to show local artists was not going to help either him or the museum. So I think he had a real different approach to the place of that institution in San Francisco.

Rigelhaupt: Could you say a little bit more about your relationship with Van Deren Coke?

Sultan: I didn't feel that he was—I think the problem of careerism makes it difficult at times. I certainly and mindful of the fact that we have these different roles. Part of a museum's role, and a curator, is to create a platform for that. But what was so interesting to me about—I guess a cautionary tale, because I felt there was enormous amounts of careerism from Van Deren. It blinded him from seeing what the wealth was nearby. At the same time, you have Sandra Phillips, whose shows—whether it was a John Copeland show that she did very early on, that's taken by MoMA New York or other institutions, that really generates interest. Not because she's interested in career; she's interested in the work. So finally, you respond to people on a pretty human level. I felt he was kind of impenetrable. He was just remote and difficult. We had planned a show together, and I didn't feel that he really understood what he was planning. So we just pulled the show and went elsewhere. Connie Lewallen, who was the curator at Matrix, had a much deeper understanding of what it would be to hire a news machine. We were generating the show through the UPI and AP, through wire machines, wire photos. It took an enormous amount of support. Both space, and the fact that we had to come to work in the museum everyday as newsmen. We didn't feel that we were getting that kind of understanding. That was more than which venue was better. It was, how can we work with the curator?

Rigelhaupt: Is that something that museums, perhaps not only in San Francisco but also in Los Angeles, or let's say the West Coast, California—forget Seattle and Portland; they'll forgive me [they laugh] for calling San Francisco and LA the West Coast. But that if they show artists from their region, they're considered local artists. But say MoMA shows an artist from New York, it's not considered a local exhibition.

Sultan: I think that says it well. I think that says it well. It was a problem with LA for a long time. Until, I think, recently—and maybe in the last ten years—because of what's gone on there with Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy and James Welling and the international art status of Los Angeles artists. Also the fact that LA has become—we have become a de-centered culture. LA is as vital a center for art, both commercially and institutionally, as almost anyplace else. The problem with San Francisco is it doesn't have that kind of collector base. It doesn't have the same commercial viability, liveliness that LA has. Or New York has, obviously. It stays regional, I think, for a number of reasons which I don't feel really absolutely clear about. But I know it's really important that when the museum shows its artists that they also show elsewhere. Otherwise, I think it would be perceived as a museum that's primarily supporting its local artists and therefore is not really doing its full job. The other side of that is when museums *don't* show people in that region. That's problematic, as well. So striking the balance is key. How to do that? I think the museum's done a pretty good job doing that. I know that most people that I work with, graduate students, go on and show work there. Not necessarily have shows, but they have a portfolio drop off, they buy work. They're perceived as a very open institution. As opposed to, let's say LACMA in LA or even MOCA in LA.

Rigelhaupt: If we jump backward a little bit, how would you describe the way in which "Evidence," that exhibition, fit in with the conceptual art going on in the Bay Area in the mid-seventies?

Sultan: I think it was substantially different. Mike and I both grew up in Los Angeles. We both went to undergraduate school in Los Angeles. We really resented the Bay Area. We thought San Francisco was a pretentious café society built around a very tired model of bohemian life. I grew up with Sunset Strip and the billboards, and I'd go to Bob's Big Boy hamburger and order the combo plate. I wasn't interested in *la bohème*. I wasn't interested in going to cafés that played *la bohème*. I wasn't interested in City Lights. I couldn't stand the San Francisco Art Institute. I was in graduate school there and *hated* it. Hated it. I thought it was a joke. I felt much deeper affinity with artists like Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari. Even in some weird ways, maybe the only legacy of the Art Institute was Minor White, the poetics of the image. But the work that was being shown in the Bay Area at the time, conceptually, was Paul Kos, Tom Marioni, Jock Reynolds. A kind of conceptualism that wasn't quite funky enough. It wasn't really Pop-ish enough. Wasn't silly enough. Wasn't dumb enough. Growing up in LA, you can't take yourself really seriously. You go to shopping malls. It's not a city like San Francisco, where you could actually take yourself seriously or think that you had something to do with the legacy of the Beat Generation. So I was not connected to any of those artists. I didn't know Tom, didn't know Paul, didn't know Howard Fried. I felt disconnected from all of that. It fueled a kind of belligerence. We felt our affinity was really, we were Southern California artists all the way.

Rigelhaupt: But there was a show at the La Mama Gallery, "The West Coast Conceptual Photographers." I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that exhibition.

Sultan: Well, that was around 1980, I think. Right?

Rigelhaupt: My notes say ’76.

Sultan: Well, maybe. There was a beginning of a kind of conceptual photography—Conceptual photography is very different, at that time, than conceptual art. Now it’s kind of been valorized and enshrined. But at that time, there was Lou Thomas and Donna-Lee Phillips and a number of people were really looking at the beginnings of how photography and art were interfacing. They came out of the photographic, they didn’t come out of the art world. They were looking at a real diverse set of practices. Certainly, the show in—I think it was Still Photography, there was a book that La Mama did. It was the earliest work of Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger that I had seen. This is 1979 or ’80, so really early. They weren’t getting much attention outside of—I don’t think either of them had had big shows yet. It was a good seminal show. I still didn’t think that being part of that show meant a great deal. Just the way that these cultures get divided is always so crazy, these hierarchies in terms of, if you’re a sculptor doing work that involves photography, it’s much more interesting that if you’re a photographer that’s installing your work in a more sculptural way. It’s just that kind of hierarchy of materials and medium. Photography was, until appropriations and the “Pictures” show and some major events in New York occurred, it was pretty small fish. Which is interesting. I just think what’s interesting about that is that that work was being seen here. But this place couldn’t validate it. We didn’t have the writers. There was no Douglas Crimp here. There was no publishing venue. There was no institutional venue. So San Francisco, in those years, I don’t think could define nationally a set of practices that would catch people’s attention. It’s only in retrospect, when you think of how rich the conceptual tradition has

been here, how people—whether it's Naylon Blake or Terry Riley or Terry Fox—people who have gone elsewhere had their roots in this great, rich tradition here. But whether the Bay Area can anoint a practice or not is yet—I don't think so.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about the 1979-80 exhibition Suzanne Foley curated, "Space, Time, Sound"?

Sultan: Not much. I remember it being interesting, but I can't remember—I don't even remember. Terry Fox was in that, right?

Rigelhaupt: I don't know everyone that was—

Sultan: Twenty-seven years ago, it's vague. Other than it being interesting.

Rigelhaupt: Any memories of how it was received?

Sultan: No. Not really. When was that show, '79?

Rigelhaupt: Yeah.

Sultan: I remember she was interesting, she was a very interesting person. But I just remember that it felt that the museum had recognized a lot of practices that were more likely to be seen in 80 Langton Street, and that it had a vitality for that reason. It felt like they got to finally go from the guest house to the main house, at least in terms of installation. 80 Langton felt like a real wonderful family space, as well. I never showed there. They weren't big supporters of my work. So I showed more in the museum than in the alternative spaces.

Rigelhaupt: That actually leads to a question about something I have heard, that photographers had a harder time in the seventies obtaining gallery representation.

Sultan: You didn't even think in those terms then. I would say that photographers had two problems. One is taking the objecthood of the picture at all seriously as a market. I'm trying to think. I had gallery shows, but they were in photo galleries. I didn't have a gallery, *gallery*-gallery, until the late eighties, until I had a show at MoMA in New York. Then they could just sell them off the wall because they were in MoMA, and then they could be in the gallery. But the gallery that was really interesting here was Hanson Fuller. Diana Fuller was really seminal. It was a major place for experimentation, and I felt she really had her fingers on the pulse. But did they show photography? I doubt it. I don't think anyone was showing photography, really. There was the kind of fetishistic photo gallery like Focus Gallery. The Wirtzes would occasionally show photography. So you weren't taken seriously in the marketplace. But I don't think we were taken seriously, really, in the kind of alternative space, as well. To be quite candid, I felt there was a kind of uptown/downtown, east side/west side division. I'm trying to think. When "Evidence" was shown, it was shown in some alternative spaces nationally. And MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] in Chicago and Harvard. It was shown at LAICA in LA. But I had very little support, or knowledge of support, from the more alternative space conceptual art movement, until Jock Reynolds, who—I think he was one of the founders of Langton—did a project that was very similar to "Evidence," that was inspired by "Evidence," called State of the Union. H showed it at the Art Institute and then he and I started to talk and became friends. But I felt neglected by that whole crowd, too. I really didn't know any of them. So while we were doing work that you could call conceptual, we didn't feel part of that conceptual community here.

Rigelhaupt: So museums, did they play a more prominent role for photographers because there were not as many opportunities in galleries?

Sultan: Mm-hm. Yeah, photography got shown in museums. You had these major curators at Los Angeles, at LACMA; you had Art Institute of Chicago; you had John Szarkowski at MoMA; you had SFMOMA, with a major collection. Then in Houston there was Museum of Fine Arts. That's all in the seventies. You could get shown in a museum. You did. That was perfect. But I never went from the museum to the gallery. It was really interesting, because had I lived in New York and did "Evidence" and had—"Evidence" was never shown in New York. The Whitney or MoMA didn't show it. It went everywhere, pretty much, *but*. We were not part of that history of appropriation. Our work with billboards was not part of the history of work around advertising. So we were kind of—We never had representation. We never had the kind of writing—Just last year, Carter Ratcliff wrote about "Evidence" in *Art in America* as one of the exemplary shows of the seventies. It was never written about before that in *Art in Am*erica or *Artforum*. So being in San Francisco really deeply affected one's career. You didn't have the kind of platform—No matter what SFMOMA could offer, it did not offer you a platform as a viable voice at the table of art, I don't think. I think that when Paul Kos had his show at the Grey Gallery in New York and Kimmelman wrote that this was the best thing since white bread—*duh*. Thirty-five years after working in an area, to finally have a major show in New York. It seems really offensive to me. Does one have to go live there to be taken seriously? It wasn't until—MoMA New York did not show "Evidence." They showed my underwater pictures, and they showed Pictures from Home, and they showed a few of the other projects. They didn't show "The Valley"; they're not interested in that. They're very select, what they're interested in. It's a very kind of particular program they have.

Rigelhaupt: Well, one of the other things I have heard about the seventies and some of the conceptual art in the Bay Area is that part of it was connected to that there was not a collecting going on, that the art market in general was down, so to say.

Sultan: Yeah.

Rigelhaupt: So it was liberating, that artists could do work that didn't necessarily have to connect to a market, per se. I wonder if you had thoughts on how that affected some of the work that was being done in the Bay Area.

Sultan: Well, I think it's kind of a sad little consolation prize that you can say anything you want because no one cares. No one's listening. No one's paying attention, so you have a lot of freedom. But that's not necessarily the kind of freedom you want. I can't speak for anyone else about that, but I know for me and for Mike and myself when we were working together, we felt that we could do anything we wanted. The question was, well, what do you want to do? Making work that looked like art or functioned as art in the marketplace was out of the question. It just wasn't even very interesting. The question became, well, this issue of presentation, who's our audience? So we began with the audience. Let's work in these public venues. Let's do billboards, let's do books, let's self-publish. Let's do work that has a defined audience, that doesn't need an intermediary. We don't need a museum, we don't need a gallery. We're speaking to thousands and thousands of people by doing work in public venues, and then having press conferences that generate newspaper stories rather than art press. So we had redefined our market. Certainly, there was no exchange value, except for NEA grants. That was the only exchange value we had. I never sold a piece of work. We sold "Evidence," the entire project, for $2,000. Recently, the Tate just bought that for thirty times that, at least. I don't know exactly how much it was because my dealer sold it. He

owned it. But that just shows that there was just no market here at all. There was no market, really. There was a market in LA, but minor. I don't think that for most people, we thought of—Publication was more the issue. How can you get your work published? What kind of books? Because photography looks good reproduced. That was really the consideration. I'm sure it fueled a huge amount of freedom here, because there was very little collecting base. I still think there's not much here. You can do anything you want here.

Rigelhaupt: Well, how do you think some of your museums exhibitions have affected what's collected? I mean by people, rather than in the museum itself.

Sultan: Oh, I'm sure it helps. I'm sure it helps. I think the fact that someone goes to the Whitney Museum and sees a picture there, it has to help. I don't know. It's a mystery why people buy and who buys and how that all works. It's really mysterious. But it would make sense that if you're seen in a museum, then you have a bigger market. You're legitimized. Then if your work is up in an auction and it drives a certain—Markets are markets, and they have their own logic. What's more important to me is that in the context of a museum, the work has a life that is independent of mine, that is greatly independent of mine, and has the capacity of reaching people that a gallery or even an art book wouldn't reach. It's so important, whether it's tourists that come to a town and don't know what to do and they go to the museum, or whether it's people on a Sunday outing. We all want that attention. The narcissism of being an artist is you want your work to have attention. I don't necessarily think that *I* need attention, but I want my work to have attention. The work that I put out, I would just hope embodies a kind of sensibility and intelligence that would be, hopefully, delightful. That's what you hope. That's the function of the museum. I can't say any of the shows I had at SFMOMA all of a sudden created a—I didn't

show in the Bay Area in a commercial gallery for fifteen years. Being an artist for fifteen years, did not have a gallery show. Took fifteen years, I think. Somewhere in the eighties, late eighties. By then I had been validated through an enormous amount of—whether other galleries or museum shows elsewhere.

Rigelhaupt: Could you say a little bit more about Louise Katzman and a group exhibition you did with her in 1980 called "Beyond Color"?

Sultan: That was a show where I thought that the context of it—I had been doing these pictures, just to give you the context—While Mike and I were working on projects, I was also working, late in the seventies, on my own work, just out of sheer necessity, both physical and personal. I just felt like I needed my own practice. I was getting bored with the strategies of appropriation that we were generating. The worked caused a crisis in my life because it was very different than the work that Mike and I were doing together that had received attention. It was an identity crisis. Louise Katzman had seen the work, and I guess I must have shown it to her, and then she wanted to show it. I said I did not want to show this work, that I felt it was best not seen. I was very unclear and conflicted about it. Then when she twisted my arm, I guess—or maybe the ambivalence was such that if someone pays attention enough to someone who needs attention, you break down. But the issue there was that to do a show called "Beyond Color," it was so problematic. I don't know why, I still—To base one's work on something that contextualizes it in terms of materials or black and white or color seemed naïve at best. I shouldn't have agreed. It wasn't right for me and it wasn't right for the work. I abandoned that project, I think, quite soon after. I have been thinking of going back to it, just to publish the work I did because, literally, I just dropped it. I had a show in a gallery in LA, and that was it. I'm certainly not blaming it

on the museum, I'm blaming it on myself. I didn't quite understand what that work was. It was an important stepping stone in my later work. But I think it just was a naïve concept for a show. Even though at that time color was just beginning to get its legs. I guess you could say that the Eggleston show out of MoMA was also based around not only just a particular vision, but the phenomenon of color. But I don't know. It just didn't interest me.

Rigelhaupt: What was the working relationship with Louise Katzman like?

Sultan: I thought she was kind of a kid. She seemed a bit naïve. Certainly, wonderful, wonderful good will, great spirit. Truly accessible. She seemed a bit young. Didn't seem very sophisticated yet, in terms of her concepts. But photography also kind of generated that—I don't know.

Rigelhaupt: How do you think the tradition of documentary photography in the region has impacted SFMOMA and some of the other photographic work that's been done by artists in the region?

Sultan: Say that again. How does the tradition of documentary?

Rigelhaupt: Well, I know there's a strong tradition of documentary photographers having worked in the Bay Area and California as a whole. I'm wondering how you think that has shaped the interest at the museum, and then also the work that's done by photographers in the region.

Sultan: I don't know. I don't know whether the practices that occur in an area—They're fairly diverse, first of all. I think there's a tradition—When you think of traditions in the Bay Area, you think of this blend of f.64 and Dorothea Lange social realism. Certainly, whether it's Hank Wessel and Pirkle Jones and Linda Conner—the whole Art

Institute faculty have had a major impact, probably more so than anything else on the students. Because these are teaching institutions.

Here's a thought. When Van Deren Coke came, he was interested in a very particular German tradition of photography. The relationship between painting and photography. He had written his thesis on that, and that's what he was looking for. Those were the photographers that he plucked from the Bay Area to support that. Sandra Phillips comes out of a tradition of documentary and vernacular photography and photography as it's used in the larger culture. You can see that in her history of photography shows, and her photographic exhibition of police work, in what she collects. There's an interesting kind of reverberation between, or a kind of sonar. One's interest is put out and felt throughout the area, and that is what is selected, through all kinds of criteria. I don't know whether the Bay Area's tradition of documentary really has had a major impact on the museum. I think that I would say that Sandra Phillips and Van Deren Coke and John Humphrey had a major impact on what was seen there because they were the curators. I don't think they necessarily really cared that much about what traditions were going on here. They were formed already when they came here. I think especially in Van Deren's and Sandra's case. They could have selected work that was more conceptually based, as well. But I think it's been fairly traditional program in photography here. It's a more tradition area, when you think of materials and methods. Certainly, LA is a little bit more experimental and whacky in that regard.

Rigelhaupt: How would you characterize the intersection between your teaching and the museum?

Sultan: Well, the museum is a fabulous resource here. It's amazing. To be able to take students—maybe because I have an easy-going relationship,

and a candid one, with the curators and the people in the collections and the education department, they're open to having students come in and look at work and talk candidly about their collecting processes and procedures; to look at shows and talk about, whether it's Robert Adams's show or Diane Arbus. It's the students chance to have access to a major collection and a major group of thinkers and writers and curators. They're incredibly generous. So I use it as much as I can. Whether it's the Jeff Wall showing coming up, where all my students have tickets. It's just really an important institution in that regard.

Rigelhaupt: I just want to run through some of the directors, and if you have any memories of what you heard, because some of them probably—

Sultan: Gossip, in that sense?

Rigelhaupt: Just how their tenures have been received and remembered by artists in the region. Grace McCann Morley predates, but what do you remember hearing about her upon your arrival in the area?

Sultan: I have to say that directors are the least—If you care about someone in the museum, the director is who you care about least of all. Because they're fund-raisers. They're not a public face, necessarily, to the museum. It's the curators. I saw Neal [Benezra] the other day at a party. Other than hi and goodbye. I'm not a fish to fry here. I don't have a lot of money to donate to the museum. Their job is very particular, in my mind. Or they're just not that interested in artists like myself, because I have never had a personal relationship with any of the directors. Henry Hopkins maybe the most, because he was out there a lot more. The museum wasn't as serious. The fundraising wasn't as serious. But you can go through them.

Rigelhaupt: Well, also then, if you have any impressions on what you have heard about how their tenure at the museum has shaped collecting strategies.

Sultan: I wouldn't be so good at that.

Rigelhaupt: Well, George Culler?

Sultan: No.

Rigelhaupt: Gerry Nordland, who was—

Sultan: Don't even remember, don't even know him.

Rigelhaupt: What about Jack Lane, following Henry Hopkins tenure?

Sultan: Jack was an interesting guy. He's just of that world. They're just of that world where they're moving very quickly. I'm trying to think of the collectors that he was courting here. They ended up moving to Texas. But they had a big collection. As an artist, you look at these people, and they're the art world, in a very particular forum. They happen to be directors for a very good reason. They like power and they like influence. That stuff isn't so interesting to me.

Rigelhaupt: Well, what about when David Ross was director?

Sultan: Well, David's complicated. He's a complicated guy. Because certainly more than Jack and Henry, David was occupying a place in the art world that had a great deal of edge. He was at the Whitney, and he was at the University Art Museum for a while, he had come out of the seventies theoretical-based social practices and documentary practices. David was very supportive of photography. Of all of them, he was the

most. Which was great. It was fabulous. He was a complicated guy. He had his own stuff that he brought to it. But I felt it was a pretty exciting time for the museum because David was going to get budgets that were important to photography. The problem of photography in a museum is that now, who has the budget to buy a good photographer's work? A photographer that's been validated whether it's Cindy Sherman or whether it's Thomas Struth or whether it's [Andreas] Gursky or whether it's Arbus or whoever. The prices have become so high that it's the painting departments that buy Struth. I don't think photo departments have the kind of millions of dollars it costs to get contemporary work. Not that a work costs millions, but a collection does. So on the street, anyway, when we look at directors, we look at the biases and is the photo department going to get any more money? That's what starts to count. Also how friendly the museum gets. How open it is to artists. That has something to do with curators. But also the spirit, whether those curators are being supported is also—you can feel that. You want to work with curators who feel that their decisions are being noticed and supported. That's pretty important.

Rigelhaupt: Do you get the impression that any of these directors have done more, had a more hands on approach to curating than others?

Sultan: Not really, no. I think probably David, I would imagine, had a little bit more to say. But it certainly didn't affect me at all. They have some pretty headstrong curators that, interestingly enough, outlast the directors. It's kind of like a college president and faculty. You're mindful of them and they have a lot of say, but they don't affect you so directly. As long as they can raise money so that you can do what you do. They don't dictate content. I never think of any of these directors as dictating content. I have been amazed at the fact that the shows, the work that I have done has had a place in the museum.

Rigelhaupt: Well, other than Sandy Phillips and John Humphrey and Van Deren Coke, are there other curators that you have worked with?

Sultan: At the SFMOMA? Oh, there were assist—Janet Bishop, Karen Tsujimoto, Bob Riley. It's pretty media specific. In that case, no.

Rigelhaupt: So do you have any memories on what your working relationship was like with Janet Bishop or Karen Tsujimoto?

Sultan: They were supportive. They were really supportive.

Rigelhaupt: Now, they were both painting and sculpture. So how did your relationship work?

Sultan: I don't know. They just were there and supporting me in whatever way they could. I don't know exactly what their role was, but I know that I had relations with them. They wrote me and prepared, whether it was public talks or—I can't really remember. It wasn't a primary relationship. Most museums are very [media] specific, I'm thinking of, whether it's the Whitney or MoMA or the Met, Chicago Art Institute—they're all media specific. Which is surprising, given the fact that art schools, and certainly the art culture of galleries have stopped. Those boundaries are much more fluid at this point.

Rigelhaupt: Well, part of my asking is recalling an exhibition that Karen Tsujimoto did in the mid-seventies, the Precisionist paintings. I was wondering if perhaps any of your work was included.

Sultan: No, it's never been—Which I think is maybe something that's a bit unfortunate. I think I can't remember ever being in a show other than photo shows. Other institutions have combined work. I have a show

coming up at the Walker that's painting, sculpture, architecture, and a couple of photographers. It's great to be in that kind of context, when it's not so media specific. It does help, because you start to foreground the ideas and the sensibility. But those are real curator shows, too. By creating those fifteen people from different medias, you're really putting a stamp on that. They're a very different kind of curatorial practice. But that has not been my case at SFMOMA. It hasn't been that interdisciplinary.

Rigelhaupt: Do you recall seeing other interdisciplinary exhibitions at SFMOMA that you thought were impressive?

Sultan: I don't think that's at the heart of their practice. Nothing rings a bell. I think their contemporary—On the fifth floor, they have a space of contemporary work that seems to be about—There, there's no boundaries, just contemporary art. I have forgotten what they call that show. But it's not really at the heart of SFMOMA's practice to curate shows of an interdisciplinary nature. Unless I'm forgetting.

[End Audio File 2]

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Rigelhaupt: I'm hoping you'd talk a little bit about being award the Bay Area Treasure Award from SFMOMA in 2004.

Sultan: Oh, I was really surprised. I wish it was titled a little differently. It makes it a little bit—"Bay Area Treasure," you want to kind of lift a little pirate's chest. It's great to be supported that way and to be honored, and to be in such good company. I know that Richard Serra was just awarded it. I think it's great. I am honored. I don't know what—other than the kind of luncheon and the feeling of support, it

doesn't have—It was very important to me to have that show there, to have "The Valley" there. Really exciting to have that show there. The fact that they would give me the award subsequently just felt really right.

Rigelhaupt: How would you define a successful career?

Sultan: That's a good question. Well, one thing about a successful career, in my mind, is that it stays slightly in the realm of avocation, of being an amateur, of being a beginner still, of feeling that you can take the risks you need to take, do the things you need to do, out of not thinking of how it's going to affect your career but how it affects you on the deepest level. For me, I feel like I have a very successful career, because I'm able to diversify that career. I teach. I have a whole practice of teaching. I think I have really built up a marvelous community of colleagues, of ex-students, former students. I show my work. I do a lot of different kinds of work, and I show it in galleries internationally and in museums. Then I do commercial work. I do more editorial work that is in pop culture and deals with issues of fashion and keeps me vital, keeps me looking, keeps me challenged, keeps me uncertain. Financially, I feel that I can not worry about the implications that these things have. That if I don't do a certain thing, I'm going to go broke or have enough money. It's not necessarily generating the kinds of content or practices—It hovers, but it's not the main factor. It's been great to be able to have all that. When one thing isn't going well, something else is. I can devote myself to projects when I'm on sabbatical, or I start teaching a little bit more when I'm in that weird place between projects where I don't know what I'm doing.

03-00:04:19 The other thing about career is that being an artist is not really a career. It's so uncertain. It's just so fraught with uncertainty. Every time you finish something and begin something else, there's—at least in my life,

it's just truly dismal and scary and unclear whether it's going to amount to anything. It takes so much work and such a huge investment of time and money. You don't know whether you're going to be forgotten or left behind or erased or—It's a miserable—Of all the careers, if it *is* such a thing as a career, certainly as a practice, at least I vacillate from pinching myself because I feel so lucky to wondering what I'm doing trying to do this, trying to keep this going. It just feels like pushing a ship in a dry dock. So I guess it's good to have those questions. To make a living doing it is pretty strange. That was never part of the bargain.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned that you had a sense of having an amateur's eye still in taking photographs. I'm wondering if you could speak a little about how that translates into your teaching with undergraduates and graduate students.

Sultan: Well, an amateur's eye is not an innocent, necessarily, eye, because I don't believe in that. But I do think that it's born out of affection, out of a range of emotions that are not just professional or practiced. There's an element of not knowing, of being open, of being surprised, of not having made up my mind, of [being] willing to hedge my bet, or to stutter because the words aren't there or the thought isn't clear. It's a kind of practice, both making art and teaching, that gives full embrace to the ambiguity and the uncertainty of making things. That there isn't a position that has solidified over the years into knowledge. There is certainly knowledge, but it isn't solidified. It floats. Because as a practicing artist, it needs to float. There has to be room for discovery and for confusion and for the delay in closure, the openness that occurs when you are beginning something, or even in the middle of something. That has a big place in my life as a teacher. In fact, I think if anything, what I have to share is that I have been working for now—Funny, you wake up and you realize how long you have been

doing something, I have been doing it for over thirty years. I *still* am confused. That's good news to many students.

Rigelhaupt: How would you characterize SFMOMA as it approaches its seventy-fifth anniversary?

Sultan: Let me try to think of the apt metaphor. [pause] It's been around long enough, proven itself long enough to arrive at a certain level of sophistication. But it's homey and open enough to still be a little silly and playful and weird. I think it's kind of a little wobbly. [Like] a gyroscope, one of those things you pull as a kid and it tries to find its center, it keeps on wonderfully vacillating between over-produced and under-thought shows, and the shows it takes as opposed to shows it generates. Certain departments kind of flourish in the museum at certain times. It seems to me that it has the capacity to take itself seriously. It has the modern art councils and the photo forums, the kind of support groups that allows it to spend the money it needs to get the right collection, show work that's expensive to produce. At the same time, like the gallery showing local CCA designers. It's a good balance. I think it's a good role for it.

San Francisco's a particular kind of town. It's not New York. Maybe it's a little closer to European cities that both support the region they're in as well as try to aspire to be internationalists. Certainly, San Francisco MOMA has been able to do that. Whether they can maintain that vitality and wonderful awkward gyroscopic capacity to change and grow and experiment, I think that will be what defines its next twenty-five years. But certainly, just seeing the shows that get generated at the museum that go elsewhere, it's really done well. The fact that they have SECA [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art], and that the SECA artists are—I was just a Frieze in London. And Leslie Shows was showing in Frieze, and then {Kotu

Asawa?} was having a show at the Hayward Gallery. The support of local artists does not mean that it's provincial. I think that's maybe the strongest message that it would be good for them to understand. That in fact, it's the opposite.

Rigelhaupt: What do you think of the new building?

Sultan: I don't know what I make of it. I think it's brutish on the outside and too delicate on the inside. I think the galleries, the interior galleries have good volume. But from the materials, the kind of pretentious materials on the interior and the kind of state architecture on the exterior, I don't think it's a well-designed or integrated building. I don't know how it got built, personally.

Rigelhaupt: Can you think of exhibitions where SFMOMA's been ahead of the curve in some respects, showing an artist young in their career, or doing an exhibition that's particularly innovative?

Sultan: Hm. It's hard to say, because the curve is—there's not a consistent curve. It depends on whether you're talking about museums like LACMA or the Met or museums more like the Walker and the Whitney. I think it kind of falls in between those. I don't think of it as a really innovative museum, where it's showing work that is really difficult. I don't think of it that way. Nor do I think of it as a staid museum. So sometimes the exhibitions are really good, they're installed well. I'm really happy with the media arts recently. The Phil Collins piece they had and Pipilotti Rist. There's some really interesting work being seen there, shown there. I think they had that tradition back when Bob Riley was there. For me, it's been more in media and photography that the vitality of that museum—I think John Caldwell, when he was there, was a substantial, substantial curator.

One of the great curators. I think his take on the end of painting, and the painting he was showing, whether it was Christopher Wool—He was showing really interesting painting. That was when Jack Lane was the director. John Caldwell and Jack Lane I think worked really well. That felt like a real golden age for the painting department and for the museum in its kind of high seriousness.

I don't think personally—and again, I'm not a painter, I'm more in this other weird wing that gets a little less attention—but I don't think there's been a substantial active curatorship like John Caldwell. That might have also been historical forces, that someone could have a take on painting when it was considered to be an exhausted art, and to think of that exhaustion, what that means in terms of who's working that area. But there's been great shows. There's been great shows and then it's been tired and fatigued. That could be both the show and it could be myself at the time I'm seeing it. But I don't think of it as a radical museum. It's the best we have in the Bay Area, but I don't think of it as a radical museum. I don't know if I would follow the Walker. Maybe it's an interesting balance. One wishes to see really challenging shows. At the same time, I understand that they need to draw a public in there that isn't just artists. The [Anselm] Kiefer show was a really wonderful show. I can see it elsewhere, but it was a wonderful show to have here. I'm sure the Jeff Wall show will be equally. But these are shows that they just seem like they travel to every major city.

Rigelhaupt: Did you see the Matthew Barney exhibition?

Sultan: I didn't, I was away for that.

Rigelhaupt: I ask mainly because I think it was one of his first big museum exhibitions. If you had heard why SFMOMA was ahead of the curve in some way in exhibiting some of his work.

Sultan: Yeah. No, unfortunately, there was a big period this summer where I wasn't here. But he's been at the Guggenheim, and I don't think of Matthew Barney as being an under-exposed artist. I'm glad that MOMA did it.

Rigelhaupt: Are there any hidden gems in the permanent collection?

Sultan: Oh, it's loaded with hidden gems, but to recall them—[chuckles] I remember going to {Attow?} Art Storage, where the gallery I'm with stores work, and so does SFMOMA, and seeing the [Sigmar] Polkes that they had just taken out of storage or something. To see things in that weird context, to go into a warehouse, highly controlled warehouse, and look at some of the great works of art. So whether it's the Polke, these incredible Polke paintings, and these fabulous photographs in their collection that I adore. I think it's a great collection. Hidden gems, I don't know how hidden they are.

Rigelhaupt: Maybe that's poor phrasing on my part, but if there's some works that stand out from the permanent collection as really significant to you.

Sultan: Many. Many. Too many to recount. Some paintings and pictures and sculpture you just don't get tired of. Nothing is jumping. Those Polkes. Certainly, the great nineteenth-century photography collection. They have got a good collection.

Rigelhaupt: Where would you like to see the museum at its hundredth anniversary?

Sultan: I think that the museum needs to expand in terms of project rooms, more temporary spaces, more commissioned work, experimental work. It feels a little small. It feels a little precious. It feels a little serious, not as much fun as it could be. I thought the Janet Cardiff piece, while it

wasn't maybe her best work, that piece that you walked through and listened to her text, discovering the museum, and the back of the museum and the areas that you don't usually go to. The museum itself as a space and a site. Off site works, project rooms that are really curated from a vantage point of, this is work that we usually won't show, or we don't know what it's going to look like. Its outcome is uncertain. If artists are working with that kind of uncertainty, where we don't know the outcome—In fact, if we know the outcome, we're not so interested. The museum could be a collaborator in that uncertainty. We don't know what the outcome of this show is going to be. Let's show work that we're all in it, so that it generates work, rather than shows work that's already been finished. It takes a sensibility or an aesthetic that is more of this time. You could say that with not only exhibitions and commissioning artists, but publications. It needs to be less of a museum. Museums have a historical role, to conserve works, to put it in a context that is much longer and deeper than the times we live in, to give it that whole sense of perspective. But at the same time, they have to respond to these times. That's the challenge of the museum, is to be both responsive and a conservator. I think they're a little short on the responsive side of it.

Rigelhaupt: Well, those are largely my questions.

Sultan: Oh, good! Those are good questions.

Rigelhaupt: Well, but the way I typically end is to ask, one, is there anything I should have asked that I didn't? Two, is there anything you'd like to add?

Sultan: I think you have been remarkably thorough. For me, it's so interesting, because I come from Los Angeles, and in some ways it defines my roots. I don't think of myself as a Bay Area artist. I really don't. For

whatever reason. At the same time, I haven't had any support in Los Angeles. It's a closed system down there. So just in relationship to these places, these cities on the West Coast, I think it's remarkable that there has been such a responsiveness to people who live here, whether they define themselves as Bay Area artists or not. The difference has been really significant. In some ways, I'm defined by the support structures I have, among other ways of defining somebody. So this has really been—it's been significant to me. My career, my life has been deeply affected in a positive way by SFMOMA. With all of the crankiness that one might have about institutions, I have a great deal of affection for that place. I feel like it's been really important to my life. I can't speak for other artists in the Bay Area, but it's been a testing ground and a proving ground and a conversation. It functions in so many different ways that it's not—It doesn't stay put. It keeps evolving, depending on the people there. So I have a very affectionate spot in my heart for it.

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