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Oral history interview with Jim  
Sanborn, 2009 July 14-16

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jim Sanborn on 2009 July 14-16. The interview took place at Sanborn's home in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's U.S. General Services Administration, Design Excellence and the Arts oral history project.

Jim Sanborn reviewed the transcript in 2020. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

### Interview

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman recording Jim Sanborn on July 14, 2009, for the GSA Archives of American Art Oral History Project in his house and studio in Washington, D.C. I start the same way with everybody. Would you please state your full name and date of birth?

JIM SANBORN: Herbert James Sanborn, Jr., 11/14/45.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. And when and why did you adopt the name Jim Sanborn? Or is it James Sanborn?

JIM SANBORN: No, it's Jim. And Mom, from the earliest days, I guess it was Jimmy, then it was Jim. But I've always been known as Jim, not James. But for some reason the press liked James better than Jim.

AVIS BERMAN: But you as an artist use Jim?

JIM SANBORN: Jim exclusively.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I'm assuming there's also the just not wanting to get confused with your father, who I guess was—

JIM SANBORN: Well, he was actually Herb—Herbert.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay. Right. But if you were named Herbert—

JIM SANBORN: Right. There was also the—I was supposed to do that because I mean he was Herb or Sandy Sanborn. So he was never James. So I was always distinct in that. And maybe that was the reason.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, also, if you were both Herbert, I mean—

JIM SANBORN: He's an artist as well. So you could definitely get confused.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And is your father still alive?

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Your father was Herbert James Sanborn. And what were his birth and death dates?

JIM SANBORN: Yeah, boy, 1907. That's tough—you know I don't know my parents' birth dates.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well—

JIM SANBORN: But he was born in 1907. I know that. But I don't know the date.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that's all right. And when did he die? [00:02:00]

JIM SANBORN: Let's see. It would've been—let's see; it's tough. Let's see, he lived to be 89. I wish I wrote some of these things down.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's all right.

JIM SANBORN: So if he was 89 plus '07.

AVIS BERMAN: About 1996.

JIM SANBORN: '96, okay. That sounds good to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And how about your mom? What was her full name?

JIM SANBORN: Katherine Blood Sanborn. And she was three years younger than my dad.

AVIS BERMAN: And is she still living?

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: And when did she die?

JIM SANBORN: Two years before my father.

AVIS BERMAN: And was that K-A-T-H—

JIM SANBORN: K-A-T-H-E-R-I-N-E.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. And do you have siblings?

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, I think it is— Let's start with some of the dynamics of your household. And because—it was clearly cultivated because your dad was an artist. He was a printmaker, is that correct?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean he started out as a—he went to the Art Students League in New York. Then he got a Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship and traveled all through Europe and Italy and Spain and was in Paris in '29. And has been interviewed by the [Archives of] American Art for that period.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, great.

JIM SANBORN: By someone like yourself—30 years ago, 20 years ago—about his years in Paris.

AVIS BERMAN: So this is great. So I think this is just overlapping here. I think this is our first Archives of American Art two-generation set of interviews.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. And so, yes, he started out I guess as a painter and watercolorist and also printmaker. And then he became—[00:04:00]—he went into military service and was

gone in both the Navy and the Army doing audiovisual material in World War II. And then left that to become the director—museum director of the Davenport Art Museum. And then the Oglebay Institute where he ran a WPA program in painting for federal buildings, public art program. Then he was the director of the Children's Museum in Queens. And then he became the exhibitions director of the Library of Congress in DC where he stayed for 30 years. And that's what he did. And he was also the president of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. And a variety of other things. But interested in printmaking all the time.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's pretty impressive. Now does this mean you were living in Davenport, Iowa, and you were—

JIM SANBORN: No, I wasn't conceived until he started just after the Oglebay part in Wheeling, West Virginia, directorship. And then he came to Washington, D.C., to the Library of Congress. And I was born here in Washington at the Columbia Hospital for Women. And, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: It used to be the old baby hospital, I guess.

JIM SANBORN: Oh, absolutely. Yes. I can still see it, but it's not what it was.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did your parents meet?

JIM SANBORN: When my father was the director of the Davenport Art Museum, my mother gave a piano recital. She was a pianist, sort of a prodigy kind of person that had actually played a large venue in Manhattan as a child. [00:06:00] So she did a piano recital, and they met that way. And her father was very—well, he was very well known, and this was in Rock Island, Illinois. And was very—their family is very cultured. He taught Latin in Rock Island.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, why don't we just briefly go into your maternal grandparents. Did you know them?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean on my mother's side, yes. My father's parents died early and young. So the other [grand]parents in Illinois, Rock Island, Illinois, my grandfather was Albert Blood, and he was notable for a variety of reasons. He was superintendent of schools for Park Ridge, Illinois, outside Chicago, I guess. And was the first one to put indoor plumbing in a schoolhouse. And he taught Latin and the classics. Then somehow in putting in the—moving the outhouse indoors, he started the A.M. Blood Company, which sold—one of the first companies that sold school equipment. And then he ran that company for many years. And he ended up being the oldest Rotarian, died at 103. And could recite poetry for hours. And actually his poetry recitals are at the Library of Congress in their Poetry Division. He was taped by someone like yourself [they laugh] for his poetry. And he wrote poetry and could also recite James [inaudible] verbatim at the age of 102 with an Irish brogue, all these things. [00:08:00]

AVIS BERMAN: So he was a bit of an actor, too, or a performer.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, no question about it. He made his own records of his recitals, many, many. When I was a child, he had his own record recording machine. So he would do his own poetry and recite it and then record it in the house.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And was your grandmother similarly eclectic?

JIM SANBORN: Not notably. I think she was—she came from an old family of Tomlinsons, it was a large family. And I have pictures of them in the mid-1800s, 18 children in their family, and she was one of them—the youngest. And, no, I think she was a wife in the Midwest, and that was her role. Right. Then my mom went I guess to—got a degree from Augustana College—I guess it's in Rock Island. Yes. In Rock Island. And then when she came to Washington. She started her own business doing picture research for books and television and public radio and did historical research and found photographs for—you know we'd often have large manuscripts of books and publications and scripts around that she was finding—going through attics literally finding great stuff, photographs for people. Had an office at the Library of Congress that she did research in.

AVIS BERMAN: Now that's a pretty enterprising business. And when did she start this?

JIM SANBORN: [00:10:00] Probably not until her 50s.

AVIS BERMAN: Because, you know, to figure out, okay, identify this is a need. This is something I could do and make a go of this.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, it was good. I mean it was called KBS [Katherine Blood Sanborn -JS] Picture Research. And, yes, she was pretty good at it and did it for many years. I have quite a few of the books that, you know, she did fit those things into. So I mean, having the Library of Congress was a resource that was very valuable to her, as it was to my dad, and as it was to me. I ultimately find that out after, you know, many years. You know it's funny. The research thing was something I never thought I wanted to do. Maybe it was because they did it. But it was a major component of my future—to be my future occupation. And before then—I don't know. I mean my parents—neither of my parents—both my parents were only children. And so I had very few relatives—I have no relatives virtually that I know. But my grandparents would drive back from Illinois until my grandfather was over a hundred.

AVIS BERMAN: So you were close to them?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. And they were very supportive and really wanted, you know—they were interested in what I was doing and when I decided to be an artist all of that [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: So in your household, so clearly did you know you wanted to be—I mean what kind of a kid were you? I guess I should say.

JIM SANBORN: Well, I know that I liked to build things from a very early age. [00:12:00] Whether it was tree houses with sliding metal doors or underground structures. I would gather together my cohorts and people the same age to work for me to build these structures. And so—but at the time it wasn't so much—it wasn't art-related. My dad taught painting classes during the summer for kids. And so we'd have a whole group in the front yard; all the neighborhood people would come and study painting in our yard. And then another person in the community, an old family friend, would do theater. And somebody else would do music. And so the neighborhood was more or less—it was a very creative environment. It was a suburban—Alexandria, Arlington—situation. But the neighbors were all smart people and wanted their children to be cultured and creative and all these things. And most of us have kept in touch since then. So it was a very fertile environment.

And in addition, because of my father's job at the Library of Congress, my mother also enjoyed being a hostess. And so they gave lots of parties for the poets-in-residence at the Library of Congress, visiting artists, you know. Herman Zaph, the famous typographer, came to the house and stayed. As did most of the poets-in-residence. Josephene Jacobson. A variety of other people came to the house. And then of course I'd go to the Library of Congress recitals and music events and all of those things associated with that. [00:14:00] And then I'd also go to art openings because of my dad's and my mother, you know, they'd both go to all the art openings in Washington. Knew all the museum directors and all those people. And so those kinds of people were around all the time.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Now did you take that painting class that your father gave?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I have a picture of myself taking that painting class. I don't know that I excelled.

AVIS BERMAN: And were you interested in learning printmaking.

JIM SANBORN: I wasn't interested in making art at all really until the last two years of college. And what started it was—I was mostly into building cars. And my summer jobs were working for automobile repair places that would fix fiberglass cars and things like this. Because I knew how to make things smooth and nice in this kind of business. And I was very much into sports cars and things like that. So that occupied a lot of my time. In addition to that, though, I was also doing electronics and kits and science fairs routinely. Things to do with electrical things and science and fossil hunting and digging up skeletons and these kinds of things. Things that a lot of kids do, I guess, today. Very much into dinosaurs, I remember that.

AVIS BERMAN: But you were encouraged, you know, your interests were encouraged as opposed to saying, No, don't do that.

JIM SANBORN: Oh, they were definitely encouraging from a creative standpoint. Now I know that when I was, I guess I was eight years old, I did a paper, illustrated paper, on what I

wanted to be when I grew up. And I did a drawing of a building: my studio behind my house where I was an inventor. [00:16:00] And I would invent things all day. And then I would hang out with other inventors and this kind of business. So I did very young—I was inspired to do something, I guess, quasi-entrepreneurial, you know, on my own. As opposed to wanting to be a teacher or an astronaut or whatever else that, you know, I was—but it wasn't art-related. It was all about invention more than art. I mean my parents and I were very close because I was an only child. And so I think all children in their adolescence don't necessarily want to be that close with their parents. So perhaps I eschewed art, high art, because of that.

I didn't come around to it until I took a course in archaeology at Oxford University. It was a Columbia University-Oxford Exchange Program. It was in '67. And I went to Oxford, went on archaeological excavations. That encouraged me to write a paper just after that as a junior—I guess it was as a junior or senior in college—write a paper on Romanesque sculpture because I was interested in medieval art history. So I changed my major from sociology—I got a double major in college from sociology, sort of anthropological sociology—social anthropology—which related to archaeology. And then I had to do a paper on Romanesque sculpture. [00:18:00] I decided to carve one as a way to do it. From then on it was—I had much more fun making the art than writing about it. So that's what started it all.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, I'm going to backtrack a little bit. In high school, were you a good student?

JIM SANBORN: I was a terrible student.

AVIS BERMAN: Why was that?

JIM SANBORN: Well, before high school I went to a place called Burgundy Farms County Day School. And it was a great—it was a wonderful school, and it was very much about nature, nature study. And we did music and plays, and it was a very creative environment. It was a private school through eighth grade. Very influential. My art teacher I knew very well. Still, I mean—her son and I are still good friends. And it was a very important in my life, this private institution. I was taken from that and put in public high school, Jeb Stuart High School, in Fairfax. And it was a shocking transition, as was—actually I went one year, maybe it was seventh grade—I left Burgundy and went to a middle school and then to high school. And I remember in middle school my mother trying to get me to take ballet. That really didn't work. I felt really embarrassed. So that didn't work. And then I tried to do, you know, other things like I remember musical instruments, trumpet; I wanted to play the trumpet. I tried the piano; that didn't last that long.

But when I got into high school, everybody was into cars and girls and all that stuff. [00:20:00] And there was absolutely no competition for grades. And I was completely bored to death. And I am totally unable to do mathematics. So every single summer I was tutored. I never had a summer off. I was tutored in math constantly because I could never get above an F. And the rest of school—I did not do well with tests. I couldn't take tests. I generated too much anxiety, and I just, you know, did very badly with testing, period. But I was interested in science and geometry; I liked and did okay in geometry. But the rest of math, toast. So my grades were basically Cs and Ds when I graduated from high school. And I did very badly on—I guess the SATs are high school tests?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: I did very badly on that. So I went an extra year to private school, to Christchurch School for Boys in Virginia, in Christchurch, Virginia. And it was a boys' school. And there the thing was grades, and everybody was interested in doing things that involved learning. And I started doing really well. I did very well. When everybody was competing for that, I started competing for grades, and I did fine. And entered science fairs down there, and was much more into that. I still had my interest in cars which I even carried into college. But I did very well there. Well enough there that I got into college—but only because the former headmaster from Christchurch was the dean of Randolph-Macon College. So they let me in as a favor; that's what they told me. [00:22:00] They said I'd flunk out in the first semester. When I went to my interview, based on my previous reports, I was going to fail within the first semester. So I was the only one from my prep school, though, that stayed in. Everybody else flunked out.

AVIS BERMAN: So I guess—but did that start as a girls' college?

JIM SANBORN: No, no. Randolph-Macon—no. There are two. There's a Randolph-Macon Women's College in western Virginia, and this is in eastern Virginia, Ashland; it's the men's college. Now it's coed.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Yes, the Randolph—I guess that's because I just, the Randolph-Macon Women's College became infamous for selling off their art. I didn't know that there were men there. So okay, two different places.

JIM SANBORN: Two different [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Okay. Now, was college something you were interested in or you felt you had to go or there was Vietnam or—what's going on here?

JIM SANBORN: I wanted to go to college. My initial reaction was I was not good enough in science to become much of anything other than—sociology was the only thing I could thing I could handle that didn't have the mathematics. As opposed to archaeology. That's really what I wanted to take. I applied to many colleges, and nobody let me in. The only place I got in was Randolph-Macon. And that was this big favor. So I also got in basically on a basketball scholarship because I did very well because I was very tall. And actually in high school I did well with basketball. But I never was really into the—they wanted me for football also. But I never had—I did okay, but I could've done a whole lot better if I'd really been into it. [00:24:00] I wasn't that into it. When I went to Randolph-Macon I quit the first the first year on the basketball team because I wasn't into that. So at Randolph-Macon I followed the archaeology thing and sociology, and that was interesting; I wanted to study that. The seminal experience, though, down there, was one day I was driving around in one of my sports car things that I'd built in my dorm room, and happened upon an old mill in Ashland, Virginia. And I'd actually gone there parking with girlfriends. And it was just a beautiful place.

Then I noticed after I was at Randolph-Macon for a year, that somebody bought it and started fixing it up. And I found out that it was two artists. A guy named Jack Witt and Nancy Camden Witt; Nancy is the painter of note in the Richmond area. Jack is a sculptor, and he built a foundry in the mill. And she had a huge painting studio. And that's the way they lived. He taught one class or something at Randolph-Macon. But they had this really beautiful place and a big lake. And the mill actually had all the original—had all the machinery, and they left it in there and just lived that way. And it allowed me to see that you could be an artist, you know, and be on your own and not necessarily do anything else. At the time I didn't realize that her family was very wealthy, and that that enabled them to do what they were doing. But nonetheless, I saw the life of an artist there.

AVIS BERMAN: Sort of the way to be a painter or a sculptor in the world. [00:26:00]

JIM SANBORN: Professionally, yes. And they did that. They made their art. They had galleries. They sold their art. And it was very inspiring to me.

AVIS BERMAN: And well also I think you see that art wasn't something that you did; it was something that you were.

JIM SANBORN: Exactly. I mean I just always remember— You know I'd go and stay over there sometimes. And I'd mostly be working with Jack, the sculptor, because I like working with my hands, and I wasn't a two-dimensional artist. Nancy, first thing in the morning she just -gone! Upstairs to the studio. You know, didn't see her again until, you know, five or six o'clock when we'd have dinner or something. You know, her studio was big; she did big paintings. And it was great.

AVIS BERMAN: You saw she worked hard.

JIM SANBORN: She worked really hard. And she had success. I mean, you know, she was very well reviewed at the time. This is 1960, '70. So it was great. And so I befriended them. I ultimately ended up taking one of Jack's courses at Randolph-Macon. And when I decided to do the double major, I did the double major in art history. And I stayed at Randolph-Macon longer, an extra semester, in order to do the double major. So I did do the double major in sociology and art history. And I got very good grades in art history. But I really liked—I still wanted the archaeology part. I did medieval art history—or ancient art history was what I was mostly interested in. And then the thing at Oxford, and the combination of that, you

know, [00:28:00] and knowing the Witts and all that stuff, that was what really enabled me to do that. And then I carved—in college I was carving these big totem-like things at Randolph-Macon. And I was making such a mess in the dormitory—

AVIS BERMAN: Carving wood?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. That they gave me my own studio in the basement of a building there. And I was really the only artist that physically made art at Randolph-Macon at the time. It was really early. They didn't really have—they didn't have a program for studio art at all. It was all just art history. But I was really the first studio artist they'd ever had. So they gave me my own place.

AVIS BERMAN: But didn't Jack Witt teach some sort of studio course?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, he did. But it wasn't—it was sort of like—I can't remember exactly how that worked. I mean, it was like drawing or something. You know it was a very simple thing. Everybody drew things on the campus. It didn't really have a studio per se. It was just a classroom that wasn't really—anyway.

AVIS BERMAN: Was it life drawing? I mean was there a model?

JIM SANBORN: No, I don't remember that. It was just maybe the year I left was the first year he started teaching it. So it was very much—I was more or less on my own with the art education.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, when you were in Washington living near, or okay, living in Alexandria but going to these openings, were there artists or shows or people you remember from that environment, from being, you know, mixing with the scene at the time, the museum scene?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I can't remember what the timing was exactly. But I know that later on, I guess when I was a senior before I went to graduate school—[00:30:00]—I'm pretty sure it was before I went to graduate school—Andy Warhol did a show in DC, and I went—he signed my book with a soup can and all that stuff. And I really enjoyed that. And there was a fledgling gallery scene. There was a Washington museum, what they called the Museum of Modern Art in Washington, was a private thing. And it was just starting up. But I mean I was, you know, at the time, I was really very conservative. The stuff that I was doing was pretty conservative. I mean my father did conservative work. I mean it was figurative. But he started—he did a lot of abstract art later, in later years. But at the time I mean I was [inaudible] doing. Some of it was—I did a Christ on a cross. I mean I was basically in Romanesque art, you know, so I did a Madonna, I did a Christ on a cross, I did a few birds, I did this kind of stuff. Hippopotamus and animals and stuff like that. I was carving. When I first started carving wood, my sphere of influence is very—sort of very small. And contemporary art had—you know, if I'd lived in Manhattan, it would've been a very different thing. But I was here, and it was a more conservative environment. So my influences were conservative.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, I just wondered from even when you were a teenager, and your parents were going to these openings, and you saw these artists. And you were always in the museums.

JIM SANBORN: It didn't make any difference to me. You know it was interesting. I was sitting—I'd go to an opening. I mean they would constantly have these artists, creative people around them. I sort of, kind of wanted to be off by myself, frankly. And, you know, I'd go to an opening. And the thing I remember, a very distinct moment: I remember my mother, she was holding my hand, I was a fairly small kid [00:32:00]; I guess I was fairly little, and I was kind of looking up, you know. They were at an opening. My father and my mother, there were paintings, and my mother looks at the paintings, and they're talking—my father and mother are talking about, these are terrible; I mean these are really awful paintings. And so we walked a little farther, and meet the artist, you know. And my mother said, "Oh, I just love your paintings. Your paintings are just fabulous!" And my father, both of them, just lying through their teeth. I'm standing there, looking up at my mother being disingenuous about art, you know. And it had some major effect on me. It was really interesting. It sort of—

AVIS BERMAN: It was a mini lesson in the art world, I think.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, a serious lesson—a very early lesson in the art world, you know. And I



made her explain herself later, you know. But it was a serious lesson. And my dad was—you know he had his own openings. I remember going to those. But I really didn't like going to openings. I just hated it. And, you know, it made me a sort of anti-artist. I don't what it was about it, but I didn't want anything to do with it. For many years I just didn't want to deal with it.

So I made—the only thing that I did do from a very small age was there was a woman, Vally Possony, and she was a potter, a ceramicist, a ceramic artist. And lived in a wonderful house designed by Wharton Esherick. And she also lived the life of an artist, a ceramic artist. And I took classes with her from the age about seven to about 15. That I liked. And I made ceramic animals, and we fired them and glazed them, and did the whole thing there. And I really enjoyed that. And that was very influential also. [00:34:00] Again, this was another artist, full time, having her own business. A woman. It was interesting. It was just, you know—that was important to me.

So the ceramic thing I carried along. I couldn't draw—I mean I had my drawings, but, you know, my parents said, Oh, these are great. I didn't feel that I could draw, and I still don't feel as if I can draw very well. Anyway, so the ceramics thing was important. And then the art at Burgundy Farms were important early influences. But I didn't want to have anything to do with it until later in college.

AVIS BERMAN: Now how did you at Randolph-Macon latch onto this Columbia University-Oxford Exchange?

JIM SANBORN: My parents I think found out about it. Actually, no. I think it was the chairman of the department, you know, had a thing on his board, on his wall, as most university things, opportunities, programs. And so my parents decided to—they thought that was a great idea to do that because it was archaeology. But again, even early on, I never wanted to be—I don't know what it was about it—I never wanted to be an archaeologist because I didn't want to go get a doctorate. I didn't want to do the formal educational parts of getting a higher degree in archaeology or art history or sociology. And I didn't want to go that far with any of those things. Because I saw and knew a lot of people who did that [00:36:00] and ended up as professors and doing fairly tedious work. And there were very few people—very few people that ended up really doing fieldwork, which is what I wanted to do. So anyway. So the Oxford thing was something that was very important to me. And I actually got engaged to a woman I met there—a long time ago, very young to get engaged. But I got disengaged very quickly.

AVIS BERMAN: A narrow escape.

JIM SANBORN: A narrow escape with a Bryn Mawr girl. And so that was my Bryn Mawr year dealing with her and going to Bryn Mawr and staying at Haverford and living that kind of life. And, you know, hanging around that crowd. But I did like—Because Bryn Mawr was kind of like Oxford, and I enjoyed being there. And again, this was a very strong woman who was very much into the archaeology and doing—making a life of it. So.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, and was this an entire year? How long did this program last?

JIM SANBORN: It was only through the summer.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, so it was a summer program? So that was like after sophomore or junior year?

JIM SANBORN: It was junior year.

AVIS BERMAN: So you were in England for three months, or did you travel?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, England three months. And then traveled after that—or before then. I traveled through Europe, more or less a cathedral tour.

AVIS BERMAN: Because I was wondering when, you know, if you were, as a fan of Romanesque art, if you got yourself to France or Spain.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, yes. I did all of the cathedrals in England and France. And didn't get to Spain. But I went to Germany and a variety of places, going after cathedrals. [00:38:00]

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: Okay. And that was a big deal. And then I—right. And then I went to graduate school. And I also went again to Europe after that a couple of times.

AVIS BERMAN: What was it like being at Oxford for the first time?

JIM SANBORN: Oh, it was great. I mean I loved it. It was—I went on two major—I did two major things: One was I was on basically—we did a course. The course had actually been—we fanned out across England to do archaeological digs. So I did a dig in Southampton, England, where we were excavating the port city—the original port city of Southampton. And it hadn't been rebuilt after World War II. So it was a grand opportunity for archaeologists to go in and dig up as much as they could before it was rebuilt. Unfortunately, though, I was large, tall, and strong, and was given the duty that the girls didn't get. So the girls were given the little brushes and the little trowels. I was given the large shovels and wheelbarrows. For a large portion of the day, I was the muscle.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs]. Uh-huh [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: When I finally did start excavating things, it was really great. And I ended up finding a skeleton, one of the only skeletons they found. And the second job I had was with my soon-to-be fiancée. And we did a—we were asked to measure, completely measure, the Chapel of St. Peter in Oxford because it was going to be converted into a library, I think, or a cafeteria. [00:40:00] I don't remember. I'm writing a book myself right now. So I've got to recreate these events [laughs] also. But anyway. So in the act of measuring, we discovered one of the walls was eight feet thick, and all the rest of the walls were about three feet thick. So we started removing stones in the crypt and discovered a passageway that hadn't been opened since the 11th century. Which was a really wonderful, mysterious thing. It had a great effect on my life—as did the excavation in Oxford also—in Southampton. They were very inspiring events. But again, I knew that I didn't want to be an Oxford professor or some sort of professor. I wanted to be—but I did want to do the more glamorous parts of archaeology without having to go through all that other dry stuff. So that was the Oxford experience.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did you go to London? Or did you see any of—

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —Roman Britain or anything like that?

JIM SANBORN: Definitely the Roman Britain thing. One of my best friends of the family was doing a course in archaeology—or did. She was on a dig at Westminster. And so I visited Westminster Cathedral and worked for a short time on that excavation that she was working on. And yes. We did London, Denmark, Germany, England, France; I think that's it.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And were you going to any museums?

JIM SANBORN: All the usual museums. All the, you know, [inaudible] in Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum. All the major museums, the Tate, the British Museum. [00:42:00] Generally tending toward the classics: Greek, Roman, Romanesque. I don't know why it was that I liked the medieval period, but that's what I chose. And when I took my art history and things like that and history—because in order to get art history—because I had to take a lot of history in college, I took medieval history, a lot of it. And I think it was because of the simplicity of the art. I didn't like Baroque. I didn't like the more—the Renaissance period and all of that was too blatantly figurative for me for some reason. And Romanesque period and medieval period was simplified and stylized, and in a way abstracted. And if I was going to deal with figurative, it was going to be like that rather than, you know, a Michelangelo approach. Perhaps that was the reason I preferred that to the other. I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: So it's about abstraction and simplicity.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But do you think it was about volume, too, and flatness? Or I don't know.

JIM SANBORN: Well, Romanesque, I mean all the Romanesque art basically is more, you

know, it's a much more massive and bulky and—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And a lot of bas-relief in the sculpture, too.

JIM SANBORN: There is a lot of bas-relief, and it was easier. [They laugh.] Okay? If you're actually going to carve it, I mean I did—I'm sure, as most sculptors do who are carving things, I was certainly into the Michelangelo approach with, [00:44:00] you know, you get a giant piece of marble and start from one point, and get an elbow, and you know, another point get a toe, and start working inward. And the whole idea of, you know, negative carving, I got into that. And so the things I carved, I, you know—but I realized that I didn't really have the confidence or the drive to duplicate that kind of carving. You know I didn't really think I had the talent for that kind of visualization at that point in my life.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you still didn't have the training.

JIM SANBORN: I didn't have the training at all. But I mean, yes, sure. Grandiose delusions that maybe someday. But, on the other hand, realizing the genius of the ability to do that and to do it so well. And my father could draw very well. And painted very well. And could do the figure well and abstracted it well. But I was unable to do that. I couldn't make a likeness. I suppose because I wasn't intimating a likeness and wasn't trained to make likenesses. My father had tremendous formal training at the Art Students League and everything else. But he'd been making art since he was a child and always was a good draftsman. So that was—but I didn't feel as if I got that gene. I felt like I could create. But it wasn't necessarily that kind of art.

AVIS BERMAN: But you didn't really know, because you were in a conservative environment, that there were other options of that kind of art yet, is that correct?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And so at this moment you are carving. Are you modeling? Are you using clay? Or are you just carving [inaudible]?

JIM SANBORN: No. It was largely subtractive. Except earlier when I was doing the ceramics, and I was making some animals.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: Things like that.

AVIS BERMAN: So are you carving stone or wood? [00:46:00]

JIM SANBORN: It was primarily wood. I didn't—yes, it was wood. There wasn't any stone involved; it was wood.

AVIS BERMAN: So you're not really thinking about materials yet, in other words.

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Just, you know, the technique.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. [Inaudible.] Well, part of it—I know that when I was here—again, I'm not great on the dates, but my dad—there was a big show of David Smith's work in DC; I believe at the National Museum of American Art.

AVIS BERMAN: I think that would've been about 1970—I'm just guessing.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Joshua Taylor was a good friend of my father's. He was the director of the museum at that time. And I remember going to a lecture and meeting him—meeting Joshua Taylor later, you know. And I was really, really into David Smith. And I really enjoyed the work. And I remember meeting him later, and he said, "Gosh! You ought to be a sculptor. You've got the hands for it. They're the right size." You know. And so I just remember him saying that, you know, and I really wanted to do it. And it reinforced my thinking that I could maybe be a sculptor.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, a lot of sculptors really do have a physical quality to them as people.

JIM SANBORN: It is a very physical thing. It requires tremendous physical strength.

AVIS BERMAN: Stamina, too.

JIM SANBORN: And stamina. And obsession. And so hours and hours and hours of pounding away at something isn't for everyone for sure. But I did enjoy doing it. [00:48:00] And so that was important. I'm just trying to think if there were other early effects. I know that in writing this book thing that I'm doing, I'm trying to recreate some of this stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: What is your book about that you're writing?

JIM SANBORN: *Kryptos* [1990].

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, so it's just—was that just the title, or is it just only about—

JIM SANBORN: *Kryptos* from the source. It's going to be a biography—biographical also. I mean I just sent the proposal yesterday to the agent. I've got an agent, a fancy agent in New York called me and said we're doing a book on *Kryptos*. Oh, really? So I spent the last three weeks writing [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Okay.

JIM SANBORN: My first attempt.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, good luck.

JIM SANBORN: That's later.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, yes.

JIM SANBORN: So my father brought the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Library of Congress. The first time they'd ever been seen in the United States. And I remember handling—we don't do that today. But I remember, you know, that really—from the archaeological standpoint, they were just wonderful. And being close to that. I remember writing one of my earliest high school—I guess it was high school—papers about it, you know, and doing all the research down at the Library, physically looking at them and all this stuff. And then the other time was when my father was handcuffed to the Gutenberg Bible when they were taking it to New York to be—to go to the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] or whatever. And the importance of that. You know, that art is that important that you've got to be handcuffed to it. You know, it just—it was fascinating to me. So those two things were really important to me, you know, in seeing those things. And in part being of tremendous to me, myself. And my father also did this great show on papermaking. [00:50:00] He brought in papyrus and papyrus things from Egypt and all this stuff. So I, you know, always saw this stuff. So I knew a lot about it, you know—subliminally, though. You know, I just sort of collected all those bits of information. Used it all later, but much later.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I think what's also very interesting, though, is you're seeing them as art objects. But all of these things are making a great deal of difference to you, which is part of archaeology. They're all about inscriptions and words, too, and the very talismanic power of words, of language. So I think that's important, too.

JIM SANBORN: And we had these friends—we had two friends. One was the Upjohns, and Mr. [Everard M.] Upjohn was the writer of art history books, a very famous guy. And we used to go spend summers with them on an island in Maine. And then we also had very good friends named the Heaths. Actually Tom Heath was my father's—one of my parents' best friends, but also their minister, Episcopal minister. And we used to visit the Heaths in Maine also. And they had a wonderful house, and the Heaths had—Tom Heath's parents had a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. And the parents' house was the Heath House in Buffalo, New York. And I remember that they—when they sold the house, they kept the furniture; they had it all at their house in Maine. I remember all of this wonderful furniture. And I bring this up because it's important later. And I just remembered that they had a chair that I really loved sitting in. [00:52:00] It was a big chair because, I mean, I'm a big person, and I don't get comfortable in very many things. And they had a great chair that I enjoyed. And I guess for some reason—I guess I said that I liked it or that I admired it. This was when I was pretty young. I mean I was eight, 10, 12 years old at the time when we visited them. And so, you know, I was exposed to that kind of architecture, and I really enjoyed Frank Lloyd Wright and

all of that.

And then when I decided I'd become an artist when I was in high school, the last year of high school—actually I'd just graduated. I had just graduated and gone to Randolph-Macon, and decided I wanted to be an artist or archaeologist—this big crate arrives at my door, and that chair is in it. So I had this Frank Lloyd Wright chair, and I carried it around with me everywhere I went. And, you know, it was part of my life for a long time, many years. Anyway, so I had that for years.

AVIS BERMAN: Still have it?

JIM SANBORN: No. But it's the reason that I have this house, and I have a little island, and the studio and everything is owing to the sale of that single chair.

AVIS BERMAN: Fantastic.

JIM SANBORN: So it was very important to my life.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Exactly. That's wonderful.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I just want to digress for a minute—

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Because you've mentioned this several times; because, I mean, I guess I should say for the tape, how tall are you?

JIM SANBORN: 6'7".

AVIS BERMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And were you ever heavy or large?

JIM SANBORN: No, I wasn't really heavy. When I was growing up, I was a little heavy. I was embarrassed because I was a little heavy. But then once I—actually in high school at the age of 14 I grew six inches in six months.

AVIS BERMAN: So you must have been—because it seemed to me what you were talking about is that you seem to have reached—you got tall very early.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Well, six inches in six months at the age of 14. I went from—I was still six feet at 13, you know. So I was always—my father was 6'2"; my mother wasn't that tall, like her father was 6'2". So it was very strange, but it skipped a generation. But somehow I got to 6'7". But I was also—but I was tall. I mean I was pretty tall. I remember having a hard time getting in movies for kids' prices. So I had to take my birth certificate to get in the movies. Nobody believed I was as young as I was.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, was it difficult for you to be so tall? I mean did it make you feel like an outsider or anything?

JIM SANBORN: No, not so much. I think I felt more self-conscious about being a little heavy than tall when I was younger.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you think—you know, I mean a lot of artists talk about making art in terms—I mean sculpture is always something because you move around, around it. The body enters into it. Have you found that in some ways your art is related not just to your body as a generality, but to your size? Do you find that that makes a difference?

JIM SANBORN: I don't know. I don't know if my body image got into it. All I know is that my size and strength assisted me in my belief that I could make or build anything that I wanted to make or build. [00:56:00] Okay? So if I'd been really small, weak and frail, I wouldn't have been able to do what I did. And that's significant. And I started out, I mean, from early on, doing things that were heavy and large, you know, from the beginning. And the belief that I could make anything, I'm sure, was instilled in me by my parents, who were very, you know, just continually reinforced everything I did. And even though I was hell to live with, even in my baby book. [They laugh.] My mother—whatever. I was not—I didn't have an easy personality. So I really had—whatever I wanted, I had to get. So I was kind of spoiled and

difficult and large, but not only physically. Okay? Anger wasn't ever a part of my life, which is a good thing because I was so big. Gentle giant situation, I'd say.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. Now how did you get to Pratt?

JIM SANBORN: So when I graduated from Randolph-Macon, because I took an extra semester, I ended up with a spare semester. And my father always had a studio behind our house—or next to our house. The studio was about half the size of the house. And it was always there; sort of cinderblock contemporary for the period, modern kind of studio. [00:58:00] And he had a big—a printing press, a pretty old printing press that used lithograph stones, and his business was actually—he, as an artist, he called himself the Stone Press because there's a picture of a press on his card and all of this stuff. And that studio, I mean I was raised in that studio. My portrait was done in that studio. My dad did my portrait. And I hung out in that studio. I had parties in that studio. So that was important to the artist's studio aspect of this. So I took a semester off and worked in my father's studio. I did some prints. I did some lithographs. I did some carving. I did some very simple geometric wall pieces made out of ceiling tile and other things. More or less to build up a portfolio because I didn't have any undergraduate art training in studio art. So I had to build a portfolio that was good enough to get me into graduate school in art.

And so Pratt's program was—it was only the second year that they had graduate sculpture at Pratt. And I mean they'd always done well—I mean they'd always been a pretty well-known art school in design—more design and architecture than fine arts at the time. But they started a graduate program—this is like, I think it was the second year that they started it. So I applied. [01:00:00] At the time I think they were letting anybody in because they needed students for the new program. And so I lucked out, and I got into that based on some pretty—I know at this point some horrific artwork.

AVIS BERMAN: What did the prints look like?

JIM SANBORN: They were pretty—they were very abstract. I did one called *Peptic Pandora* because my stomach was killing me, and my stomach was always an issue. Now it's a major issue in my life. Whatever is going on in my life is reflected in my stomach. Anyway. And I did some fairly abstract—some abstract things, primitively abstract. And I remember at Pratt, when I got there, I made a clay—you know, we were—everybody was sort of, okay, you've got to do what you want to do. We're going to meet, have our first class after about two weeks. So everybody brought in what they'd made. And the first sit-down critique I'd ever had in my life. One of the reasons I refused to go to art school—because I didn't have the confidence. I knew it would be very hard for me to get through a critique. And there are quite a few artists who quit making art because they couldn't handle critiques. And I knew I couldn't, and I knew I didn't want to deal with it.

But by that time I was—I got somewhat arrogant, I guess, doing what I was doing because my influences were fairly conservative, and they weren't that sophisticated. So whatever I did was great. Okay. So I was getting support from my parents and my parents' friends and this other stuff, you know. So if you're in a mediocre artistic milieu, your critiques aren't going to be that great. So anyway, so I got—I had enough confidence to do this. And so I made this tortured head, representational head thing. I vaguely remember it. [01:02:00] And the other people, several of them, were from Manhattan and, you know, were doing these more modern, contemporary—one guy was even doing Conceptual documentation or something, you know. Clearly completely out of my realm, you know, completely. And so I go there. And basically there are only about six of us, maybe seven, six or seven of us in a class. And our teacher was Robert Zakarian, and he was a sculptor. And my other teachers—I had Jacob Landau and Zakarian; Calvin Albert, who was the figure sculptor. So there were a couple of people—you needed to do figure with Calvin Albert. I mean he was a well-known figure sculptor.

Anyway, so I did this thing. And the general consensus was: What are you thinking? What do you think this is, 1940? You know, and I was like destroyed. Okay? Completely destroyed, you know. And so that prompted a tremendous amount of introspection and going around to the galleries, the new galleries in SoHo. And at that time, there weren't that many. I mean there were very few. OK Harris had opened up. And Sonnabend might have just opened.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, they were opening '70, '71.

JIM SANBORN: '70 is when I started. '70, '71 was when I was at Pratt. The World Trade Center was being built while I was watching it being built. So I spent a lot of time going to galleries and going to openings in Manhattan. Getting to know what contemporary art was. And I remember seeing some shows that really thrilled me, and it was great. And so very quickly I started making very abstract stuff. [01:04:00] And large, very large—again, carvings, but they were Styrofoam carvings of simple organic forms. You know ten, 12, 14 feet high. And because Pratt had been given a huge amount of Styrofoam by Dow Chemical Company, it was all sitting there. Nobody was using it. I mean the rest of the students either were Calvin Albert's straight representational figure artists working in plaster and clay. Or they were—they had their own studios somewhere in Manhattan and were working with Conceptual documentation or various simple things. And then a couple were just off-the-walls things.

So I got a studio. I was living in a little house for \$50 a month on Myrtle Avenue under the Myrtle Avenue El, elevated train, at Myrtle Avenue. And then I got a studio—I got a house for 50 bucks, and my studio was \$35, and that was up the street. And didn't have any water or heat. So I worked in there. But mostly I worked in the studio at Pratt, with this huge, unlimited supply of Styrofoam. And I laminated it together and started carving these huge organic forms out of Styrofoam. And I can't remember what the name of it was. The second year I—what was it? Anyway, I ended up submitting—it was the shortest thesis they'd ever accepted. [They laugh.] It was a six-page thesis—[01:06:00] because you had to write a thesis—and it was six pages or seven pages, and I still have it someplace. But it was about the organic forms, connecting and disconnecting. And I made these big things that went out of the window, out into the street. This kind of stuff.

I did very well, and I got a full fellowship the second year. And became the tech guy; as part of my fellowship, you had to do a teaching thing. I was the tech guy for the graduate department for the second year. Then I also had to teach a course at Kingsborough Community College, which was a living hell. And knew at that point in time that the last thing in the world I'd ever want to do was teach. It was sort of a mass lecture situation with 700 students in an auditorium. Most of them were stoned out of their minds on pot. You know it was just reeking of pot. I mean it was like nobody was interested. Whatever. Had to show art appreciation.

But I really did enjoy doing these huge carvings and going around to galleries and trying to, you know, show them what I was doing. Ivan Karp was very kind and directed me to several people a couple of months after I got out of graduate school. Nothing came of it, but it was an interesting experience, you know, going to some hotel room and meeting some collector. But getting to know the galleries in Manhattan, getting to know the museums in Manhattan and the whole art scene was the most valuable experience in graduate school. You know it just completely transformed what—I mean it just changed what art was. [01:08:00] And it was like night and day.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, you needed it.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And besides Zakarian, was he influential on you? Or I mean were there other people who were there that you gravitated toward?

JIM SANBORN: No. I mean graduate school—I mean graduate school was sort of—it's different from undergraduate. You're supposed to already have your shit together. [They laugh.] Okay? And you're supposed to know what you're doing, right? And since there were so few of us, only seven people, there were a couple of the other students that I befriended, and we would hang out and go to openings together and things like this. But I knew that Zakarian made art, but frankly he wasn't that serious about it. And I realized that when we went to visit his studio, fairly quickly, that he was a teacher not a big artist. And that was—we visited somebody else's studio there, a studio in Manhattan, and the same thing. They weren't, you know—I realized that teaching was a trap that you might not escape from as an artist. So I didn't really gravitate toward either of them. I gravitated more towards spending time in Manhattan and going to see, you know, some really interesting, what I thought were conceptual, minimal interesting stuff there in Manhattan. And was much more interested in that. But I was shy, so I didn't befriend that many people. I just—I've never been gregarious.

AVIS BERMAN: So if you went to an opening, and you saw Donald Judd there, would you

have approached him? [01:10:00]

JIM SANBORN: Probably not. I've never been really good at that. There were people—I mean, certainly, you know, I went to all those shows of [Dan] Flavin, and, you know, all the people of that period. It was, you know, it was really great. I remember Wolfgang Laib, but that was later actually, later. His marble and milk pieces. And I did spend a lot of time at that whole—there was a group of galleries—I guess it was, who was the Australian guy? He had the downstairs gallery; Sonnabend was upstairs.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, his first name—Max Hutchinson.

JIM SANBORN: Max Hutchinson, right. Hutchinson—I used to go to Hutchinson's all the time, talked to him. And I remember di Suvero as having—had his first show there. And I watched him install. And I always wanted Max to show my work, and he never showed it. He never did show it.

AVIS BERMAN: So what did you think of Mark di Suvero's work when you saw it?

JIM SANBORN: I liked it a lot. I mean I liked the ambition and the scale. And, yes, I liked the scale and the ambition of that. I mean it was great. Sort of before the accident.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: You know he was much more—he was doing well and was able to pull off these huge things, and move these big things around. And so, once again, it was—I could see that, you know, you can make anything if you want to.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And after the accident he used cranes for his arms and legs.

JIM SANBORN: That's right. That's right. But again, with di Suvero's work, I lost interest in it because it didn't have—for me it didn't have intellectual content. [01:12:00] It didn't have the content that I felt was needed. And so I lost interest in the work.

AVIS BERMAN: And at that time, what kind of intellectual content did your work have?

JIM SANBORN: I'm trying to think—it's difficult because I went to school at Pratt. And then I came back, and I taught at the community college for a while, for a couple of years. But still going back and forth to Manhattan. I didn't have a place to live. But then I did get a place to live later. It wasn't 'til the '80s that I lived in SoHo for a couple of years. So it's hard for me to know when I saw what.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, this is the other question: I guess you—when you were finished with your master's degree, did you want to stay in New York?

JIM SANBORN: I basically, my last year of graduate school, I basically had my first nervous breakdown. It was a very—getting through my opening for my graduate show was extremely hard. You know, I don't know what it was, but I became increasingly anxious my last year of graduate school. And I now think it was—well, I was 25, and 25 is a very hard period of anybody's life if you're dealing with college. And all of a sudden you're out of college after being in school for your whole life, and then you're out, you know. And I didn't know what I was going to do with art or any of that stuff. [01:14:00] And I just more or less lost touch with reality. For almost a year, it was just really difficult to exist. And so—then I started seeing a psychiatrist in DC. And had to go back and forth.

And New York didn't help. The pressure and all that stuff didn't help. So I didn't want to stay there—I couldn't stay there. Psychologically, physically, I was too much of a mess to stay. And so I took more than one—about two years of anti-depressants and whatever else to get me out of that depressed period. And so basically that landed me back in DC. Then I got married. She was someone I had met in college, but who was going to school in Manhattan. So I lived with her part of the time. And that, you know, kept me going with Manhattan, you know. But I think I married her to get out of my depression. That worked for a while—for a year or two. But as far as making art, I made these huge pieces. I moved them to DC, the huge graduate student pieces. And I rented a house just out—you know, I got out of graduate school, I got married, we rented a house, and I had a garage studio. I had these huge pieces left over from graduate school. And there was a gallery in Washington called the Henry Gallery—Henri Gallery.



AVIS BERMAN: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [01:16:00]

JIM SANBORN: And Henri was doing very well. And I guess their major artist at the time would be—I remember Robert Stackhouse was showing. Martin Puryear had his first show at Henri. I wasn't that enthused about his first show; I liked his second show at Henri. And I showed my work to Henri, and she really liked it. And so she was going to show me and David Smith. My big break, okay? My big break. So I have these huge pieces made out of Styrofoam. And so I had to make them more solid. They were flocked: latex, house paint and sawdust originally. And I felt as if I needed to make them stronger. So I was going to spray them with polyester resin. Because I'd known about the fiberglass from working with cars and stuff. Well, I succeeded at—let's see. The day before I was supposed—two days before I was supposed to install my work at Henri, I sprayed these huge pieces with polyester resin, and it melted them. Made them useless. I had to call Henri and tell her they all fell off the truck. That was it. That was it for my big break.

AVIS BERMAN: She probably wasn't too happy.

JIM SANBORN: She wasn't very happy. It was a really bad experience. So I never again showed with Henri. And we never spoke, you know, for many years. And so that was a bad experience. First experience was not very good.

AVIS BERMAN: On the other hand, here you are, you're just out of graduate school and whatever, and you're going to get this gallery show—[01:18:00]

JIM SANBORN: Oh, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —immediately with a prominent gallery. I mean not as—

JIM SANBORN: And Ivan Karp loved it; he loved it. I mean he wanted to show it. But, you know, it wasn't going to be for a couple of years. It wasn't going to be for another year. And by that time I'd already melted the suckers. So it was like—and you can't hold onto a certain kind of imagery forever.

AVIS BERMAN: And you couldn't replicate them.

JIM SANBORN: I didn't want to. No, I couldn't do it. It wasn't part—I just couldn't do it. It was like old work, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes. Well, but it's amazing that two dealers wanted to show your work.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. That [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: That doesn't happen to artists that often.

JIM SANBORN: Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, you know, fairly quickly.

JIM SANBORN: So I was reinforced. Even though it didn't work, I was still getting some reinforcement, the reinforcement that I needed to get me out of the doldrums, to say the least. And out of the depression and all of that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, maybe that thesis show also, you know, you said you hated going to openings as a kid but for different reasons.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And maybe it brought up a lot of that, too. But it is also scary to have your life, your creative life on display.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Totally.

AVIS BERMAN: Have you found since that when you're having a show, that it's very anxiety-provoking for you?

JIM SANBORN: It got better. But I still have never really enjoyed going to openings. I knew—I

realized fairly quickly that it was an absolute necessity for the career. And the only reason I did it was for the career—or to try to pick up girls or something. Never enjoyed it.

AVIS BERMAN: For housekeeping purposes, when were you married, what years, if you can remember?

JIM SANBORN: '71—one year.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

JIM SANBORN: To the day. [01:20:00] And I married a woman that I met when she was dating my roommate in college, undergraduate, at Randolph-Macon. My roommate was dating her when she was 13, and he didn't know it. He didn't realize. He thought she was older. She acted incredibly mature. I mean, she was an Army brat, extremely bright. So anyway, I got to know her, you know, and she was so beautiful and intelligent and acted, you know, extremely mature. And so I don't know how we met again at a party or something like that. By that time she was 18. And I married her when she was 19. And she was in fashion in New York at Tobé-Coburn, this thing on the Upper East Side; it was a fashion [school -JS]. Well, she stayed in Manhattan, and she spoke like three languages, and she got a job with ABC News. Quickly rose to being a producer at ABC. One of the first women producers at ABC. She ended up producing Barbara Walters. She was the head of ABC News in Boston. She became very big at ABC News. Then she produced Bill Moyers and Barbara Walters and various other people. But her whole life was completely taken up with a whistle around her neck and lots of cocaine. Because that's what young successful producers, that's the way they got ahead. [01:22:00] And it was especially hard as a woman. And so she worked— But she was still very bright and very good at her job and rose very quickly. But was completely into that world. And I was completely into making sculpture. And both of us were very young. So it just didn't work out. We both went our separate ways. And we're very good friends to this day and have kept in touch all these years, and she's a very smart lady. But we just couldn't live together. Too young.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And going in different directions.

JIM SANBORN: Going in different directions, 1971.

AVIS BERMAN: So you—when you came back, were you living with your parents? Or did you have your own place here?

JIM SANBORN: No, I was living with my parents. And when I came back from Randolph-Macon—from Pratt—in a bad state, I was staying with my parents. Stayed with my parents a lot. I stayed in my dad's studio when he wasn't necessarily working in it. I stayed there. And right. I was staying with them, and then I got married. We looked at a house in Falls Church, Virginia, through '71. And then I got a job at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, teaching sculpture. And part time, I think—part time to begin with and maybe a year full time. Didn't enjoy that much. Made a whole series of pieces using a machine shop at Montgomery College. [01:24:00] Aluminum and glass pieces that detected changes in relative humidity. Basically they would fog up or clear up. I mean that's basically—I did these pieces, and they were polished aluminum and glass. And they got me my first fellowship and exhibition at Virginia Museum, my first major show. But prior to that—let's see.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's—well, let's just discuss this for a minute. Because that early work is certainly in the direction you were going to go.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did that happen that you really changed your approach, your materials, your direction?

JIM SANBORN: New York. Being close to New York and the contemporary art world and what people were doing at the time. The Minimalists. I liked the Minimal period. I liked the early environmentalists. The artists were working with, you know, simple materials. If you need a restroom, we've got one in here.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, I'm just going to pause. [Audio break.] So anyway we were talking about teaching sculpture at Montgomery College in Rockville. And what was the content of

the class? And were there any interesting students or dedicated students?

JIM SANBORN: [01:26:00] I taught a course in three-dimensional design, art appreciation courses, and sculpture. My design classes and my—actually my design classes, I did wacky things with the students that I guess annoyed the other professors or whatever. I wasn't invited back to Montgomery College after my full, after the one—I did one full-time thing, but was not invited back for a variety of reasons. The main reason was that I would spend most of my time at the machine shop, and I had significant success as far as having shows and making a lot art in the different departments. And not hanging out with the other teachers who were going to class in coat and tie. I mean it was like high school. I mean it felt like high school. And I didn't relate to the other people at all.

AVIS BERMAN: Because they didn't act like artists.

JIM SANBORN: No, they didn't act like artists. It felt like high school teaching. I mean it was like—and I did crazy things like taping up whole hallways with string and all this other wacky stuff, which they couldn't relate to very well. And I opened up a plastics laboratory in one of the restrooms where we did fiberglass work. And I think the smell—they didn't appreciate the smell either. So I tried doing all of these things.

AVIS BERMAN: The kids must have loved you.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I got along very well with the students. And some of them have done fairly well. I mean they aren't recognizable in the art world. But they've done well in DC as far as starting some really edgy music, you know, things. And doing edgy things in DC, which is good. [01:28:00] And I know them after all these years. But generally Montgomery College is basically high school, and the students aren't—it was a two-year college, and the students were the kinds of students that you wouldn't be able to follow later [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Now, what was this artist-in-residence in Glen Echo Park [MD]. What does that mean?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Right after Montgomery College—actually during Montgomery College—after I got married—I got married and got divorced. I was at Montgomery College. I probably was living—Oh, I lived on this—after the house in Falls Church and I got divorced, I rented a little college on an estate in McLean, Virginia, right across from the entrance to CIA Headquarters. And it was on the Kennedy Estate.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Robert.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. A portion of that estate.

AVIS BERMAN: Is that Hickory Hills or something?

JIM SANBORN: Maybe. Yes, I think that's what it was. Something like that. And I was sort of the artist, you know. It was inexpensive, and I built a studio there, and I made sculpture there for maybe a year, year and a half. Then I was summarily booted out because they were going to develop the property into these grotesque McMansions out there. Which ultimately that's what happened. And then right after that at Montgomery College I met a couple—the guy was teaching ceramics. They had a farm in Frederick, Maryland—outside of Frederick, Maryland—Middletown, Maryland. [01:30:00] And I moved up there, built a studio in a barn there. Made larger sculpture there in this barn in Frederick for about a year and a half—or maybe just a year, whatever it was. They did ceramics; had big kilns and everything. It was a pretty interesting period. But it was pretty far away, and it was hard to get anybody to look at my work. So right after that, after I lived there, I heard about this thing in Glen Echo starting up. So I applied to be an artist-in-residence at Glen Echo Park. At the time the jury consisted of Anne Truitt, and she got me in there. She really liked what I was doing.

AVIS BERMAN: What were you making then?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I mean I was still working with the glass and the humidity and this other stuff. So it was kind of edgy, conceptually-based work. And I was able to get Virginia Commission on the Arts and NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grants and things like this. And so I was able to support myself with that. So I started— When I went to Glen Echo, I was offered the Crystal Pool, which is an old swimming pool at Glen Echo, over which there

were great riots during segregation. It was a segregated pool, and Glen Echo was an amusement park. An old amusement park. Previously it was a center of the Chautauqua. In the 1800s it was a Chautauqua center for the arts. [01:32:00] And then that was taken over and more or less built on top of it by Glen Echo Park, the amusement park. And it was an amusement park for many years.

So I was given the area underneath the Crystal Pool, which is a huge swimming pool. But around the pool, underneath the top paving around the pool, was 5,000 square feet of fairly interesting studio space. It had huge filter tanks in it and diving boards for tables. They made tables out of diving boards, these huge, aquamarine diving boards that became the tables in the studio. And then in one of the areas I built a foundry and had large-capacity foundry for pouring metal. I taught metal casting for eight years in Glen Echo Park and ran a foundry. And that's how I supported myself.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did you know how to—I mean had you learned metal casting?

JIM SANBORN: Remember that guy from Randolph-Macon College, that lived in the mill.

AVIS BERMAN: Jack.

JIM SANBORN: Jack Witt. Had his own furnace that he had built, and he did metal casting. So I got into it and made some large aluminum castings, very similar to the big Styrofoam things I'd carved. I mean clones but made out aluminum, highly-polished, these huge highly-polished things. The thing about Glen Echo was it's a national park. And as a national park, I figured that, well, maybe there's some way to get access to government surplus materials. So I started—I did some research, and I discovered a way to gain access to all the federal government excess material to make art out of. [01:34:00] Now this is like—I mean myself and Raya Bodnarchuk, who's a sculptor in Washington.

AVIS BERMAN: What did you say that name was?

JIM SANBORN: Raya, R-A-Y-A. The last name is B-O-D-N-A-R-C-H-U-K. Raya and I were at Glen Echo. She was a sculptor, and I was a sculptor, and we ended up living—we lived together for about three years at Glen Echo, and we shared the studio for eight years. And I got this thing going where we could take—I got a truck, and we could actually take semi-trailers to the naval shipyard in Norfolk and have them filled with everything imaginable. We could have taken spacecraft. Literally they had spacecraft there. You could get anything that a sculptor ever wanted. There was just acres of metal: brand-new sheets of aluminum, huge chunks of metal, propellers the size of the building, every imaginable thing you ever wanted as a sculptor you could have for nothing. Zero!

And so we went to the naval shipyard in Philadelphia, the naval shipyard in Norfolk, and I started collecting these massive amounts of metal. And it made me into a Constructivist. All of a sudden, you know, you're working with small bits of metal and glass and minor materials because you can't afford stuff on a big-scale. And then all of a sudden, within a year, you could build anything you wanted to build out of just endless materials. So we'd go around, you know, and collecting this stuff. And then I started making large outdoor sculptures. [01:36:00]

At the time there weren't that many people—there were a small group of artists nationally: Nancy Holt, Beverly Pepper, and some other artists who were doing public art. But it wasn't a very big group at the time. And really one of the first public art programs was in Seattle. And I remember, you know, trying to put a portfolio together. I knew that I couldn't make public art unless I had made some public art. I mean I wouldn't get commissions if I couldn't make public art. So I started with all this infinite amount of metal and with proceeds from—I did bronze casting for other artists. Generally pretty terrible stuff. But I got some interesting commissions. Actually my friend Jack Witt—I did a large commission for him and charged him for it, whatever. And other artists I did large bronze castings for. I did a restoration of the Minute Man statue for the Naval Museum. I made castings of Smoky the Bear to be given to the park rangers that put out the most forest fires. Or whatever.

But it supported me well enough that I could start making large artworks. I'd put them on the back of my truck, take them out to a contemporary office park or large grassy area in front of minimal building that I liked. Plop them on the grass on a Sunday afternoon. And photograph it like they'd bought it. And then pick it up with security guards chasing me, literally chasing me away. And put it back in my truck and take it back.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] So you were going around Washington or Baltimore?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Well, I remember I used GEICO. GEICO campus in Bethesda was a new building at the time. [01:38:00] It had a big grass area. And I used GEICO several times. But I made these huge pieces out of metal. And then I'd have it rolled, you know. I'd polish it [inaudible]. I'd do all this stuff. And I'd taken them somewhere. None of them were ever sold. They were all basically to build up a portfolio doing large-scale public art.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I mean I realize it was truly plop art, and it was going to be de-plopped.

JIM SANBORN: That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: So it was spurious.

JIM SANBORN: That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you have any sense of what public art was other than at this moment, what you're discussing is large and maybe a decorative add-on to the building?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean at that point in time, I mean short of some artists that— I guess Dennis Oppenheim was doing some big outdoor pieces. Again, I said Nancy Holt. Who else was it?

AVIS BERMAN: Of course di Suvero had some.

JIM SANBORN: I mean of course di Suvero was doing large pieces, large outdoor pieces.

AVIS BERMAN: Was Storm—

JIM SANBORN: Well, Storm King had started like just when—Hutchinson left, Hutchinson Gallery, and then went up to New York and started opening sculpture parks. Storm King started after that sometime.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

JIM SANBORN: But at the time, my pieces were minimal, metal constructions. And I did those sort of minimal—large, minimal, metal constructions. And I built a portfolio of that. While simultaneously doing other metal constructions that had content to them and had some sort of intellectual basis. [01:40:00] Based largely on a trip I took in '77 to Egypt and prior to that, they were sort of minimal constructions that related somehow to—they were temple-like and futuristic cityscapes or whatever. But they were very simple, minimal—because I had an infinite supply of metal. And make whatever I wanted to make out of this metal and have curators in and try to get shows.

I remember at Glen Echo—I mean, there were some major disasters, too. I mean, I was doing the public art thing. And then simultaneously doing the gallery-museum thing. Which is what I have continued to do for the rest of my life, which was to do two parallel—two separate things, and one doesn't necessarily relate to the other and never has. The intellectual basis for public art isn't as strong as it is for my museum and gallery work. And so the two worlds are separate. I mean, you can make public art and be completely unknown in the museum-gallery world. And you can be known in the museum-gallery world—the two worlds are separate.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, one is more architectural because it's involved more with architecture.

JIM SANBORN: It involves compromise. It involves working with clients' whims. It involves all this other stuff. But it doesn't have anything to do necessarily with what I consider to be high art. Okay? So basically the public art is a way, a method for me to support my gallery-museum work. And that worked very well for many years. And I made significant money from the public art, to the point where I didn't have to teach anymore. [01:42:00] But so when I was at Glen Echo, I supported myself—I didn't sell much public art, but I was building up this portfolio, slowly building it up, building it up. And I also then at Glen Echo started working in stone. But it wasn't carved, it was split stone. And I started splitting and making very simply geometric, geological forms. They were science-based geological forms. Prior to the science-based, geological-like tableau, I was doing—these things were things that were inspired before that, like Egypt and the archaeology.

So after I left graduate school, I more or less decided that if I'm going to make anything that's my own, I've got to somehow base it on my previous experience. And I decided what I would do would be—I could do as much as I wanted about archaeology and do an end-run around the whole system. And be an archaeologist or deal with archaeological stuff without having to get a doctorate and do all that other stuff. So I could do stuff with archaeology. I could do it with as much science. I could do all of those things that I wanted to do but was crippled by my lack of mathematics. So I was never able to do the mathematics. As a result, I could never be a science person or a scientist or whatever. So I could circumvent that by being an artist. That way I could accomplish my goals without having to deal with the usual routine of getting there.

So in the '70s the work was a mix of these futuristic—[01:44:00]—they were sort of, again, I mentioned futuristic cities, but they were archaeologically based. So they were minimalized. They were minimal kinds of metal constructions. But the public art was just metal constructions without the archaeological inspiration. Which to me meant that they had less content.

AVIS BERMAN: And the stone pieces, are those outdoor big pieces?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. So the stone pieces start in the mid-'70s. And I'm working at Glen Echo. And I build this huge stone-splitting machine where I can split large blocks of stone. I built a small machine also. And so I built these two machines so I could—in 1977, I guess, I started working with the stone and doing these geological tableaus. And I got major grants from the NEA and other places based on that work. So I was getting a lot of good, positive feedback about that from the stonework.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Does Noguchi figure in here at all or anything like that? Or any others?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I admired some Noguchi work. But I thought Noguchi was passé. I mean I think because it was related more to—it was related more to the classic stoneworkers. At least his public work I felt had some promise because it was—he took more chances with it. But the carved work was very—too traditional for me; it was very traditional work. While I was at Glen Echo I had an assistant, a woman who worked for me named Nizette Brennan. [01:46:00] And Nizette had worked for Noguchi in his studio in Italy. And I had been working with the split stone exclusively. It was nothing like what Noguchi worked in. And I had shows at a couple of museums. I think I showed this split stone work at the Virginia Museum and several other places and was doing fairly well with it. And Nizette said, "Well, Isamu's coming to town, so let's go out and spend the day." And so she brought him up in my studio, and he loved the work. You know he—I was very—I mean I was feeling paranoid that somebody like Noguchi picks up on what you're doing, it's the kiss of death. I mean I'd had other artists that had borrowed ideas from me, and I was very paranoid.

So I was very selective about what I showed him and what I told him. It seemed very strange, but I think a lot of artists, if they're working with ideas and stuff that quite a few people are working with, they're very proprietary about it. I didn't want to take any chances with this. And so we talked about stone and the way we each related to stone. And how, you know, I related differently to stone than the way he related to stone. And we just spent the day, I mean, you know, talking about stone and all of that. And we went down—I think he had installed a piece at the East Building or something, and we went down to Washington and worked on that. And that was really the only experience I had with him. I got a call from him about a couple of weeks, a month later, about some of my stone suppliers and stuff like this, you know. But we related pretty well. And, you know, it was an interesting experience to do it, you know to talk to him and everything. [01:48:00] Anyway, that's the only—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's pretty amazing, though.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, it's pretty amazing. I mean it was cool.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean that he wanted to talk to you without—I mean he was talking to you as clearly a superior.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, he really liked what I was doing because he realized I was serious about it. It was a type of stonework that he had thought about or he hadn't dealt with before. Because, you know, it was entirely different. And there were geological representations of things I mean, you know, and whether they were earthquakes or landslides and things like this, they were pieces which involved literal—they were representational, but they were

representational of geological events.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you remember what he said about how he related to stone?

JIM SANBORN: No. Honestly.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did you explain how you related to stone?

JIM SANBORN: Gee. Stone to me was just a medium. I think he had a more sensuous relationship with stone, in the way that Michelangelo might have a sensuous relationship with stone. I certainly know that Nizette, his assistant, did work almost exactly like Noguchi's, you know. And it was very derivative of his work. So I sort of saw his work around all the time because her work was around. And I'm pretty sure that that's the way he felt about it. I might have described it at the time, but I didn't—it was an interesting event, but it didn't seem as significant as it should have been.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, of course, he had that place in Shikoku, which was a whole island of stone carvers. And he went there to push and move the stones around. [01:50:00] I mean, the stone was the reason he went there.

JIM SANBORN: Oh, absolutely. And I—I mean, you know, just the fact that I was taking stone, and I wasn't putting a chisel to it at all. I was just splitting it. I mean, it could've been some other material. It could've been chunks of ceramic or even chunks of Styrofoam that I was sawing. But because it was stone, you know— I mean the thing about it was is that I started looking around. I guess I wanted to work with stone in a different way. And I saw a couple of houses that were made out of multi-colored stone. These were stone veneer on houses, strips of stone almost like brick but it was actually stone, in all different, amazing colors, you know. And it just blew me away. It was hideous because they were mixing it all up into these hideous 1950s, '60s, things, you know. It was just grotesque. But I saw the stone, and I said, Gee whiz! Is that fake? Is that color real? Is that like—what is that? You know.

So I located the quarry. After a lot of research, I found out where the stone came from. And it was a sandstone quarry in Ohio. One place, Briar Hill Stone Company, in this one area of Ohio that had stone, a sandstone, that had been geologically endowed with many hues from blues, greens, red, brown, the whole gamut; all colors of stone coming from an area of a group of quarries in maybe 10 square miles. It was a remarkable thing. And nobody had messed with it. No artist had really used it or anything, that I knew of. [01:52:00] And it was just an amazing discovery that they had this infinite amount of color in this stone. And so basically the way they built these houses, they'd have these wooden pallets, you know, four-by-four feet. And they'd have a conveyor belt would come by. And the conveyor belt had all these stones on it of all the different colors. They had one strip of stone that's gray, a strip of stone that's brown, a strip of stone that's blue, green, whatever. And the guys would try to put an equally mixed group on a pallet. Right? So that a stonemason could just mix them all up on the wall, and it'd be all even. Heaven forbid you make a house out of one color! It wouldn't—they never did. They took the stone, they mixed it all up in colors.

So I said, now this is ridiculous. So I started having them make me pallets of one color, you know; so I'd have one brown and one bright red and one gray and one whatever. And so I had a truck, and I was able to bring like five pallets at a time back to my studio in Glen Echo. So I started making these stone constructions using just one color. And it was very evocative, and it looked—I mean I did very well with that body of work. And I started showing with a woman here in town named Diane Brown.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, wait a minute! I remember her from many years ago. But I think we're getting ahead of ourselves there on that.

JIM SANBORN: Well, '79 was my first show with Diane.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, I wanted to ask you two questions here, is that: you stopped, even though you had all the free material, you stopped using it?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you ever go back again for it?

JIM SANBORN: [01:54:00] Well, I guess this [inaudible] stone distracted me to such an

extent that I then— I did use it for my— I did two, my first two major public art projects, one was for the City of Baltimore, this is '77; and also for the City of Charleston, West Virginia. They were large projects. And one piece ended up being about 90 feet long and 30 feet wide and 20 feet high. The other one was about 60 feet by 60 feet by 60 feet by about 30 feet high—20 feet high. And they were both my representations of cities. They were giant constructions as if they were pyramids—Egyptian constructions along the Nile River. Both of them were adjacent to rivers. One was the Elk River in Charleston, West Virginia. The other was the Patapsco River in Baltimore. And they both—each piece was gigantic, and they both related to the river they were near, in the way an Egyptian pyramid relates to the river that they're near. And these were the first two big projects. And each one took me about two years to three years to complete.

AVIS BERMAN: I want—actually it's kind of funny because when you say pyramids, what I was going to ask you was I see that you were at the Pyramid Galleries and *Ramon Osuna*.

JIM SANBORN: I went—yes, but he and I never got along at all. The only time I went to Pyramid was when Andy Warhol went there. And I might have shown something.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, there was this show called *Eight Sculptors*.

JIM SANBORN: That's right. That wasn't because it was Ramon's show; it was because Howard Fox maybe chose it or—he had another curator choose it. [01:56:00] Right? So I don't think of it as being whatever. Yes. But it was only—yes, it had nothing—I didn't have a relationship only with Ramon who named the gallery that.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, oh, I know that. I just thought that was— Well, I guess what I was going to say is also I think you began to get involved or did some work with Washington Project for the Arts?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, the first—my first one-person show was the WPA.

AVIS BERMAN: And was that when Jock Reynolds was there?

JIM SANBORN: No, that's when Alice Denney was there. This predated Jock Reynolds. Jock Reynolds never showed my work. He didn't like what I did basically.

AVIS BERMAN: So Alice Denney was—I'm not sure if she's still alive.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, she's still alive.

MS BERMAN: She's quite legendary.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, she's legendary in Washington. That's right. So I had my first show with Alice. Just barely got these big polished metal pieces in the door—just barely made it in there.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean what I was also leading to was, starting in the mid-'70s, was there—do you feel that there was an art scene in Washington?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I mean there was. You know Pyramid was there, and then next door to that was Max Protetch. And Max—I remember one day I went in to see Max, and I had a polished metal piece photographed and polished, some of these polished metal pieces I'd done. Which in some ways were a regression on my part. But I did them. They just predated the archaeological minimal metal pieces. They just predated that. They were kind of left over from Pratt in a way. I don't remember when this was; mid-'70s I guess. And I went to see him with some photographs. I went upstairs, and Max was living like a college student. He looked like a college student. He had a mattress on the floor. He was living upstairs in the gallery. [01:58:00] And there was a mattress on the floor and bunch of his crud in the corner. But then he had a couch, right? He had a couch. And behind the couch was this long minimal painting. And I went in there, and I said, "Hi, how are you doing?" And he says, "I'm doing fine. I want you to meet Gene Davis. This is Gene." Gene was sitting on the couch, and I sat down next to Gene. And he said, "Be careful!" I started sitting on the couch. "Don't put your head back! Don't put your head back." That's a very expensive Robert Morris on the wall there. Puts you on edge immediately, right? It was sort of like [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.



JIM SANBORN: So all of a sudden I have to show my work to Max and Gene Davis at the same time. You know it was like—so I dragged the portfolio out, and I'm showing him this stuff, you know. And I think—the comment was, from both of them—and I was not that old, you know I should have—when I look back on it, I probably should have known better. But the comment was, you know, it's sort of like, I made this piece, you know. I thought it was—I was referring to galleries too much as places to sell work. Now it's true they are. They're places where you sell work. But it was as if I was making my sculpture to sell it.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: And so the comment was: Don't worry about whether you can sell it. Just make your art the way you want to make it. That's what it came down to [what] the meeting was. He didn't show my work. Protetch didn't show my work. He showed very little interest in it. Some interest—but the work I was doing at that time—I can understand why now—but whatever. So that's what it was like showing it to Max at the time. [02:00:00] And so a couple years later—a couple years later I started applying for GSA projects. Our architect was Don Thallaker, who was there. And I get a call from Max Protetch after he moved to New York and opened up his gallery. He said, "Hey, Jim, I've seen some stuff written about your work. And I know you've got a lot of grants and stuff. I'd really like to represent your work, and here's a contract." He gives me this contract to sign. Right? He's got this contract and everything. So the next day I get this call from GSA saying, "Hey, Jim, you're short-listed for this \$200,000 project." I can't remember where it was. In New York City or something. And I've got this contract from [Protetch -JS]. Now I've got this \$200,000 commission.

AVIS BERMAN: Contract from Protetch, not Gene.

JIM SANBORN: No, no, no, no.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Just for the tape. I know what you meant.

JIM SANBORN: Contract with Protetch, and I get this GSA commission the next day. Geez, are they related? Well, you know, so I find out, after a little snooping, that Protetch was on the panel of the GSA project. And he wants a cut of the \$200[000]. And that really, you know, sort of like, okay, so this really is the way it works, isn't it? Isn't this amazing to do it this way. And anyway, sure, I was happy with the contract. [02:02:00] And sure, I didn't get the GSA. And sure, I never showed in New York. But it was just really stunning, you know. It was very stunning, you know. But it was—it's amazing, I was very disillusioned by the whole project. Anyway, so that's something.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: When I was at Glen Echo and running the foundry, there was an artist named Yuri Schwebler who was a very up-and-coming Russian artist at the time. And there was this young guy, who was the director of the Corcoran [Gallery of Art], named Walter Hopps. Walter was very influential in the art world, who was the director of the Corcoran. And Walter and Yuri were drinking buddies. And Yuri was notoriously insane, crazy, but a very good sculptor. And he had been selected for the Paris Biennale. So Yuri comes to my studio, and I had bailed out Yuri from jail once and kept him from killing somebody once. And thought I had done him a few favors. He comes to my studio and asks me if I would cast his bronze plumb bob for the Paris Biennale. And he said, "I'll tell you, Jim, if you can do this for me, then Walter Hopps and I are going to do you a lot of favors in the art world." And I said, "Yuri, I mean, you and I both know that you can't guarantee my career by my casting some plumb bobs for the Paris Biennale, you know." That's basically what I said to him. And I said, "Well, let me think about it for a week and figure out if I can do it financially." Because he was expecting me to—all the expenses in exchange for art world favors. [02:04:00]

My delay of three days got, you know, ticked him off to such an extent that he told Walter that I was trying to rip off his work. And that single event set my career back to the mid-'70s. It set my career back 10 years, because of Walter Hopps. Then the people that I knew—the curators that I was currying favor with—regarded Walter as God. And so Walter started saying to people that my work is derivative of Yuri Schwebler's work—and it wasn't if you really looked at it. But all of a sudden there was a dampening of art world interest in my work. Because of my reticence about all art world favors. After my Protetch experience, I was a little, you know, weirded out by the whole thing. Is it really that weird and strange?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I see that you have—you were in group shows, area shows at the

Corcoran in '74.

JIM SANBORN: That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: And '78.

JIM SANBORN: That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: So I'm not sure when this event would have occurred.

JIM SANBORN: It was close to that period of time. But these are area exhibitions. Walter might have been at the Corcoran then. But there were guest curators. And I don't remember who they were. I mean who knows? They could've been friends of my dad's—David Scott and Joshua Smith and all those other museum people. You know, I was doing interesting—I was doing those giant constructions that looked like cities. So the work was still okay. And I got in those shows. But I really felt as if I would've gotten much further if that incident hadn't happened.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But what were you supposed to do? Just be manipulated by him and cast that stuff when you would've felt horrible?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I couldn't do that. That's what happened. [02:06:00] But I didn't realize how badly it could—you know, I didn't realize how badly I could be injured by something like that. I couldn't believe that somebody would actually do that.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And it also seems so absurd. I mean first of all this person has disappeared from view. No one ever hears from him again.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Right. You know it's like—I know. I mean he moved to New York, and he had some shows in New York. But, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: He didn't make it.

JIM SANBORN: He didn't make it. He killed himself. But it's just—I know. Yes. Because you end up with that crowd. I mean, you know, Walter was at the time, he was doing very well. But he was notoriously difficult to deal with. And getting on your bad side, getting on his—whatever.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, on the other hand, you can't go about doing that all the time because it's not going to work, and you're going to feel like crap. Also, as you say, you just couldn't believe people could be that evil to do that.

JIM SANBORN: Right. I mean, that combined with the Protetch thing made me very gun shy of anybody—of that whole realm, you know, of the art world. And it sort of reinforced my [inaudible] so I sort of felt like I wanted to be by myself more often. Or at least try to get curators that I could trust, you know. And the curator that ended up being most influential in my life, you know, in that period was Howard Fox at the Hirschhorn. And he later went to LA County Museum.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

JIM SANBORN: And Howard helped me immensely and put me in several shows. And that really, you know, allowed me to rise, you know, despite Walter. And even Walter put me in a show a year later in the '80s. But, you know, I couldn't even see the man. I couldn't even—I didn't even want to see him. [02:08:00] After that experience I never saw, physically, never saw Walter, until he was in his—I don't know what age he was when he died. But it was just two years before he died, I saw him at a Hirschhorn opening. He came up to me and said, "Hey, Jim Sanborn! Is that you?" You know it was like even then it was like, weird. Why Walter would be, you know, coming to me like this—you know, the Hirschhorn had bought one of my pieces, and it was sitting up in front of the museum, you know. It was up on a slide of the wall. All of a sudden Walter, in his dotage in his last year, figured out, oh, hmm, not bad, after all. But this is all terribly sour grapes to be putting on tape. But anyway—

AVIS BERMAN: It's not sour grapes.

JIM SANBORN: It's all part—it's what forms you, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, and the other thing that's scary is because the art world was smaller here, that one person could have so much power.

JIM SANBORN: Absolutely. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean that doesn't—I mean in the old days maybe [Clement] Greenberg had that much power. But there's no one—and probably not even in Washington anymore—nobody has that much power; one person doesn't have it. Maybe I'm wrong about Washington. But I can't believe that that's so, that there's no one—

JIM SANBORN: There is now. Richard Koshalek.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. [They laugh.]

JIM SANBORN: I mean there was a little bit before in Ned Rifkin. But Rifkin is like— I mean, you know I ended up befriending some of these people in very high places. And it helped certainly. You know I played the game, you know. And I guarantee part of the reason I've done as well as I have is because I began playing the game—reluctantly, very reluctantly. But I started playing the game socially. [02:10:00] And it paid off to a degree. But anyway—

AVIS BERMAN: This is probably a good time to stop for today. So thank you.

JIM SANBORN: No problem.

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AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman recording Jim Sanborn on July 15, 2009, for the GSA Archives of American Art Oral History Project, in his house in Washington, D.C. I want to start out just with a couple of housekeeping—yesterday there were a couple of things that you said and I didn't pick up on. So I just want to go back and finish those before we start up. And you had said that the Library of Congress would become very important in your later work. And why don't you elaborate on that now?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean let me preface this by something I didn't bring up necessarily yesterday. It seems as if generally my artistic life, career, et cetera, is divided into roughly 10-year increments. And I seem to work with subjects for a period—a fairly lengthy period—and then jump to a different kind of thing. Sometimes entirely, but they're usually related with some sort of common denominator. So through the 1970s my work was largely constructivist, minimal. Dealt with things that were architecturally inspired. And were basically derived mostly from archaeological sources. And then in the 1980s, I began working with the forces of nature. The pieces were largely geologically inspired—some paleontological incursions in there; i.e., I included fossils in some of the works and some Greek mythology and things like this. And so we had the '70s was one thing, the '80s is another thing. And then the '90s became the secrecy stuff. [00:02:00]

The Library of Congress during all of this was influential—and of course my dad was working there the entire time—in that I was familiar with the library. I was familiar with the stacks and the collections. And when I started introducing content into my work, it became a valuable resource. And one of the main reasons I actually left New York and came to DC was the ease with which I could research my projects, which was important. And get support from the Library of Congress and the general government—you know the government sources. The things that were available to me here were greater than they were in New York. Perhaps they aren't greater in actuality. But they were greater for me because I was familiar with it. So I came back to a familiar system of content-making and research, which was very necessary to what I did in the subsequent years.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And was your father able to be helpful? I mean, as you progressed in the—

JIM SANBORN: Only in that they were completely and utterly supportive with everything that I did. Being an only child was very helpful in that. And being artists, both of my parents, artists and having artistic mentalities and spending time with artists and entertaining artists, I was in an environment that was very just generally totally supportive of what I was doing. Which was great. But also, though, the work that my father was doing was much more

conservative and very different from the work that I was doing. So I had to sort of educate them in the higher, more contemporary, Conceptual art kinds of things that I was doing. And they came along just fine.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Now you also had said that you had up to a certain point, how you had supported yourself through Glen Echo. [00:04:00] When were you able to make a living from your art alone?

JIM SANBORN: Well, Glen Echo ended around 1980-81. The Park Service decided to condemn the building that I used as a studio for all those years. My 5,000-square-foot studio was bulldozed because it was sort of falling down around me. It was a very difficult transition. And I was saved in a couple of ways. Right about that time an old family friend, whom my father had known in Oglebay Park, when he was the WPA person there, a fellow named Gordon Hanes. Gordon Hanes invented the seamless stocking and Hanes underwear.

AVIS BERMAN: Right!

JIM SANBORN: Okay? So Gordon Hanes for some reason—and Gordon was an art collector. And Gordon in his, just, art collecting somehow came across my name. Or saw me somehow. Saw information about me and called up and said, "Are you Jimmy Sanborn, Herbert James Sanborn's son?" And I said yes. And he said, "Well, I've seen some of your sculpture"—the large stone constructions that I was doing at the time. And the first one I actually had done was for the Baltimore Metro System in the 1980s, and for which I built this huge splitting machine so I could build several of these big things. So Gordon called me up and said, "Listen, Jim, I'm coming to visit. I want to see your work." So I'm at my studio in Glen Echo, my run-down building, and my other artists' assistants, and the other artists at Glen Echo watch this big limousine pull into the parking lot and pull up to the front of the studio, and Gordon and Copey Hanes came into the studio. And just a really wonderful, simpatico—wonderful people. [00:06:00] They're the people whose home became SECCA, Southeast Center for Contemporary Art. And Gordon's bedroom, he said, was the offices and—

So he was very influential in that southern contemporary art scene. And he commissioned me outright to do a large piece for his front yard. He had also commissioned a replica of one of the Easter Island heads. Well, actually he had moved one, something, one of the original things to his front yard. So there was going to be my piece at one side of the house, between the house and the lake, and one piece, this other piece, on the other side of the house. So he commissioned me. I was at a point where I was losing my Glen Echo studio, and he paid me the entire commission up front. And that enabled me to put a down payment on my warehouse studio that I had for 22 years, and which I lived in for those 22 years and made art in.

AVIS BERMAN: And where was that?

JIM SANBORN: It was in Northeast Washington, D.C. And so that really got me going. And then—so I worked that way for a couple of years in the early '80s in that building and realized that I was getting kind of lonely by myself in this warehouse building in Northeast. So I took a job at the University of Maryland more or less to gain social interaction. And I taught there just for two and a half years, I guess. And got the CIA commission. And the CIA commission amount was large enough that I, with tremendous angst, decided to leave the job at the University of Maryland and devote my entire life to just making public art. And I'd gotten actually, a little earlier than that, a project, [00:08:00] yes, for the City of Baltimore and for Charleston, West Virginia, in the late '70s, up until about '80. And so by that time did have a pretty decent portfolio of large-scale works, that I was able to compete with some of the larger names who were in the public art realm. So those events all conspired to allow me to do that then full time. And that's what I've done since. I haven't taught since '85—'86, I guess.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. We'll go back to some of those other pieces. But I just wanted to get—because that's always an interesting question about how those things fall out. And then yesterday you also said that when you were at Oxford finding that hidden passage was very influential. And I just wondered if you might elaborate on that.

JIM SANBORN: It was influential when I did *Kryptos*. Shall I discuss that aspect of it?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, you might as—right. Okay.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. One of my favorite—there are several favorite texts of mine. One was Howard Carter's notebooks describing the opening of King Tut's tomb. And the other one is Heinrich Schliemann's *Troy* [*Memoirs of Heinrich Schliemann: A documentary portrait drawn from his autobiographical writings, letters, and excavation reports*], of which I have an original copy from the late 1800s. And those giant excavations and amazing discoveries of cultures were really profoundly—profoundly interested me much like—you know, I mean excavating and finding something that's been hidden for millennia is a very exciting thing. And whether it's an arrowhead, a simple arrowhead in a field, [00:10:00] or whether it's an entire tomb that's been out of view for millennia, it's a wonderful thing to discover something that nobody's seen before and that you can actually—tangible evidence of the past. And I'm fascinated by the past in general.

I am really not that interested in post-colonialism, you know, when the United States is colonized. I'm far more interested in prior to that, you know, prior to the 16th century, 15th century, whatever. I'm much more interested in that period than I am more contemporary history. Unless it involves Native American situations which I can still, you know, use and document and use languages from. So that event and then, of course, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were again something lost, then found. These objects being hidden and then found are fascinating to me. They also link together with the nature thing, which is where I was able to—if I were to do something that involved magnetism and the earth's magnetic field, the earth's magnetic field is invisible; and so I basically would work with compasses or lodestones in some way to visualize that field. So in nature, and also by making a geological tableau, I more or less took up out of the ground and put on display the wonders of what nature was able to do. So again, it was more or less an excavation in geology, a geological sort of excavation, and it presented something that had been hidden from view in geological terms for millions of years. So I was very much into this whole thing, beginning, I guess, really in the 1980s but before that, about exposing things unseen. [00:12:00]

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, it's the researcher's temperament, too.

JIM SANBORN: Right. Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: The aha!

JIM SANBORN: Opening the book, whatever, the aha. Exactly. The aha was all things to me. So when I was more or less short-listed for this GSA commission, I was short-listed because of my experience on working with things held secret. So they made a conceptual leap and determined that I might be capable of working with secrecy of mankind or humankind as well. And so for me the challenge was the same; they dealt with the same issues, albeit the commissioning agency, not GSA but the CIA, was a far more complex decision, you know, to do the piece or not do the piece, than I thought it would be in the beginning. So that's—and in doing *Kryptos*, I brought up this hidden/not hidden thing when I wrote the plain text for *Kryptos*. You know, I included an entry of Howard Carter's discovery of the tomb. And also other writing that I composed that related to mysteries as yet undiscovered.

AVIS BERMAN: I just should say for the tape—I'm not going to ask you about anything that hasn't been solved. Because it isn't even my interest anyway. It's your interest.

JIM SANBORN: You wouldn't get anything out of me anyway.

AVIS BERMAN: No, I know. But I'm just telling you.

JIM SANBORN: Sure.

AVIS BERMAN: But you're saying it [inaudible].

JIM SANBORN: But this is all stuff that I am familiar with now because I've just been writing all about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: So I can be far more easily—I can talk more easily about it because it's more familiar in some ways. [00:14:00]

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Now we're going—oh, and one other question from yesterday: Did you really believe that when Noguchi came to your studio that he was going to really take your

ideas?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And during the—

JIM SANBORN: Well, I'll tell you, from an artist's standpoint, and perhaps there are artists who don't think about it, but most of the ones that I speak to are very proprietary until their work is on the walls. Okay? When the work is on the wall, then, you know, unless somebody else has put the same work on the wall down the road, which is highly unlikely, that's your moment. That's the time that it becomes yours. But up to that time, most artists like their studios to be closed. I mean I know that Anne Truitt never allowed anybody in her studio. I have many artist friends who are very conscious of working in secrecy because they do not like their work borrowed by others. I have had assistants borrow my work in very blatant ways. I've had well-known artists absolutely steal my work to the point where it ends up in *Time* magazine and art magazines. And it's just—it's not whatever. But this is for artists who are making work—who are attempting to make work—that hasn't been made before. I—my primary driving force in doing what I do is to try to do something which hadn't been attempted.

And the fact that my work now, and for the last 10 years, has been more and more and more technical demonstrates that, okay, I'm going to try to do things that nobody else could pull off, as a way of distancing myself from other artists' work. So even if somebody sees it, they won't necessarily be able to do it because of the technical aspects of it are so difficult to do. [00:16:00] So that's what I've done. And I've been stung very badly in the past by artists I will not name. And they admit it. But it's like—I don't know if it was Da Vinci that said, you know—there's a wonderful quote about it, about stealing art or stealing an idea from somebody. And, you know, you just do it, you just do it with relish, okay, and you get more out of it. And I cannot remember the quote. The quote fails me.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't know about that. But I do know that T.S. Eliot said, "Poor poets imitate, great poets steal."

JIM SANBORN: Right, right. Well, that's very possible. And I've met quite a few artists—though, yes, when Noguchi came to my studio, I was paranoid. I was working in a style which is very distinctly different from his. Yet knowing Nizette, our mutual friend, had sent him some pictures of what I do—and she said that he was very interested in the work and really wanted to talk about it. So that was the main reason he came to the studio. So I was leery about that. But an assistant borrowing your work can't damage your career. An already-established, well-known artist steals your work, you're out of it. Forget it. You've got to start an entirely—you've got to start over. And I've seen this happen so many times. I mean I have a very good friend in Washington, who did fabulous paintings for 10 years, wonderful paintings. Keith Haring came along and really did the same paintings. They never met each other. I don't think they even saw each other's work. But he started doing it. And my friend was lost. I mean he was in the Guggenheim. He had showed in major exhibitions in New York. And all of a sudden Keith Haring just wiped him off the face of the earth. [00:18:00] And I couldn't, you know—so, yes, I was paranoid and still am paranoid. But less paranoid now because I know nobody would be crazy enough to do what I'm doing now.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. As the day wore on, were you more relaxed?

JIM SANBORN: No, I was more afraid after because of his interest and his wanting to find out where that quarry was in Ohio where I got this amazing stone; because he had never seen anything like it in his life. And I did end up giving him the name of the quarry. I don't know if he ever used any of the material. I don't know. So I never saw him again. And Nizette and I became less than friends. So—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, I think you probably would've seen by now if Noguchi had done something.

JIM SANBORN: Probably. I haven't looked at any, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: And I generally don't. I generally—it seems ridiculous—but I, as an artist, I generally don't study other artists' work. I don't look at other artists' work. I very rarely look

at other artists' work unless it's an artist that I've known about for a while, I'm familiar with their work, and I enjoy the work, then I might go to the opening and do something like that. Or if we were good friends. Or, you know, if I find the work interesting. But I try—I sort of insulate myself from it because I don't necessarily want to be doing mainstream art. Mainstream in that a lot of people might be doing it, that type of art. You know I've always tried to be sort of a loner.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Are you much of a museum-goer anymore?

JIM SANBORN: No, not really. I'm much more of a nature absorber. I travel a tremendous amount. During the '80s and '70s and '80s I traveled internationally a lot, all through Indonesia and Borneo, around the world twice, India [00:20:00]; you know, very remote areas of Irian Jaya [Indonesia] and Sulawesi [Indonesia] and all these foreign areas that were very remote, in order to see and study tribal cultures as they were before Westernization. Now it's almost impossible to go to these places without seeing people on mopeds and wearing, you know, Grateful Dead T-shirts in the most remote parts of the world. So I'm so glad that I have those images to hold onto of what the past was like.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I'm sure you went to Stonehenge when you were in England, and that's all—

JIM SANBORN: I slept in Stonehenge, you know. And we could play all over the rocks. I have pictures of myself sitting on the rocks, which you can't do anymore.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you can't even get near it.

JIM SANBORN: You can't get near it. So that was a great experience. Plus the very large outdoor pieces, the white chalk pieces on the sloping hillsides of mountains are also very important to me, as were the Nazca images in Peru and Macchu Picchu in—actually my early large commissions were inspired—I built some very large stone, a very large stone project for—at the same time I built the piece for the City of Baltimore, I built one in West Virginia. And I used huge blocks of granite. These were 50-ton blocks of granite. And I tried to—I fabricated and assembled them in the way that I believe the Incas manipulated their stones. And it was a gigantic scale. And in order to replicate that, to get that kind of impression, I built this huge temple kind of structure in West Virginia. An odd place, but—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I'm going to go to those actually in a few seconds. But I realize there was one more, the early travel, one more thing from yesterday. [00:22:00] You had mentioned that you had been to Egypt fairly early.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, well, '77 was the first trip, and then I went again in '84, and I'm really glad I went in '77 because the tourism and the plastic bottles in the Nile, they wrecked it for me. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, the first time, did it disappoint you? And what was—

JIM SANBORN: Oh, no. It was absolutely incredibly inspiring. I made one error that I went to Egypt before I went to Greece. It was the same trip. And I should've really gone to Greece first and then to Egypt. But that's—it's hard to explain why I would rather have gone that way. But I was just completely blown away by Egypt and the culture. And how in the tombs of the nobles and all of these things, you could still see the artists' fingerprints. You know, you could see their fingerprints on the works. And it was amazing to me that you have four or 5000-year-old pieces that are so fresh and brand new because they're in total darkness. The only way you can see them is with several little boys holding mirrors to see it with natural light.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it also must have appealed to you because this was art—none of these things were ever expected to be seen again.

JIM SANBORN: Well, yes. I mean again, you know, and then of course I saw *Tutankhamun's*—all the stuff that Howard Carter found at the Egyptian Museum when I was there. After that it traveled. But I was really able to see it when, you know, more or less—I felt like they'd just taken it out of the ground, because it was sitting in the same location as it was placed originally; hadn't moved. Which was fabulous. And the orientation of the works in the room were the same as they were in the tomb. And so that was really wonderful. And seeing the various temples. And then Abu Simbel, I think, was one of the most awe-inspiring things that

I saw in scale. [00:24:00] The scale was so gigantic, it was something that to me was unimaginable. And the fact that it had been 10 years before moved in its entirety up to a higher location, you know, by being sawed up flawlessly, and moved flawlessly, was quite a stunning achievement in two ways. So that was wonderful also.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean were you interested in how they were built, too, and all of that part?

JIM SANBORN: Oh, yes, totally. And I had very specific ideas about the way they were built. I'm very much a debunker of, you know, myth and conjecture about the way the pyramids were built, you know. You know, I have no problem with the fact that they built them, not by aliens but by system. So people like Von Daniken and all of that crowd are very much on my no-read, ignore list. Yes, and I'm a sculptor, and I did everything I could to try to build work like they did, to emulate the way they did it. So that's why my work ended up like it was.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, let's talk about the first public pieces that you did and how you— And then I'll leave them apart from other ones because I think they were—because they were early, and they were different. And one was—which was first, the one in Baltimore or the one in Charleston, West Virginia?

JIM SANBORN: Baltimore I think was first.

AVIS BERMAN: Now was that the metro system in Baltimore?

JIM SANBORN: No, that's different. That was a stone piece. No, this was for the—it was along the Patapsco, and it was sort of east Baltimore near Brooklyn. Baltimore has a place called Brooklyn. And [inaudible] something like that. [00:26:00] And it was '77, and I was actually hired as a CETA employee. And that's how I was paid. And then Bethlehem Steel donated all the steel. And local concrete contractors donated all the concrete. And so I basically built the molds for the concrete. And then had the metal cut and welded on site for the piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Excuse me for moving stuff around. I'm just looking at my list. So how did you approach that, it being public, as opposed to how you would approach something in your studio?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I always felt as if my public work was 10 years behind my gallery/museum work. Because in most cases it would take me 10 years to figure out how to make gallery work substantial enough to exist in the public environment. And I had early public pieces more or less destroyed. I mean I did—remember I told you I made these large formed metal works, so of minimal geometric things, and then carted them around and put them in front of buildings. And so I had a collection of these. And so Reston, Virginia, asked if I would exhibit them around downtown Reston. At the time Reston was a very sort of, you know, contemporary place. It was kind of great. Well, I put them out there, and somebody—first of all, about 15 people—it weighed about 1500 pounds. And at least 15 people got around, picked one up, and threw it in the lake. [00:28:00] It was a huge piece—huge piece. So without telling me anything, the City of Reston used a bulldozer bucket to pick it out of the lake, threw it—literally threw it—in the back of a dump truck, and dumped in the dump. Really. You know, so it was like, well, okay. So I went out to the dump. I looked at it down there at the bottom of this big pile, twisted, totally wrecked. Had to sue Reston.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: And I was reimbursed for the piece, and nothing near what it was worth. But it was a lesson that was profound in that just about anything you make is possible for somebody out in the public to want to screw it up. So, you know, hence that long delay in trying to figure out from an engineering standpoint how to build work that isn't mutable. Or as immutable as possible. And in doing so, if you can make work that's immutable and is going to stand there forever, and using materials that aren't going to weather, then you're then qualified to make large public art for large amounts of money. Before that, the only people getting screwed are the artist and the commission. So that's when I started doing substantial work. So that was a big lesson.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But you—and the piece in Baltimore, do you feel that it was sort of a big outdoor piece? Or was it a place?

JIM SANBORN: It was a temple site. It was oriented at a causeway that went down to the water, right into the water. And you could walk up—like you'd walk—came to it in a boat,



you'd get out of your boat, walk up the causeway into the center of this piece. And it was oriented very much like an Egyptian temple was on the Nile. [00:30:00] And it was made of a series of I guess t10 truncated pyramids 30 feet wide and eight feet high and six feet deep. And then there was a steel superstructure that sat on top of that. And then inside that there was a reflective section that concentrated sunlight down into this area that was suspended over a body of water. And just under the water there was a grating. So that you could walk up into this temple and basically be bathed in this intense light and walk on water. Because you could walk right out on the water. And it looked like water, but you could walk on it like a god. So that was what that was about.

AVIS BERMAN: It sounds fantastic. Is it still there?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And so it's sort of a recreation area there.

JIM SANBORN: Well, sort of. But it's not really. I mean it was across the street from a hospital. But on the other side of the street was a very bad neighborhood. And I don't know what condition it's in. I mean I know that they did some restoration work to it. But whether the pool is still in operation, whether the metal is polished well enough to concentrate the light, I don't know. It's a long time ago. But, you know, some of these things you just sort of have to let go, and just they live in photos, and that's it.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you feel it was an effective piece?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I was pretty happy about that piece. It took, you know, three—two or three years to build, going back and forth to Baltimore every day. It was a hell of a thing. But I was paid. Then the one in Charleston was right on its heels. So then I ended up commuting to West Virginia and staying down there to build this huge thing using granite, these huge granite slabs and then probably about 50,000 pounds of government metal: aluminum that I got from the Navy. [00:32:00]

AVIS BERMAN: The yard?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. So I used that—I guess about 20,000, 30,000 pounds of aluminum from the government. And then ALCOA supplied the rest because they had a West Virginia plant. And so with that material I worked in a steel fabricating yard down there and built the piece on site. And it was again a temple structure. It was about 60-by-60 feet by 25 feet high. And it had a grid in the roof part of it. I had a pseudo roof. It wasn't covered, but it had the roof beams, and it felt like you were inside the Temple of Luxor, which had columns and roof beams without a roof structure. So it was very much Egyptian-inspired, Luxor kind of temple. Had big louvered sections made out of thick metal. And there were some major disasters in the way it was originally built. And I learned a lot about contractors and cities and municipalities for that project because I left specific blueprints the way the piece is supposed to be built, and the contractor, after building this huge civic center arena, the important thing, the artwork out there was much less important. So we'll just do it.

So they had these hundred-ton, multi-sectioned, granite walls that they built. And they were like six feet off. So that the huge aluminum superstructure didn't fit. So they had to come in and remove them and move the 200 tons around and do it again. It was still a foot off. But I had to compensate. So from then on it was like—I was in Egypt when they did one of them. And they hired an Italian company to come over and put it together. [00:34:00] And they just screwed it up. But anyway, that shows I could never be somewhere else when one of these is being assembled. That was really stupid. It worked out in the long run, but it was still a very lumpy installation. But I learned a lot. And I'm glad I learned it in '78 instead of later.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, did it ever resolve? Were you happy with the outcome?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I was relatively happy. I mean, they had some problems with the foundation. The piece was actually designed so that it was very flush with the paving so it was almost as if—if you thought of the paving as being sand around it, you know, it'd come up around the stones, it'd come up around the aluminum. Well, they put the stones on a plinth this high. But that wrecked the concept, you know, for me. And they went and poured the concrete another layer to raise it in order to make it look like I wanted it. So to me it was

always a bit flawed because of the way they raised it like that. I just [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And was there any public interaction with this in terms of, you know, the people who were going to use the building?

JIM SANBORN: Oh, sure. I mean, many newspaper reports and interviews and all of this stuff. I mean, there was a woman named Carter Giltinan, and she was more or less the arts lady in West Virginia. And she was actually—once again—an old friend of the family. So that really assisted me in getting that commission.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

JIM SANBORN: Anyway, so that's more or less how I got that. And I more or less lived down there in her home the whole time of the year it took me to build it down there.

AVIS BERMAN: And does it have—I mean did you feel—so did you relate it to the site or the building or what?

JIM SANBORN: It was related to the site and also to the Elk River. [00:36:00] Again, it was another piece oriented like a temple was oriented to a river; this time the Elk River in Charleston.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess what I'm also getting at is when do you feel you began to get, shall we say, more site-specific in your work?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I mean that—the site-specific nature of it for me, I mean started on the first stone pieces I did for the Baltimore Metro. And what were the dates on that? It was like 1980. I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Let me see.

JIM SANBORN: That's too early for these slides.

AVIS BERMAN: '81 through '83.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. So '81 to '83, I always—gallery work was, I was making compass installations. I was doing these geological things. And so for the Baltimore Metro basically I was building these—what appeared to be natural stone outcroppings that came out of the ground. And they were there before the Metro station was put there. And so for me that related ultimately to the site because it was supposed to have been there way before anything else. So to me it was definitely not plop art. The earth was plopped on it. [They laugh.] Okay? For me conceptually that's the way that worked. And I could put one outcropping over here. And then as in geology, another one would line up with it in a sedimentary way over there. So I did a whole series of those kinds of geological pieces that had multiple sections but were oriented in a natural way, a way nature would have oriented them. So the plop art, from what I considered, the plop art pieces, the metal pieces that were moved around at Reston, those ended up with the stone things, and I started incorporating, you know, the environment into it.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now how did you get that commission?

JIM SANBORN: Which one? [00:38:00]

AVIS BERMAN: The Metro—the Baltimore one.

JIM SANBORN: The Baltimore Metro was a mayor's office project. I was short-listed for it.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, were you competing? Or was it—

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I was competing. Yes. That was a public art project for the city.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, did you start putting your name on various lists?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. By that time I had a couple of resume things. And I'd had the *Elk River Project*—I mean the Patapsco River thing—they still remember that. And I had sort of an in with the mayor's office. I mean this is Mayor Schaefer, and he had a pretty inspired arts program. I got to know those people. I actually got them involved in the surplus metal gig I

had at Glen Echo. So that Baltimore artists and Maryland Institute artists could start using it also. So there was this strange connection. And then also the City of Baltimore sent me actually as an artist-in-residence to a Sister City Program a few years later in Kawasaki, Japan. I did a piece there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, maybe that's what we should talk about, is how, you know, getting to Japan. Baltimore is the sister city of—

JIM SANBORN: Kawasaki.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that your first time in Japan?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And you were there for what was it, two years?

JIM SANBORN: No, no. I was just there three months. It was a summer project. It was a full three months living in Kawasaki. And I did a split stone piece with a crack in the middle of it, which I don't know if there are any photographs of—very few if they exist at all. And it was more or less about Flight 007 that had been shot down by the Koreans just a week before I arrived. [00:40:00] I was on the same flight on the same route. So it was inspired by current events. And it was very simple. All the others—there were nine sculptors. It was actually a symposium. There were nine sculptors from around the world—from Germany and Japan, China and various other places. But they were all doing pretty much Noguchi-esque carved objects or Chinese figurative work: some guy holding a dove. It was all pretty schmaltzy. My piece was very different from anybody else's in that respect.

AVIS BERMAN: It's kind of funny. It's almost like where you were at Pratt when you first came in. They were there.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Yes, I mean—I mean that's the way it is. The figurative element in public art is still there, no question. Embodied with Ray Kaskey. I mean Ray does very well with it. I mean Ray's a wonderful friend.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, Ray also doesn't just take the old symbols. He invents things, too. So that makes a big difference.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, yes. Totally. And I mean you know he's trained as an architect. So he, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: And also, yes, he has also—understands those abstract compositional principles well.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean his first pieces are right from the architecture department at the University of Maryland. When I was teaching at Maryland, I always wondered, whose piece is that out there, you know. When I found out it was Ray's, I couldn't believe it because it was so abstract and simple, you know, knowing what he did after that, it was like stunning.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And that was—but, you know, I guess it was sort of the end of something for him rather than the beginning of something. But he has—I think he's able to fuse more imaginative elements into figurative sculpture than say someone like Hart [ph] was able to.

JIM SANBORN: His lions and lambs piece is great; that's my favorite piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: The law enforcement piece. [00:42:00]

AVIS BERMAN: Anyway, let's—what impressed you the most about Japan? What stuck with you?

JIM SANBORN: Well, the existence of the ancient culture. I contrasted it later in life to Taiwan

where I was also doing a project. It's like night and day. The Japanese revered their past and preserved it. And, you know, you can walk into a 1200-year-old wooden building. It didn't catch fire. It's quite a remarkable experience, you know. And the whole Japanese art, the figurative aspects, the Buddhist aspects. I was particularly taken by the animist parts of it, animism embodied in the Shinto, the Shinto religion or nature worship. And how they revered trees and considered trees to be almost religious—just with religious reverence. Obviously because they were living on an island and had to take care of what they have. But I thought it was really remarkable. And the whole culture, as deferential as it is, and generally as kind as it is, albeit it is rigid certainly in a lot of ways; but I really enjoyed the culture and the food and the whole thing. It was just a wonderful experience.

I went back twice after that just to travel on my own. And I just felt as if the aesthetic was just terrific. And I was mostly taken with the architecture. The architecture, the simple and the oldest architecture in Nara. Which in those early Nara temples were inspired largely by Greek architecture. And you can see those influences in there. And then the Nightingale Temple where you can walk along. [00:44:00] Your footsteps are heard—they sound like birds. It was to deter night visitors from coming; so the floor squeaked in a very particular way. And that was amazing to me. And the archery, which I still practice today. And, you know, it was a great cultural experience. And what else?

AVIS BERMAN: Well—

JIM SANBORN: They gave me these great books. I just read one of the books the other day, and it repeats the whole experience. They're kind of neat things. These are [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: This—oh! We're looking at this beautiful leather-and-gilt bound album, I guess, that says: "International Sculpture Symposium, 1983, Kawasaki, Japan." Yes. With these beautiful papers.

JIM SANBORN: My original little proposal.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And your itinerary.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. It was just the whole thing. It was really fascinating.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So am I looking in—are all the sculptors from different places men?

JIM SANBORN: Different places, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Were they all men?

JIM SANBORN: This is the kind of thing. This is the Chinese guy, this kind of thing. You know it's all this kind of stuff. Mine was this simple thing.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

JIM SANBORN: Black and white granite. So anyway.

AVIS BERMAN: Well of course anyone from China would, you know, they're so repressed anyway that it would have been very hard to—

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, this is terrific. [00:46:00]

JIM SANBORN: Yes, it was great. And later I did a thing in Taiwan which they gave me a very similar book. It was great, seeing yourself in younger years.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, there certainly were a lot of banquets.

JIM SANBORN: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. They were really into that. You had to sing and all that stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: So early karaoke.

JIM SANBORN: And there was another artist, Mark Lear. I don't know if you ever heard of

him. He's a California-based artist who does public art stuff. We were the only Americans on the gig. But it was largely initiated, again, by Howard Fox at the LA County Museum for their anniversary [ph].

AVIS BERMAN: [Inaudible.] Well, maybe LA County by then. That's great.

JIM SANBORN: So it was fun. It was kind of kick to have that.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Because also it's so done and it's so organized. You probably would never have organized that.

JIM SANBORN: [Inaudible.]

AVIS BERMAN: Yesterday you were beginning to mention, but we didn't quite get there, you mentioned your first show with Diane Brown on sedimentary constructions. And I didn't know if you wanted to talk about her being in the gallery.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean I—yes, so I had switched to stone and was doing the geological abstractions. So I did a series of these. And Diane Brown had a smaller gallery in DC. And then she opened up this brand-new gallery in an industrial area. And she was really in the vanguard of those things in Washington. Everybody else was on P Street in small little galleries, and Diane branched out to a second space on O Street. So I was the inaugural show for that. And brought in, I don't know, tens of thousands of pounds of rocks in small little pieces, and did these constructions—[00:48:00]—again these geological, cut-away constructions which were very successful. She sold seven of these things. They were huge. But now over the years people have a hard time moving them. [They laugh.] So they've slowly been donated off to every museum in Washington, which they take reluctantly because it's such a pain. They're large pieces made up of small pieces. Anyway, so I get calls from various places around town, the Corcoran, National Museum of American Art, how do you put this thing together? You know. So—but it's that kind of situation.

AVIS BERMAN: But she remained your dealer for a while, right?

JIM SANBORN: Many years. And we are pretty close. I mean she was good. She's a very smart lady. And, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, did she—and I know she eventually opened a gallery in New York, but that didn't last for too long. But I know you had a show.

JIM SANBORN: Well, she had a gallery for a long time on Green Street.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: Then the dreaded mid-'80s when the art market collapsed in the '80s, she opened a new gallery on Broome Street. Simultaneously with opening that gallery, she was struck by a taxi and flew through the air about a hundred feet and fractured innumerable bones in her body. And was severely embezzled by her accountant, who embezzled her money and bought cocaine, and it went up his nose. And those three events conspired to make it impossible for her to continue.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, my God! I never knew why she disappeared because she really was smart and she had good galleries, you know. [00:50:00]

JIM SANBORN: Yes. It was really unbelievable collection of events. I showed with her when she was on Green Street, again, more stone constructions. And I sold a couple of up there. One of my—I mean, at the time I was doing these large stone constructions that were sort of cantilevered out from the wall, and the stone shells made shadow images underneath them on the wall. And very clear shadow images because I used pinpoint light bulbs that cast very sharp shadows. And I could arrange cracks in the stone in such a way that they made almost perfect lightning bolts on the wall. And I did several of these installations at Diane's. And the critic from *ArtNews* wrote a review saying: "I know Sanborn's work, but why did he choose to paint all this stuff on the wall?" Never realizing that everything in the show was made out of shadow, which was extremely difficult to pull off. What else?

AVIS BERMAN: I've actually got a photocopy of a postcard of that installation—

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —somewhere here because I saw—yes, it was a postcard. Yes, that was interesting. I was going to ask you.

JIM SANBORN: That piece was again shown by Ned Rifkin at the Corcoran a year after that. And that one was *Artists' Space*. I think one of the compasses?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, this is the one—this was the—yes. Anyway, this is what your—this is the postcard.

JIM SANBORN: This is—yes. [00:52:00] This is the one from *Artists' Space*. This is *Artists' Space*. Yes, that was 1981.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay. Because this says—maybe I've got them—this is '85.

JIM SANBORN: Oh, let's see. *Invisible Forces, Artists' Space*. This says '82. Well, I've got '81 down there. C'est la vie. Probably in the middle of the year.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. And then that's the '85 Diane Brown show.

JIM SANBORN: Diane Brown, right. Yes, that just completely deflated my, you know—that was the last show I had in New York really. I mean honestly it was just so ridiculous that the critic can so totally miss what's going on.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes. I mean you're telling me all these things. And maybe they happen to other artists, too. But you seem to have had all kinds of weird obstacles.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Just in terms of the fates or personal malice or other things like that.

JIM SANBORN: Whatever.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, shows you—

JIM SANBORN: Too good at what I did. Too convincing that they were painted on the wall. [They laugh.]

AVIS BERMAN: I know, I know. Did your dealer write a letter to *ArtNews* or anything?

JIM SANBORN: No, I didn't. I mean I just didn't want to mess with it, you know. Gerrit Henry was a pretty big critic around that time. He just totally missed the mark.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, he was ubiquitous then.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Totally.

AVIS BERMAN: I wonder how close he could've gotten to the wall.

JIM SANBORN: I know. It was just baffling to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Anyway. Now I think—because the title interests me, I'm doing to go to a 1985 piece called *Covert Obsolescence*.

JIM SANBORN: It's not '85.

AVIS BERMAN: Alright.

JIM SANBORN: That's '95. [00:54:00]

AVIS BERMAN: '95, okay. Well, I've got—

JIM SANBORN: Anything *Covert* is after *Kryptos*.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, that was what I was going to say, is that when that was—okay, that's in—

JIM SANBORN: I mean the next piece is after—and this is all pretty much newer stuff here.

Anyway, so, yes, so through the '80s I did these pieces. And I did several—I did an office park in Fairfax. It was stratified stone column kind of situation. I did one in Bethesda here. Again, stone construction. I did several stone constructions through the '80s. I was able to support myself from doing those. And then in—in the beginning I was doing these straight stone tableaux about geology. Then I discovered lodestones and stones which had—for me a lodestone has a tremendous amount of internal content because it's magical, it's magnetized. And lodestones are magnetized by lightning. And that's the way they're magnetized. So I became fascinated with lodestones and went around the country.

And I worked with a physicist at the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center who is a specialist in terrestrial magnetism—or extraterrestrial magnetism actually. So he was a specialist in meteorites, particularly magnetized ones. But he had also done a lot of research on lodestones. So he directed me toward this town in southern Utah called Cedar City. And I went to Cedar City in the early '80s and [00:56:00], with a tractor trailer and a bulldozer, to an iron mining area. And this area had just been bought by an iron mining concern, an international—or global—mining concern. And they were going to basically tear down a mountain that was in the middle of the mining area. At the top of the mountain there were located many, many large lodestones that had been struck by lightning repeatedly over millennia, and of whom the townspeople were very fond because they'd come out during thunderstorms to watch the lightning strikes, which was fascinating.

AVIS BERMAN: So it was a natural lightning field.

JIM SANBORN: There was no question it was a natural lightning field in Cedar City, Utah, Iron Mountain. So I basically knowing it was all going to get trashed anyway, connected very long steel cables to the lodestones on the top of the mountain and pulled them down with the bulldozers and loaded them onto trucks. Brought them back east, along with another load of fossilized seabed that I found in Utah in another area that had fossilized seabed that had ripples in it which you could see. And also—there was something else I brought back. Oh, petrified trees. So I had a big tractor trailer loaded with stuff that came to my studio. All the material that I was going to ultimately use for public art projects because I was doing fairly well. And hoped over the next 15, 20 years I could use these things.

AVIS BERMAN: And was there any problem—did anyone stop you from taking any of this stuff? Or did you have to get permits to take it?

JIM SANBORN: No, this is all—I mean the iron mining company, it's just iron ore to them. They were going to grind it all up. So they didn't mind selling me big chunks of it for the same as they would've had to grind it up for. It was easy, and it was inexpensive. The petrified trees come from private ranchers' land [00:58:00], and there was a big business in Holbrook, Arizona, selling petrified trees, a global thing. Then the ripple rock came from a place called Torrey, Utah, and it's famous for this stuff. And people used it for decorating their gardens and whatever. So I just liked all these materials because they had content. They were just rocks. But they had magical content in a variety of ways. Petrified wood, ripple rock.

AVIS BERMAN: And they had history.

JIM SANBORN: I mean a lot of history in all that stuff. And so I started—and again, it's my archaeology, geology, all of that stuff—paleontology—it all came together there. And so on getting that material, then I did several, you know, public artworks that used that, that used those things.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And how did you hook up with the scientist at Goddard?

JIM SANBORN: How did I originally do that? I think I might have read a paper. I did a lot of research, again, at the Library of Congress about lodestone. I think he'd written a recent paper, if I remember correctly. An interesting guy, Peter Wasilewski was his name. Wasilewski is—yes, he's there and does a lot of work collecting meteorites around the North Pole and the South Pole. So anyway, he was great. So I brought back a lot of stuff. And I helped him prove his theories about lodestones. So in my collecting stuff, in my studies about lodestones, I was able to reinforce his research.

AVIS BERMAN: Is that because you brought him samples? Or because of the way—

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I got a lot of materials. I tested their strengths. I took pieces to him and tested their strengths. Things like that. [01:00:00]

AVIS BERMAN: So clearly—and also this goes back to that piece you made, you know, in West Virginia, at some point you had either gotten better at math or at physics or at science that—I mean, I don't know how you—

JIM SANBORN: There was still no math involved except the math that I had to calculate how many tons, you know, materials were. Which was fairly easy with a calculator in this kind of business. So long as I could steer clear of algorithms and calculus I was fine.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, in real life there's no need for calculus.

JIM SANBORN: That's what I say. So, yes. And also the trip to West Virginia was seminal because the road—they had cut a road just before my project. And they had moved more earth to cut this road through the mountains of West Virginia than mankind had moved in its entire history. And they had laid bare geological strata of the mountain ranges. And that was '77. And that started my geological period. That drive back and forth commuting weekly to West Virginia and seeing this amazing geological phenomenon. And then I found that red, crazy stone in some tacky house in West Virginia. So it all came together.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: So that's how I found that stone and started working with geology. Then the lodestones came up. And then all through like the '80s basically was lodestone and compass-needle installations. I did the installation at Artists' Space. I did an installation at the Virginia Museum. I did an installation at California College of Arts and Crafts. Houston. I was very popular with the installations. I got the Artists' Space installation. [01:02:00] I got two or three fellowships during that period and was doing very well with the whole suspended compass needles things.

AVIS BERMAN: So that was sort of—do you feel that you've matured during—I mean when did you say you really kind of found yourself as an artist?

JIM SANBORN: In the early '80s—actually early '70s, I mean late '70s—is when I started doing work which was I felt more uniquely mine, although I felt as if the Egyptian-inspired temple structures were also mine. But there are other people who could technically be said to be doing that in the '70s; you know, Nancy Holt and some other people were doing earth-inspired work that—or temple-like structures out in the desert, things like this.

AVIS BERMAN: I was going to ask you, when you were doing these geological structures and getting these stones and everything, did you see yourself in relation, or now if not then, to any of the earthworks artists?

JIM SANBORN: I came after them.

AVIS BERMAN: I know. But I wondered if you saw any kind of connection?

JIM SANBORN: We worked, I guess, with similar ideas. But I never thought—I never thought it was that direct because it was a very different approach.

AVIS BERMAN: For example, is [Robert] Smithson an artist who interests you?

JIM SANBORN: Not so much at the time.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: Again, I didn't want to do work, you know, Robert Long and the Long *Stones* and the [inaudible] and all that stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, Richard Long.

JIM SANBORN: Richard Long, yes. Yes, I just—whatever. These days I—these days, I felt like the work that I was doing, making large pieces that are very small pieces and stacking them and doing all this stuff, I felt closer to [Andy] Goldsworthy. [01:04:00] You know, it relates far more to what he does now than what I was doing then, you know.



AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes. Right. No, and you certainly weren't taking the big heavy equipment and moving the earth.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: It almost seems opposite to what you were doing. I mean, I don't see you as someone—

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I never—I didn't buy into that. I did not like that fact that they were screwing up the environment to make art out of it. And I—granted, some of the pieces are very beautiful. But I didn't buy into that. And I did something very opposite to that for several years in the '90s just to counteract that movement and to demonstrate that you can do huge outdoor works without leaving a trace. That kind of in some ways pissed me off, that people would go around throwing pigment all over the desert that didn't necessarily go away for a very long time. You know, bulldozing things up. I mean I had some difficulty with that.

AVIS BERMAN: Or aestheticizing the desert or whatever it's supposed to be.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And were you ever—because this is the opposite—interested, although it's not like your work, anything that Christo did who always had something temporary?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean, I certainly liked the early Kit Canyon. That was his closest—the body of work I really liked. When he came into the urban environment, I was not thrilled.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I think *Valley Curtain*.

JIM SANBORN: *Valley Curtain*. I think that was another Kit Canyon one, too; I think there were two. Those things were, I thought, fascinating, and I liked the way he worked with the remote environment. But the remote environment is what interested me the most. And I was traveling every year—sometimes twice a year—to Utah, Colorado, Great Basin, Nevada, [01:06:00] areas just to travel and also to store up my memory banks for locations of interesting things, where I could find interesting rocks, stones, things I could use. My inspiration came 99 percent from the desert Southwest, starting late '70s.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think what I want to do is let's begin to talk about *Kryptos* and your experience with GSA. And I guess how you got the commission. Start with that sort of thing. And let's not talk about the aftermath right now. I want to concentrate on what was—you know, doing the piece.

JIM SANBORN: Right. Well, I had applied—I mean I had applied for GSAs for many years, and I had worked with [inaudible]. And I had worked with Don and I'd get short-listed, but I'd never gotten one. And so I was continually updating my files of the GSA and hoped something would come along. Then when the CIA project came along, the panel was stacked in my favor. What can I say? [Laughs.] Ned Rifkin was on the panel, Alan Stone was on the panel, Isamu Noguchi [*sic* Yuriko Yamaguchi -ed.] was on the panel. These were all people that I knew and was very familiar with. And they all knew my work. And I think Richard Andrews was on the panel. They all knew my work, and they all knew I'd worked with *Invisible Forces*. And *Invisible Forces* was an important thing to me at the time. So they all knew about that. So that's how they made that leap, I believe, and I got that. Plus I was a local boy, and that helped a lot I think, too.

AVIS BERMAN: What you say short-listed, you didn't have to—I mean how did you know you were short-listed? [01:08:00] I mean, did they tell you? Because I mean—

JIM SANBORN: GSA changed their modus operandi several times. And I don't remember exactly whether I found out that I'd gotten it and was old that there was a group of artists that I was chosen to do it. Or whether I was told that I was on a short list. But I didn't ever have to submit anything for it. I got it based on my previous work. So I guess I wasn't short-listed. I got the project for—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Because it seems—and then did you have to—

JIM SANBORN: And they called me and asked me if I wanted to take the project. So it was

basically given to me as the rest of the GSAs were. But I sometimes, I think I did know that I was up for a project. I think GSA does select a pool of artists. And I was told prior that I was in the pool, and would I be interested if I got it? And that's the way they did it. Because they didn't want to include artists in the pool that wouldn't take it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. To go through all of that.

JIM SANBORN: To go through the whole thing. And they got burned with my project—I mean not me, but the other half of the CIA commissions. So anyway—so, yes. So basically I was told that I got the project. Then I built a maquette, a fairly realistic maquette.

AVIS BERMAN: Was this—

JIM SANBORN: And did about six months of research about the agency, thinking about what I wanted to do. I knew full well that the agency was not the code-breaking arm of the federal intelligence community. The NSA was. But it didn't matter to me because I knew that 90 percent of Americans didn't know that. And so they all associated the CIA with spy craft, which they do. But I mean, the CIA runs spies. The NSA runs information gathering on a large scale, mostly electronic. [01:10:00] But the CIA has the human intelligence. Now my father was a government employee for 30 years and worked in the Library of Congress, which is inherently a fairly beautiful building, although it's largely painted institutional green inside. And all of our friends were government employees. And we had known agency employees—or at least my parents knew that they worked for the agency. And I was a Washington person, and so I was familiar with the politics and all of this stuff. So it did seem to me to be a no-brainer to take the CIA commission. I mean I was really—I was also a fan of John Le Carré, and his spy novels were, to me, the most sophisticated and interesting and non-superficial. So that's where I came from in that regard.

I was always a lefty. My parents were dyed-in-the-wool Democrats and lefties. And my father was always blasting somebody at the *Washington Post* for less than liberal causes. But I took the project for the agency because I felt as if that institution after taking a tour is gigantic. There are thousands upon thousands of people who work there. It's a large university scale. And so, sure, there are programs that the agency sponsored which were anathema to me. But on the larger point, you know, I went in there, and I met people there. [01:02:00] I mean, there are people that clean the floors, there are people that, you know, keep things in great condition. There are artists on staff. There are people that do the graphic design for them. The cafeteria. There's just a myriad of individuals who were there, who are very proud of what they do when they work for the government. And I really could not see denying them art because I had some political axe to grind against the agency. I thought it would be very unfair to do that.

The only reason I'm saying this is because during the process of the panel meetings—during the process of the panel meetings, Betsy Hess of the *Village Voice* wrote an article called "Art of the State," in which she more or less said that any artist who accepted a commission from the CIA was selling out and was buying into the Great Satan. And this came out before I had been selected as the artist and before Matt Mullican had been selected as the other artist to do the work on the inside of CIA. Have you interviewed him yet?

AVIS BERMAN: No.

JIM SANBORN: Okay. And, you know, so they went around with their microphone saying, "Hi, I'm from the *Village Voice*. Would you take a commission from the CIA?" So they went around and interviewed 25 hip New York artists, and of course, "Whoa! No way I'm going to do that! Are you kidding?" So then Mullican and I both were selected for the project. And Matt Mullican withdrew right after the article came out. And, you know, in a way I said, you know, I said, well, I mean—I said to myself—I didn't have a single qualm about doing what I did for the agency. [01:04:00] Because in one way I was playing with them. Because I knew I was playing with them. I did my presentation, and I knew what I was doing. And I felt as if I might be able to make some sort of difference, and I didn't want to let down the people at the agency I thought really needed it. And so that's my main reasons for doing it. And so—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you'd already been asked by the GSA if you were going to take it. So you did make a commitment.

JIM SANBORN: Well, so did Matt Mullican, and he didn't take it after he had committed to it. And as a result of being burned, CIA withdrew the money for the interior and never

commissioned it. And they commissioned ultimately 20 years later a model of the Blackbird spy plane. So I mean, that's what you get, you know. I mean, if you're going to have it, do that kind of thing, I think it's tragic. But that's the way it is. Whatever. So anyway, I felt as if there was something that I could do there that would stimulate the environment out there. And for whatever reasons, perhaps assist.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess that I won't be—I wouldn't be interviewing Matt Mullican because he didn't do the commission. I only do interviews with—

JIM SANBORN: He might have done other ones. But, no, he might have been blacklisted after that. I really don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Because he's not, you know, on the list of having a lot of commissions.

JIM SANBORN: Right. So anyway, you know, so I took it, and I did a tremendous amount of research, and I did all the studying and Library of Congress work and as much as I could learn about code. And all that stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, now let me—right. What came first? Research, presentation? And how did it—how did you—

JIM SANBORN: Research. When I found out I had the commission, I had almost a year to prepare for making a model. So they paid me a design fee, I think, in the very beginning. And then I made this fairly elaborate model. [01:16:00] And I'm pretty sure it was accepted first time, right off, without having any go back and fix this, and fix that stuff. I don't think it was. And from the very beginning it included this component of an encoded text.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Was this the first time you worked with lettering or inscriptions?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, very first time. Now I have to say, you know, I told you earlier that one of the world's greatest typographers stayed with us at our house, Herman Zapf.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: And he made my parents an alphabet with a Bic pen in their guest book that was frameable. And still is. I still have it. It's quite a remarkable thing. So typography was my dad's thing. And he had worked with a typography company here in Washington called General Type, T-Y-P-E. And he had a guy there named Buddy Harris who ran the shop. And he more or less told me, "Listen, if you want to deal with anything with code, go see Buddy Harris, and he'll, you know—" So I worked out a system with Buddy—he gave me and taught me the typeface. And then we had to stencilize it so that I could cut something through without having the letters, the centers of the zeroes fall out. So I worked at General Type. And I also, at the time, I had to figure out how to cut out the letters. So I knew if all else failed, I could them out by hand. I tried it with a jigsaw and took actually a piece of the metal to the presentation, and it had letters cut out of it through thick copper with jigsaws, by hand, a laborious process. So it was accepted based on that.

But at the same time there was a process called "waterjet," and it had just started. There were only two companies in the United States that did it. The CIA commissions were \$250,000, and the estimate that I got just to cut out the letters was \$250,000. [01:18:00] So I was then stuck with cutting letters by hand, which after the commission was accepted, I started gearing up and hired several assistants. Had some copper made by Revere Copper, Paul Revere's company in Boston made the sheet copper. And it was very expensive material, and I had it shipped to my studio. And I hired about five or six assistants who began cutting the copper. We lined it up with metal, cut the copper. It took two and a half years, five days a week, 52 weeks a year to cut out the letters. Nine hundred jigsaw blades, nine jigsaws, and about 20 assistants because they could not take it; they could only—each assistant lasted, most of the assistants lasted only a week or two. They started dreaming about cutting letters.

AVIS BERMAN: Now was it because it was so boring? Or because it was so laborious?

JIM SANBORN: Physically demanding and stressful because they could not cut outside the lines. They had to—they could not make any mistakes. So most people were extremely slow. You know, they got three letters a week—three letters a day—out of one person. So it took somebody with great confidence and great skill and obsessive/compulsive traits to do it. And

finally one guy came along, got in the group, and virtually cut out half of the entire thing himself in a very short time.

AVIS BERMAN: And who was that?

JIM SANBORN: A fellow named Dave Sheldon [a sculptor -JS], whom I've never seen since. I always wondered what happened to him. But Dave was really amazing. And then there was another fellow, I can't remember his name, but I have pictures of him cutting letters. But that's all going into the book. So basically, it got cut out. And then I wrote the plain text. [01:20:00] I went to Arizona, [inaudible] and bought a petrified tree. On the way back, I devised the plain text, what I was going to write for the plain text.

AVIS BERMAN: Now I'm confused because when you're having—the letters have the code with the text in them, right?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So why are you doing the—

JIM SANBORN: I could cut—I could cut this chart. This side is the chart with alphabets; it's just shifted. It's called Vigenère's tableau. So they could begin cutting on this half, which took all of nine months to cut, while I was coming up with the coded part on the other side.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

JIM SANBORN: So they could be working while I'm working on this for efficiency's sake. So I could get it done in a reasonable amount of time. So they cut that, and I wrote the plain text for the code. Originally I wanted to use somebody like John Le Carré. Sent a letter to his publisher, never got a response. So in the end it ended up much better when I did it myself because then fewer people would know what it said. And I also enjoyed writing it. So that's basically you know—

AVIS BERMAN: Now—

JIM SANBORN: So then the CIA, I was thinking of who—how was I going to encode this—I wanted this piece to last into or through the 21st century. I couldn't really do a code or invent a code based on ancient codes because they'd all been cracked. So I had to turn to somebody who was high tech, in the high-tech field, and knew what they were doing. So I said am I going to go to Russians, am I going to go to Mossad, am I going to go to somebody else? Then I said, well, there is a stipulation in my contract that I have to buy American. Yes, I could have gone to these people, considering the kind of project it was. And it took me quite a while. Finally I resigned myself, okay, fine. So I asked the agency if they knew of somebody. [01:22:00] And there was a fellow who had recently retired from the cryptography section to open his own technical security company. And his name was Ed Scheidt.

So Ed and I met at secret locations because Ed could never trust his telephone. I knew that my phone was probably being tapped by somebody because I knew I was being watched because people were getting on ladders trying to look in my studio. And other strange stuff was happening. So that we knew that we were under a gun. We suspected it was NSA employees trying to one-up the CIA. Or CIA people trying to find out what the code was so that they could crack it almost before it hit the ground.

AVIS BERMAN: So at this moment even—I mean once you said you were making up a code for a work of art, people were already—

JIM SANBORN: Trying to crack it, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: At the time, were you upset? Or did you think, oh, it's flattering. They're just so into this already?

JIM SANBORN: Oh, yes. It was flattering. It was great.

AVIS BERMAN: At that time.

JIM SANBORN: Oh, yes. Totally. Yes. And I knew. I spent every cent of the commission. I made nothing on this commission. It almost bankrupted me because of how much I

proposed. I mean it was a massive amount of work and a massive amount of materials for the project. And I made very, very—almost no profit, if any at all. But I knew it was a high-profile project, that the agency was the agency, and that I'd get press. And what I proposed, I knew that if I proposed it right, that that would pay off ultimately in getting more commissions or whatever it was. That was my hope. And so that went on way beyond my wildest dreams as far as that was concerned. Not financially but at least from a notoriety standpoint. So I basically worked on that plain text and then figured that out. [01:24:00] And Ed basically gave me—he gave me a primer of ancient encoding systems. And he also gave me some ideas for contemporary coding systems, more sophisticated systems, systems that didn't necessarily depend on mathematics. That was one of my prerequisites.

So he told me about matrix codes and things like that. These are the parts of *Kryptos* that have already been cracked. So I can discuss them. But he told me about coding systems that I could then modify in a myriad of ways. So that even he would not know what it says. Okay? So that was very seductive to me. And so I took those things. We met two or three times. And that's what I based the whole thing on. And then the CIA asked that I—well, it was actually part of the contract that stated—that they had to know what it said in order to know that I didn't put something pornographic on there or anti-agency that would end up in biting them in the butt, you know, years later. There was really no point to doing that. I mean there's no point for my doing that because they would just rip it out of the ground, and that would be the end of it, so—

But nonetheless, they asked if I would give it to the Department of Historical Intelligence, which consisted of three individuals in a small room. And so I said, "How am I going to do this so that they can read and understand that I haven't written something that's subversive to the point it's going to be removed? Yet, they'll be able to understand—so they'll understand enough, but they won't remember it." Okay? So basically what I did is I—since there were three people in the room, I took the text, this is the English text, and cut it into strips in sentences. [01:26:00] And then took the sentences and rearranged them all in a different order. And glued them onto pieces of paper. I made two sets. One set if there were three people in the room, one set if there were two people in the room, and one genius. This place is only five minutes from here.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

JIM SANBORN: So I devised this system. So what if, out of these three people, heaven forbid, two of them had photographic memories, and they'd remember it their entire lives. So just by lucky guess I said, Okay, let's just say one of them has a photographic memory. So I made up two sets: one where I divided into threes, and one where I divided it into two sets. So I went into the room and I said, "I need to give you this information about *Kryptos*, and I really want you to remember it. Does one of you by any chance have a photographic memory?" And two of them instantly pointed to the third person. And I said, "Sorry. That was a trick. But please leave the room." So I got her out of there. And so I was left with the director and his assistant—or the other person in the room, whatever, the other analyst.

So I put the two pieces of paper down and waited. And so they were reading it. They reread it a couple of times. And then the woman started shaking. I saw her hand shaking first, and then she just started shaking violently. It was almost as if she had a seizure. But she was just completely and utterly terrified by the responsibility of what she had to do. What if I tricked them and put this in the courtyard, and there was something in there that embarrassed them? She's toast. So she had to be led out of the room, she was crying. [01:28:00] She was a mess. And so I got a letter from the Department of Historical Intelligence saying, "The Department of Historical Intelligence cannot accept responsibility for this artwork. Figure out another way."

So at the time I was building the piece out in front of the agency and the interior part simultaneously, the stone parts of it. And the front of the agency is the main entrance for all the employees coming from the parking lot into the new building that they were building that this artwork was for. And people were giving me really lousy comments. I mean really lousy, continuous, daily 10, 15, 20 just yelling at me, just cursing at me saying, "We don't need this shit!" "This is crap!" "We don't want this?" "Why are we spending \$250,000?" "This is a joke." And they started pointing, laughing. It just wore me down. And it was a difficult project as it was; but it was just made more difficult by the negativity I was being barraged with.

So I ended up writing a letter, an open letter to CIA employees explaining exactly what I was doing to everyone. And at that time also some people like Patrick Buchanan referred to my project—he was a contender for the White House at the time—referred to my piece as a pile of dinosaur feces before he even knew what it was. Which was great. That was flattering frankly, coming from him. So I wrote this open letter. And then the next day people were coming up to me constantly, saying, Listen, we really want you to do this. Ignore these assholes. We'll do what we can so people, you know—and now that we know what you're doing, it's really interesting. So then I continued building. [01:30:00]

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think you should have had like an informational meeting earlier with everybody or something?

JIM SANBORN: No, I think I just—I think it was better that I let it go like it was. Because it's a weird place to work. You know I mean I saw people there that I'd known my whole life, that I didn't know worked at the agency. And we'd see each other, and it was like they wouldn't look at me. It was like, you know. So you don't know what you can do and what you can't do, you know. So it was a very weird thing. You're followed around 24 hours a day. You have to go to the bathroom with somebody. I mean it's like, you know—so it was very bizarre.

AVIS BERMAN: And you probably had assistants with you on the building. Or were you—

JIM SANBORN: Right. No, I had several people that had to get in every day. You know they had to be U.S. citizens. We had to be screened every day going—all our stuff was screened. And then apparently at night they x-rayed everything that I did actually with neutrons, neutron x-ray machine that could go underground, you know, and see inside petrified trees and stuff like that. So that they knew I didn't plant anything, listening devices on them.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: So, yes, so there was that kind of stuff going on. And then I was in the midst of building the project, and I was doing a lot of the stone cutting in the parking lot of the agency. And one day I had a whole truckload of these huge slabs on granite that I was putting into the courtyard, had the entire truck disappear. I came in the next morning—left on Friday, came in on Monday—and in this super secure parking lot, no truck, no stone, nothing.

AVIS BERMAN: Was this your truck?

JIM SANBORN: No, it wasn't my truck. It was the tractor trailer. They'd left the trailer there with all the slabs on it so I could work. Then they'd come back later and pick up the—never found again. [01:32:00] That entire load disappeared forever. And so I went about two weeks working on other stuff. And the agency just replaced it. Never told me what happened to it. It just vanished. So another intrigue. It just made it very clear that there was a schism at the very highest level of the agency. On the one hand you had William Webster who was the director of Central Intelligence; on the other hand you had his subordinates or his equals on the other side of the aisle, so to speak, who really didn't want it to happen. They didn't want to spend the money on it. They didn't want it to happen. And they did everything they could to subvert the process. So anyway, eventually it got done. And it was like building a ship in a bottle because I had to engineer these huge slabs, bring them in on dollies through these tiny little doors. I could only work from six p.m. 'til two a.m.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you only worked at night?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Because of security reasons I couldn't work largely during the day. So the only thing I could do is set out this big buffet. I had this big gourmet buffet set up there that I did every day. Brought out to all the assistants so there was this giant pig-out. They'd work really hard, and had cranes and pumping trucks and everything working at night out there to get the thing done. And we got it done in time. And I filled the pool up with water. There's a pool in—two pools in the central courtyard: this one large pool that had ornamental grasses and [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Well, let's pause for now, and we'll continue later on. Okay? Thank you.

[END OF AAA\_sanbor09\_6590\_m.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman continuing the interview with Jim Sanborn on July 15th. We took a break, and now we're starting again. And we were still in the middle of the discussion about *Kryptos*. I think we had discussed the labor of it and some of the obstacles that some people of the agency were against it, and some people were for it. But what you had not pursued further was that the Department of Historical Intelligence felt unable to take responsibility for the knowledge of the codes. So you had not discussed how you resolved that.

JIM SANBORN: Right. So in addition to my—while I was at CIA, and because I had clearance and this kind of thing, I had access to the agency grounds with my vehicles. On one of my sorties around and being curious, I found a dumpster bay at the agency that contained three huge dumpster containers that were being filled simultaneously by large nozzles coming out of the ceiling. And they were being filled by pulped paper which was made from—in each office at the agency there's a paper bag that says: pulped paper. So then each office at the end of the day, when you have to destroy some secret documents, you put them in this paper bag, and you drop it down a chute, and the chute goes to a hammer mill where water and hammers beat the paper into pulp. [00:02:00] That was done in lieu of shredding because shredding can be reassembled by assiduous adults in large tents in the desert.

So the idea was I wanted to see if I could make art out of the paper pulp. So I basically, boldly, insanely stole a bunch of it, and put it in the back of my car in five-gallon pails, and took it to the studio and made a few things out of it, and discovered that it worked very well. So that was a bargaining chip that I used when I traded the code to William Webster at the dedication ceremony, in exchange for access to the paper pulp. The paper pulp was interesting because it had a lot of content. It had pieces of jets on the runway, top secret stamps, photographs of—at the time it was 1991 or so—1990, 1991—and there were images of Middle Eastern architecture all over the place. So I found the material to be excellent for making large paper reliefs and free-standing artwork out of it. So I made a deal. And so at the dedication ceremony I traded what I told William Webster was the entire code to *Kryptos*; but whether I told him the truth remains to be seen.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, when you say you traded, I mean wasn't it a condition already that somebody had to know? So I guess when you say that was your bargaining chip, you had to tell them anyway.

JIM SANBORN: I didn't necessarily have to tell them. I mean I didn't necessarily have to tell them in a way. Well, this is the CIA, and they're not exactly straightforward in their dealings. [00:04:00] So who's to say I have to be straightforward in my dealings? Granted I didn't want to do anything which would upset the agency. On the other hand, I was playing their game. I mean I had already decided that I was going to have to be burdened with a secret the rest of my life, much as every CIA agent is. So I wanted something in response [laughs] back for that. And so I got access to the pulp. And I didn't necessarily give them the whole code.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Okay. Yes. Because in other words—so they had to on some level take it on faith that you had not put in anything, as you said, pornographic or Communistic or whatever else they were concerned about.

JIM SANBORN: That's right. Whatever else. And, you know, there was no sense in putting something in there that would jeopardize its very existence because it would not live for the 20 years it has already lived. And that would be unfortunate for all those people who do seriously still appreciate it. And the minions that are continuing to learn about it with the increase in eyes over there at the agency. I mean it's gotten vastly larger than it was when I was there.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, at the time also—you said you knew you were going to have press. But you didn't know what the spiral would become. Did it bother you at all that at the time maybe that it was pretty much only people at the agency who would see it, as opposed to a wider public?

JIM SANBORN: I knew from the day I did it that the wider public would know it and see it. I was getting continuous requests from the media about shooting pieces in there. The media had been largely excluded from the CIA. [00:06:00] And so none of the networks had any videotape of what the inside of the CIA looked like. They were never permitted to do it. So with *Kryptos* and with William Webster wanting to somehow improve the image of the agency, he decided to open the floodgates. So that was—I was aware of that even as I was

writing the text. So very quickly, before the dedication even, and way before that, the [Washington] Post was writing articles about it, there were cartoons about it. There was—I was on *Good Morning America* within days of the dedication ceremony. I hit every single network. I saw myself on Chinese television in China. It went global within two days of the dedication.

AVIS BERMAN: So is that because looking at the sculpture at first was a Trojan Horse into seeing the CIA?

JIM SANBORN: Absolutely! Yes, absolutely. So they still use it. I mean there's Fox Network today uses it every day. Anything about the CIA, there's a clip of my artwork on it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But is it—do you see the CIA or do you just see the sculpture?

JIM SANBORN: No, you see the CIA behind it, you know, whatever. But the sculpture has become typified as CIA and secrecy. So I mean it just became, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: A symbol.

JIM SANBORN: It became a symbol. And they picked it up, and everybody else has picked it up as an easy way to explain the work of the organization, so—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I mean were they—and also within two days were they talking about the code and cracking the code? Or was it just—

JIM SANBORN: Oh, absolutely. The fact that they paid a quarter of a million dollars for something they can't figure out was a big deal.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, but at the time, you probably expected that people would have figured it out sooner. [00:08:00]

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I assumed that people would figure it out in a matter of weeks, and some might have but they didn't say anything. But on the other hand—I also knew the agency well enough to know that if I didn't tell Webster the whole story, and the dedication ceremony occurred and everything happened and all this stuff, it's not like they could admit that I duped them. They could never admit that I pulled one over on them. So they were in a position of total—I mean, you know, total submission to what I was doing as well. And so the whole idea of the piece is that I was going to play their game the same way, you know—I was going to play their game. So they had to be prepared, you know, and they had to trust me on one level. So on one level, they don't trust anybody, and I don't trust them. So that was a fine relationship. The last time I was at the agency after I did the piece was ABC News—I arrived at the agency to pick up a load of paper pulp in my truck. I'd rented a warehouse to store the stuff in to dry it quickly, because the agency was canceling the program of pulping. And they were actually going to pulp and then burn the stuff to power the agency. Which they did ultimately.

So I had to collect a huge quantity of it. So I was there on one of my routine missions. And ABC News decided to do a story about the paper pulp. And they wanted to film me leaving the agency with a truckload of pulp. And I arrived at the door, at the main front gate, and I told them I'm on my way in. And this ABC News crew is going to film me leaving, and will stay out in the parking lot until I come out. And so somebody said, Hey, listen, you've got a phone call. [00:10:00] So I go over, and I get this phone call. And the person at the other end of the phone said, "Mr. Sanborn, you're not going to get filmed today." And I said, "Well, what do you mean I'm not going to get filmed? You know, I mean what's the big deal?" He said, "Mr. Sanborn, you're not going to get filmed today." I said, "Well, I'm not getting filmed where? Here, or I mean—what about out on Route 123, out in front there?" "Mr. Sanborn, you're not getting filmed anywhere in the world today." And I said, "Oh, really!" And then hung up the phone. And went in and got my paper pulp. And came out while the ABC News pulled out of the agency parking lot, down Route 123, on the public highway, Dolley Madison Boulevard, and pulled off on a side street in order to capture me behind the CIA sign at Dolley Madison Boulevard, just passing the sign.

So I exited the agency. And as soon as I went through the main gate, all hell broke loose. And all these sirens went off. And all these loudspeakers. And CIA vehicles pulled in front of me and behind me, and escorted me out of the agency, down Dolley Madison Boulevard. I looked over at the ABC News crew, and they were at a tug-of-war with their camera. The



agency police were trying to take their camera to destroy their film. And so basically I kept going. And then they made me stop while they corralled the ABC crew, put them in their van, and then escorted both of us to the edge of town, which was all the way down about 15 miles from the agency, where they cut away and let us alone to drive to DC. And I didn't go back for 16 years.

AVIS BERMAN: And when would that have been?

JIM SANBORN: It's in the book. [00:12:00] It's like very late 1990 or very early 1991.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And do you have any idea of why this happened?

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Just one of those rules but there are no rules?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. It's either the schism at the top, or there was a struggle. The public affairs department at CIA was staffed—one of the main members was a former director of ABC News. And my ex-wife was with ABC News. And there are always struggles between ABC News in particular and the CIA in order for them to avoid the appearance of favoritism. And so I think ABC might have been trying to do one story too many. But on the other hand, I have no idea. And we got the bum's rush.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. It's amazing that you could—but you were until that time pretty allowed access to go in and out, pick up stuff.

JIM SANBORN: Oh, yes, yes. Sure.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, yes. Right. And I guess—when did, shall we say, kind of a benign fame about *Kryptos* began to escalate and maybe get more unpleasant or more threatening or whatever sort of thing began to happen?

JIM SANBORN: Well, within a few months I started getting stuff from the agency. I didn't even have a computer at that time, I don't think. So they started faxing me stuff. Like the guy who wrote the Bible code—I don't know, some French guy—he sent a fax to the agency with the code cracked, more or less equating me with, [00:14:00] it was me and Satan and Jesus Christ, all in the same coded stream. And then there was another one extremely—15-page document—with these elaborate color graphics about decoding *Kryptos* into it's being entirely about the War of 1812. And then other documents, usually 12, 14 pages. I mean they took months and months and months of work to do these things. But nothing—none of them cracking the code. And so that went on and on for years where I'd get a trickle of stuff.

Then maybe five years or more later I met someone at a party that said they loved my website. And I said, "What website?" And so I went—I went to my computer, which I had at that time, and found out there was Elonka Dunin's *Kryptos* website. And it was basically a catalogue *raisonne* of all the work that I had done, at least a lot of it, gleaned from public sources. And she'd done a very good job of it. So I called her up, and she came to DC. We met, and immediately we hit it off. And so I trusted her implicitly and gave her then as much—as many images as I possibly could for her to scan. So she basically set this whole thing up. She made the website that was paid up for 50 years [00:16:00]. It's not something that she's necessarily enthusiastic about doing anymore. But she continues to do it nonetheless and updates it every day. Very interesting, you know, informative thing. So that was great.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But she also was involved in trying to solve the code, too. Isn't she part of the group that's working on that?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, there's no doubt about it. Her major motivation for getting involved in all of this was to find out what the code was if I made some slip. She figured the closer she could get to me, the more chance there was for me to make a slip. And I found that interesting. I knew I wasn't going to mess up. But it also enabled her; she gave lectures actually to a packed auditorium at CIA, a packed auditorium at NSA, a Hackers' Convention in Las Vegas, and many other venues, and made a major career out of being *Kryptos*'s maven. Which is fine because it took a lot of it out of my—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, you didn't have to do it.

JIM SANBORN: I didn't have to deal with it. I have to make a quick call while I remember.

AVIS BERMAN: Sure. Go ahead.

JIM SANBORN: It reminded me—[audio break.]

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. And I had asked you before we took a break if *Kryptos*, if things—when things began to get less benign. You were discussing various long faxes that you had received. And then you had a computer. And then I guess—was it the advent of the Internet that—

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Definitely. I mean, I know that when I first Googled it, when I first Googled *Kryptos*, I got like, oh, 550, you know. The next time I Googled it two years later, it was 550,000. And you know, now, whatever. And so it became a geometric progression in readership and all of that. And I still was pretty much ignoring it. [00:18:00] I wasn't paying any attention to it much. Until eight years after the dedication, ABC—John Martin of ABC News—called me and said that a couple of guys had cracked the code, and would I do another ABC piece about it? So I agreed to do that. So that's when I read, you know, that I could corroborate that they actually had cracked part of it. And that started a whole other, you know, thing. And, you know, the fact that nobody could get, including NSA who had tried to get it, hadn't gotten the final section.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean were you amazed at how good you were at doing this? Or how long you had kept people baffled?

JIM SANBORN: Quite frankly I wasn't that aware of how extensively it was being pecked away at.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: But, you know, I mean, aside from the people who had devoted some portion, some major portions, of their lives to it, it was also being used by a school for brain-damaged people to enable them to function better. So it was having a beneficial effect on a large group. And that's one of the things that Elonka [Dunin] told me. So it was that kind of thing.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And meanwhile is the CIA happy with the work? Are their attitudes changing that you know about? I mean until you weren't there for a while?

JIM SANBORN: Well, yes. I mean they certainly embraced it. When they realized—I mean, the CIA was—at one point they were getting 25,000 hits a day on it, on their website, to the point where it just got totally out of control. And I don't know how many they're getting a day now, but it's probably a whole lot. [00:20:00] So they realized fairly quickly that it was a PR tool that they could use for recruitment and everything else. And they do use it for that. They also train the cryptography people on it as well. And then the thing after that, after that John Martin thing, the next thing was basically *Wired* magazine online wrote the news about *The Da Vinci Code* [Dan Brown] connection, and the fact that it was on the cover. The code had come out a couple of years before, but I didn't know anything about it. And I didn't know that part of the code was on the cover of *The Da Vinci Code* until this article came out. And then started a whole other level of interest in the piece. And then when Brown said, you know, it would be in his next book, that triggered another level. So from there it just went up, and then the new *Wired* piece came out just you know—reiterated it all, written by a very smart guy who treated it very well.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. Now I can't remember the cover of *The Da Vinci Code*. Was it some code writing? Was it an image of the sculpture?

JIM SANBORN: No, no. It's hard to find. [Inaudible.] If you take this over there and you look at this in the sun, your longitude and latitude coordinates are right there.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay. I see. Is that—

JIM SANBORN: Then here, right here, if you hold this in a mirror, these little white letters here, it says "ONLY WW KNOWS" backwards.

AVIS BERMAN: And that's—

JIM SANBORN: Only William Webster.

AVIS BERMAN: Only William Webster knows. Oh, okay. So at this moment, yes, he really—I mean as I look at this, I never would have figured it out. [00:22:00] I would've just thought it was all Leonardo's mirror writing instead of other things.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: So you really, yes, you have to look. So it wasn't—

JIM SANBORN: His new book is completely covered with that stuff. And I don't know if *Kryptos* is in there or not.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. So this was sort of—well, this could have been the cover designer who thought about this. Or do you think it was Dan Brown himself?

JIM SANBORN: Oh, I'm sure Dan Brown knew about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Jacket design by Michael J. Windsor. That's all I—I'm just reading on that. I mean it could have been the graphics designer.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, it's a serious marketing tool, whatever it is.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, you know, anyway so that happened. Now in terms of the notoriety, did you ever regret doing this piece on any level? Or from the anxiety that it caused you?

JIM SANBORN: Not unless it kills me.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] I shouldn't laugh at that.

JIM SANBORN: To date.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: No, it's been the Energizer bunny of any artwork I could make. But I don't—the fact that it was picked up by this popular culture and *The Da Vinci Code* thing, which introduced religion into my work—because I told you that Dan Brown said on *Good Morning America* that it was "only WW" meant Mary Magdalene actually upside down.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: That introduced a level of religion into it; and considering that I'm something of an agnostic, atheist, whatever, it's difficult for me to tolerate.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, well, I'm sure the CIA wouldn't have wanted any religious connotations either. You know, I want to ask you at this point, now that we're past *Kryptos*—also, wait a minute. Before that, you had the main sculpture, and then you worked on a plaza area, too, right? With the outcroppings and all. And then you had said something about an interior that got screwed up. Or did you mean Matt Mullican when you said that? [00:24:00] Or something of yours that got screwed up?

JIM SANBORN: No, nothing got screwed up. I mean there's an outdoor component to the piece which is in front of the new building, which is a stone outcropping. Then there's—in the interior there's a stone outcropping also, and those two are parallel to each other. So if you see them from an airplane, they look like they're lined up like they were geological strata. Yes. So I mean the outside has very simple codes, and the inside has complicated code.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And even though this was getting so expensive, they didn't give you any more money in terms of budget?

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: And also when you were working on this, was the GSA involved in any of—Was there a project manager or anyone else who was running interference or doing anything else?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. There was a project manager that was interfering. [Laughs] I mean, you know, there's not much, I mean, a project manager can do at the CIA. Because the project manager's got somebody following him around, too.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: And I generally found that if the project manager's leaving me alone, I'm much, much happier because I pride myself in what I do. And there have been project managers in GSA projects that I have done who in some way make things happen to make it appear like the only reason the artwork got done right was because of them. That is an extremely frustrating experience to endure. Especially if you have pride in what you do. It's a pride-killer, I think, for a lot of people. [00:26:00] I mean, why bother? I'll just do whatever the hell I want to do and let him clean up the mess, if he's going to be that way. And so there is always that tendency with a project manager; it depends on how much they get involved. And I'm sure there are artists who are flaky enough that the project manager has something to do that's necessary. But in my case, I mean, every time those people have been involved, it's been hard for me to tolerate because they try to take credit for your every move. And, you know, I mean it's ridiculous. But that's the reality of it. But most of the time it was fine. The project managers were way in the background. But I don't remember who it was at CIA. But for me they're kind of an extraneous individual appendage that wasn't necessary.

AVIS BERMAN: When did the CIA stop following you—if they have stopped following you? [Laughs.]

JIM SANBORN: Oh, I have no idea. I don't know. I never went back out there after that period of time. I mean I'm—right.

AVIS BERMAN: No, because you were saying, you know, in other words, while you were doing the project, they were following you and tapping your phones and doing all of that.

JIM SANBORN: They could've been. Or somebody was. Possibly. I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe I'm thinking—putting too much into it. But I, you know, probably Ed Scheidt the cryptographer had a problem with it.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course, yes, that would—right.

JIM SANBORN: Right. I figured, okay, if Ed is paranoid about this, I think I'd better be paranoid about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Did things change—I mean, now you were done—I mean this was done during the Bush I [one] Administration.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And did things change when—I mean you were done with it—but when Clinton came?

JIM SANBORN: I was done with it. I was out of there. I mean, you know, my only protector was William Webster. [00:28:00] He was strongly behind the project and the initiator of the whole thing. And he is a very smart, very savvy, great guy. I mean, a couple of years later when he retired from the agency, he said on *Face the Nation* that the hardest secret he had to keep was the *Kryptos* sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Fascinating. And that would be—you know, you would think some horrible thing that the agency had done would be a harder secret.

JIM SANBORN: Exactly.

You want some more water? There's another water thing here. Have you got some in there?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I guess there is some there. There's still some. Thank you.

Okay. Now I want to ask you because I wanted to get this—I don't want to call it a hurdle, but we really had to, particularly had to talk about—oh, I know what I want to ask you: Is there anything that you would improve or change, looking back on the piece, that you would do—

JIM SANBORN: On *Kryptos*?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

JIM SANBORN: No, I went out there to check the condition report, and it's perfect. The only thing that happened is they ran into it with a machine or something. Some crane or something hit it and knocked one of the plates. And I showed them how to fix it with a sledgehammer. And that's the way it was left. It was in good shape.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now in terms of conservation, I think that's important, what needs to be done to keep it the way it should be?

JIM SANBORN: Whatever they're doing, they're doing the right thing. I mean that particular piece involves very little maintenance. The only tricky part is the pools, the water; and one of the pools of water, the circular pool, which is supposed to be spinning around wildly, wasn't spinning and actually wasn't filled with water for the last couple of years, and it was sort of collecting debris. Well, I showed them what the problem was with that. But that needs some stewardship. But they had actually, I think—I'm not sure they had my original maintenance instructions—but after 20 years they could've been misplaced. [00:30:00] You know, I don't know how you, you know, can keep things like that for so long.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: But that's an issue. And I don't know. It probably something that GSA should—GSA would do well to keep an archive of these maintenance booklets and just resend them every five years to whoever owns a piece. I think it would do very well because they do disappear. And anyway.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, what I want to ask you now, because clearly your sense of a piece of public art has changed post-*Kryptos*—or just you've made some. In general, maybe, what you think now. I mean I guess what makes a piece of art public? Patron, location, access? You know as opposed to a big piece of outdoor work, which was your initial conception.

JIM SANBORN: Well, I mean it has to have a presence. It has to have a significant presence. It should operate somehow with the sun, some light; it should interact with the sun in some way, day and night. It should be effective at night. After *Kryptos*—and because of *Kryptos*—I more or less invented the signature pieces that I've done 12 or 13 of since *Kryptos* with these projection cylinders. And the first projection cylinder I did was at the Corcoran [00:32:00] in an exhibition just a year—1992—a couple of years after the dedication ceremony. And it was basically a bronze cylinder with a light inside.

I did one for GSA. And then I've done several for the universities around the country. And basically they're text-based magic lantern types of pieces with a pinpoint and a very particular kind of light inside that projects the text over a very wide area. So you can make a small piece; but it has an effect, it has a very large effect over a very wide area. So in addition to having this lighting effect, it also then projects the content of the text that I've written, or that somebody has written, that's on the work over the large area. So it's sort of a metaphor for enlightenment. And so I did a piece for Florida Power and Light and for the City of Fort Myers, Florida. And I used two projection cylinders: The text on one cylinder—it was for Florida Power and Light, which seemed logical; the title is *Lux* [2001], L-U-X. And so one cylinder had listed all of the materials that Thomas Edison had studied for the light bulb filament in Fort Myers, Florida, in his Fort Myers, Florida, laboratory. So he had a lab in Fort Myers in which he tested all of the filament possibilities. And so it was very apropos to that area and to Florida Power and Light and things like that.

So the other cylinder there on the particular site where that artwork was, it was formerly an [00:34:00] Indian city or village—large village/city. And it had been abandoned before the colonial period. But artifacts had remained there. And so that piece related the Creek/Seminole migration legend from Oklahoma to Florida, which was how the Seminoles ended up populating Florida—and how they ended up leaving, going out to Oklahoma, etc. So that was one instance where, you know, the projection cylinder operated on several levels.

AVIS BERMAN: These weren't in code, though. These were legible texts.

JIM SANBORN: That particular one, the first one I did, was in code. The *Cyrillic Projector*, and it was all in Russian. And there was one English word in it which was Medusa because, you know, the gaze of Medusa could turn you to stone. So the Russian text that was on this piece was all about KGB operations and CIA operations carried out about Russia—carried out against Russia—and KGB operations carried out against the USA.

AVIS BERMAN: Wait a minute. I'm confused. This is on the Florida Power and Light one?

JIM SANBORN: No, that's different. The first one I did, the very first one, I showed at the Corcoran. Okay?

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: That piece was sold to the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, and it's in between their arts building and their communications buildings.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And this is the one in Cyrillic?

JIM SANBORN: That's in Cyrillic. It's called the *Cyrillic Projector* [1997]. And the code—all the code people wanted to crack that one also.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that one cracked?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. That was fairly easy.

AVIS BERMAN: Probably couldn't go through another *Kryptos* in terms of intensity there. [00:36:00] And then *Lux* was something one could read.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, that one could read. But what I introduced as a result—in order that the work would retain interest was that I started using international language texts. So like the piece for Fort Myers actually the list of plant species is all in Latin. The one that listed the Creek migration legend was in Creek. My other pieces use a variety of languages, as many as 10 or 15 languages on each piece. So, maybe one line in English or something. But that allows peoples of different cultures to collaborate on deciphering what the piece says. So in a way it's like a code. And so it's a language code. And then I also use—I've used about four or five different Native American languages.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that must also give it graphic interest because it's—

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Well, fonts are beautiful things, especially like, you know, Greek and Russian and Arabic and all these other fonts. And I've used all the Chinese, and I've used all the languages. And I really enjoy seeing them visually. And so, yes, I'm hoping that they operate as dramatic projectors and as dramatic content kinds of pieces. Although their forms are rigidly similar: a variety of cylindrical forms, some taller, some shorter, but largely cylindrical. Some spiral. But mostly to just enhance the projection effect. And I basically came up with the idea because I had two pieces of *Kryptos*, these big sheets. [00:38:00] I had these two pieces in my studio. So for some reason I was shining a light through it or something like that, and I realized that if I could pinpoint light—I took two of the pieces while they were still in my studio and brought them together into a cylinder and put a light inside it, and it worked so well that, you know, that's what started the whole thing.

AVIS BERMAN: And so—I guess I'm going to discuss the GSA commissions. And I guess the next one would have been *Ex Nexum*, is that correct, the Bankruptcy Courthouse?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did that commission start?

JIM SANBORN: Well again, it's another GSA, and I was selected. I was told that I was on the short list. And I was called weeks later saying that I had won it. Then the usual, you know, making a maquette and submitting it to a panel situation I think I was asked to give—first time. That piece was—it was interesting to me just because it was Bill Clinton's town. And bankruptcy and all of this business, there were all these issues with that town at the time with the administration. So it was sort of fun doing it down there. And then I did a lot of research in Greek and Latin about bankruptcy law. And then determined that I'd do a piece

about the transition from Draconian legal practice, which as we all know is brutal, to Justinian legal practice, which we all know is justice. And so there was the transition from the Draconian to the Justinian that is listed on the three metal panels that comprise the artwork. And then on one side is a block of red granite and another block of black granite, meaning to be in the red and in the black from an accounting standpoint. [00:40:00]

AVIS BERMAN: And the panel that passed it would've been the Washington panel, is that correct, the people in DC? Or is this someone in Arkansas as well, a group in Arkansas?

JIM SANBORN: That I don't know, because I wasn't privy to the panel for that one.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And when you went down there, did you get to meet with the judges, the people who work in the courthouse?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I think so. A site visit.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did they have any requests or demands or things that they asked for?

JIM SANBORN: No. Which is great.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Because no one said to you—and I mean—

JIM SANBORN: I wouldn't take it if they did. I mean I generally will not take a commission if I'm required to do a certain thing. I won't take it. I mean there are many commissions I have not chosen to participate in or go for if they have a requirement like that. Or even offer a theme. If anything is offered, I won't take it. I have to be the genesis of my theme.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So were there any problems in the execution or as time went on about this?

JIM SANBORN: No. It was all very straightforward. The GSA commissions are the easiest commissions I have had.

AVIS BERMAN: Because?

JIM SANBORN: It's streamlined. Granted, I've met many artists who have had the opposite experience. But I've had a perfect—I mean every experience for me, at least at this point in time—and maybe you forget how difficult they were—but I've always felt as if the GSA commissions were the best-handled of all the commissioning processes that I've gone through. And some of them are absolute hell. And GSAs are not. [00:42:00] And I know that it's been streamlined a lot where, you know, the contracts are shorter now. You know they're not an inch and a half thick. They're a little thinner and easier to deal with. And the payment's always very straightforward and on time. And I thought they were very well handled. And they were responsible in following through and making sure things worked out. And that's all.

AVIS BERMAN: Because, well, of course I guess they could also see what they were getting. But I ask this because in interviews with some of the other artists, both abstract and [inaudible] and figurative, courthouses seem to be, I don't want to say a problem, but the judges always come out and say I want this, I want someone with a white robe, I want, you know, I want this that and the other. That I'm just curious that no one had an idea about this one.

JIM SANBORN: Well, I was always dealing with justice theory or the history of, you know, jurisprudence. They didn't have any way to criticize that. That made it all very easy. Because I don't make figurative things. They knew also what they were getting into. They were part of the panels, and the courthouse pieces all involved panels. So I was in that way fortunate in that my subject matter and content disallowed, you know, having to be changed.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And did you find this an effective piece as far—

JIM SANBORN: I don't think I ever saw the little booklet, to tell you the truth. I don't even have one of those.

AVIS BERMAN: I'll give it to you.

JIM SANBORN: That's great.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, yes. Yes, Jennifer sent it to me.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I never saw it.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, did you—in terms of the people using this, I mean, did you find— I mean I don't know how you judge if a piece has been effective because *Kryptos* is such an exception to everything. [00:44:00]

JIM SANBORN: Oh, I remember going to the dedication ceremony, and everybody was very happy about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: You know? I mean everybody was very pleased. And I know that the one at Greenbelt was also received pretty well. I never had too much criticism.

AVIS BERMAN: And was this something you would do differently in terms of changing it, looking back?

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: And how about conservation of this piece?

JIM SANBORN: Again, it's a really simple conservation. I mean the granite's not going to change at all. It's so big and heavy—unless you have to clean graffiti off of it, it's not really an issue. The bronze is the same way. Unless somebody tries to vandalize it.

AVIS BERMAN: And have you heard any— Well, would you have been told if someone did?

JIM SANBORN: I haven't been told anything about that one. The one at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte has been vandalized, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: In what way?

JIM SANBORN: Somebody broke letters off. Stuck a crowbar or something in there, wrecked parts of it.

AVIS BERMAN: Did they fix it?

JIM SANBORN: No. Not as far as I know.

AVIS BERMAN: Has there been other work that's been vandalized?

JIM SANBORN: No.

[Audio break.]

AVIS BERMAN: Right now I'm just going to hand this [inaudible] over to you so you can have it.

JIM SANBORN: I don't know that I ever saw it. Don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, in general, and again let's except *Kryptos*, is there anything in particular that you have to consider when the government is your client as opposed to a corporation or an individual?

JIM SANBORN: [00:46:00] Well, I mean—the pieces that I've generally done, I've done so many of them for different places, that at this point it's almost formulaic in the way I build them. And it's made them very easy to get completed. Because the process is somewhat standardized. And the company that cuts out the water-jet panels and all of that, I've been working with for almost 20 years, and that process has gotten better all the time. So, you know, they take less time to cut them and all that stuff. The only trouble that I've had with any of the cylinders on college campuses is people throw beer cans in them.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, like over the top.



JIM SANBORN: The big trash can. But that's not unusual. It doesn't happen at bankruptcy courts.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, then let's—I think that the next one you did—now this is on *Indian Run* [1994]? Do you have this book? Okay. And I guess this seems a little different to me in terms of—I mean not just the cylinder, but it looks like you've done a whole park or a whole—you've done a lot more—you've done a lot of landscape in here.

JIM SANBORN: Well, at CIA, too, I think one of the original commissions now since 1990, this was—they added some more by including landscaping on it. So I did—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: So I embellished the sites. I tried to—in general I tried to modify the site landscape to integrate my piece into that landscape. [00:48:00] So that it's less plop art, you know, than it would be otherwise. That piece obviously is like a serpent now with its serpentine walkways. You know the *Indian Serpent Mound*.

AVIS BERMAN: In Ohio?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. There's one in Indiana, too. And that piece, I mean, that was fun because I seeded the site with 10,000 arrowheads after I'd built it. And so that's always been curious. And I'm sure I've driven the Maryland State Historical Society hysterical because people walking in say, "Hey, I found this arrowhead out there at Greenbelt Courthouse. What do you think?" And I had them all made in Mexico.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, yes, I was going to ask you about that.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. So I'm sure they just keep turning up in gardens and things like that.

AVIS BERMAN: It seems like it would be hard to cut the grass if those were hitting a lawnmower.

JIM SANBORN: No, they don't get a lot. Most of them are buried. I mean most of them by this time have sunk down, you know, and discovered when someone puts pipe in or something. But those pieces are far more complicated. I mean the water features, the pools I did at CIA are very expensive. The budgets often don't—they don't reflect the expense of including the water feature. And they're also very expensive to maintain. So on some of these I was pushing my limits as far as how much I could do water-feature-wise for the budget. How much they were willing to do from a maintenance standpoint. And I know that the water feature for Greenbelt has been difficult to keep from leaking. The one at CIA has just been perfect. But that one's [inaudible]. That I probably would have done differently, but I couldn't afford to do it differently.

AVIS BERMAN: In what way would you have done it differently?

JIM SANBORN: Well, the one I did at CIA, [00:50:00] I built a concrete pool for the whole thing. This one has a rubber-lined streambed. And the rubber-lined streambed just doesn't hold up any more than 10 years before it's got to be rebuilt.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. It's like a regular swimming pool, but it's worse because it's more used.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, and it just runs all day. And so they end up losing a lot of money in water.

AVIS BERMAN: And then you've got this stonework that you did, too.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I did that in the middle of a terrible, terrible winter. Unbelievable! Right in February snowstorms. Zero degrees. By myself, the whole wall.

AVIS BERMAN: Just going back to the Arkansas piece here. Because this is distorted. Is it this close to this wall, this rusticated wall on this older building that looks kind of—

JIM SANBORN: About 20 feet away.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Richardsonian [ph] here because in terms of integrating this, it was—

JIM SANBORN: It was just the original building that was there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Let me just—

JIM SANBORN: And the only other one was IRS, I guess.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, this is this—is that this?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, that's IRS.

AVIS BERMAN: Which is Martinsburg [West Virginia] Computing Center? And that's an IRS building?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. That's where the football fields are underground.

AVIS BERMAN: Of old tax returns?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: And that's my Social Security number on that front cover there. My Social Security number and my girlfriend's number and two of my assistants' Social Security numbers and everybody's Social Security number that I knew. There's mine right there.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Don't put that on the tape anymore, if you think you—

JIM SANBORN: Oh, trust me, I wasn't going to finish.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay. No, no, don't put where it starts. [00:52:00] We don't want people to realize that—maybe they're figured out that they're Social Security numbers already.

JIM SANBORN: Well, sure. It's called *Social Security Seating* [1999].

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

JIM SANBORN: That's the title of the work. I told them what it was. It was tempting them do that if I ever got audited, I'd blame it on them having my Social Security number under their nose.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, no, no, it's just in this age of identity theft, I just hated to have—I thought you might put your Social Security on this—I mean, I'm not paranoid about me. But I'd hate to see that happen. Now let me just pause for a second here. [Audio break.] Why don't you tell me about the procedure and the genesis and, you know, sort of going into working for IRS here?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, they gave us another tour where I saw the robotic football-field-sized rooms, which I was very impressed by. And the fact that they used magnetic storage at the time. They could've changed it by now, but I don't know. And since I had a lodestone, large, magnetized lodestone, lying around just waiting for a home, a nice 11-ton lodestone that everyone would like to have, I decided to use that and make it the focal point of the piece. So I basically picked up on the magnetic tape head kind of theory and went with that and made a maquette, you know, very precise maquette.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I think we need to say that the magnetic tape because you told me about that at lunch, but you didn't put it on the tape: that when you saw this, what you saw you should explain about the robots going.

JIM SANBORN: Well, storage devices for computers are of different types: There are laser storage devices, and then there are magnetic, which are generally old technology, magnetic storage. But basically, the robots in the football-[field]-sized rooms are running back moving magnetic storage tapes around to update people's files. [00:54:00] So basically the information is stored on a metallic tape, and the information is stored magnetically. So in front of the Martinsburg facility, I installed a large lodestone and two sheets of copper. And basically, the copper was going in one side in English characters, and it's the names of all the presidents and secretaries of treasury in the United States. Then coming out the backside of the magnetic thing is all zeroes and ones. So I converted all the presidents

names into binary code.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: And then the problem was that since the thing is magnetized, and since the security badges that everybody wears that goes in and out of the Martinsburg facility are magnetic, people couldn't walk up to this lodestone without demagnetizing their badge and they couldn't get in the agency. So I put a red ring around in the paving that says magnetic, so that people would stay away from the stone. But nonetheless that stone now still collects large numbers of magnetic objects—like thousands and thousands of paperclips, thumbtacks; anything that's magnetized gets stuck on it. People bring up there and bring their little metal offerings to the lodestone.

AVIS BERMAN: Does that disturb you?

JIM SANBORN: I think it's great.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. You don't mind that stuff is on your stone?

JIM SANBORN: Yes—no, it's great, personalizing it.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: Yes. And then there's in the paving I inlaid a 256-bit chip with 256 stone, one-foot-by-one-foot tiles that has a binary code in it. And so there's an encoded text in the paving section, the square paving section. And then the *Social Security Seating* is a piece of black granite with Social Security numbers [00:56:00]: my number and so on. And so that's basically the piece. And it went very smoothly. I mean I didn't have much problem with that. You know, working with the architect, trying to incorporate into the architecture and all that.

AVIS BERMAN: And who was the architect?

JIM SANBORN: I have no idea at this point. I think it might have been HOK, but I'm not sure.

AVIS BERMAN: HOK?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, Hellmuth, Obata and—what is it? HOK. Hellmuth, Obata, and I don't remember who the third one [Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum] is. HOK.

AVIS BERMAN: I can look that up.

JIM SANBORN: HOK [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I think this is the question I haven't asked you: Have you run into any problems on the GSA buildings, any problems with any of the architects?

JIM SANBORN: Not with GSA buildings. Other buildings? Hell yes! But not with GSA.

AVIS BERMAN: So in other projects you might name, architects are not your friends?

JIM SANBORN: Not these days. They're all my competitors.

AVIS BERMAN: So in all of these, the building was already built, and then you came in later in all of these four cases so far?

JIM SANBORN: The buildings were designed, but they weren't necessarily built—particularly Martinsburg. It wasn't, when I went out there to visit it, there was no site. I mean, the building was built, but the landscaping, paving, and everything wasn't in existence yet. So I could make changes in it. And it was the same with the IRS—with CIA—too. I was able to make some changes, although minor, but I was able to initiate changes in the site.

AVIS BERMAN: So that means—okay. Because I always think of the CIA as being in Langley for quite a long time. So this was a new building?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, this was the new headquarters building; it was connected to the old one. Yes. [00:58:00] Basically, there's a courtyard piece that's sitting in a part of the forest that was there; it went up a hill. And they chain-sawed the forest away and built the building

there. And left this little courtyard. Much to the chagrin of the employees.

AVIS BERMAN: That might have been another reason why people were also not happy with you in the beginning if they—

JIM SANBORN: Yes, they could have deferred.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, they could've—I just meant if you took—

JIM SANBORN: Deflected the blame to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Or also they were—it looked like you were taking a courtyard away. Which I would say would be considered an amenity. And at the bankruptcy court, was that a new addition to an old building?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, that was purely a new addition to an old building. So it was a no-brainer. I mean, basically, I just said I needed this much area. It needs to be level and flat. And that's it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Let me just check something here.

JIM SANBORN: Plus, in the GSA projects, the architects don't generally have any choice.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, they have to have the Percent for Art.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, they have to have it, and they're stuck with it. I mean, they do have a choice if they're on the panel. I know that [inaudible] was on the panel that I was on—or was one of the architects on the panel. He was completely immutable.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Let's see. Oh, yes, I wanted—this is a little different because—but it's about the same period. Because I think that this—in doing the magic lanterns, is this leading into photography and projective light for you? [01:00:00]

JIM SANBORN: Well, I did the CIA work, and I did the secrecy work. And I was doing public projects involving some secrecy. And it got to a point where I just got burned out, and I had to leave it all behind for a while and take a break from all the seriousness involved in espionage and just generally holding secrets. And so I, the year before, had gotten a commission—I don't remember what the year was of that one—

AVIS BERMAN: There was something in Iowa.

JIM SANBORN: MIT [*Paleos*, 1994].

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, okay.

JIM SANBORN: The MIT project. I did a projection on the floor of the Microbiology Department. And that piece involved the use of a projection system—1994. And I projected on the floor of the Biology Department on a white marble disc a projection of a microscopic slide image. And the images were given to me by the electron microscope scientists of things that they were working on at that time. And so I had slides made and installed a very high, powerful, what's called a theatrical projector in the ceiling with a special lighting system that I designed that would last a very long time. And so it projected the image of the slide on the floor, and it overpowered the ambient lighting. And people could walk into that image. So after doing that, I decided in having that projection system in my studio while I was playing around with it; I tried shining it on a building across the railroad tracks from me and started playing around with various ideas for large format projections because this is a large—it's called a large format projector.

So I then got the idea that I wanted to work out west and project on the natural landscape. [01:02:00] So I basically took off '95, '96, and '97 to do large format projections in the desert for two years—three years in the desert and then one year, one summer, three and a half months I went to Ireland and projected in Ireland. And then came back and projected on the coast of Oregon. And out West for a last final time. And it was on that final trip that I discovered Los Alamos. I discovered that—I went to White Sands National Monument in southern New Mexico. And White Sands Monument was just 20 miles south of where the first atomic bomb was exploded. And so while I was at that monument, I collected some books about building the first atomic bomb, and that became my next project, which has, to date,

lasted almost 15 years.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Okay. I don't want to do that right now because I think that's—I kind of want to save that I think for tomorrow.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: As a matter of fact.

JIM SANBORN: Good.

AVIS BERMAN: And also the 1992 and later corporate shows. I think that's what I want to finish with. But I just wanted to make sure—

JIM SANBORN: The projections operated in '95, '96, and '97.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And there were—was there photography, too? Or was it all projections?

JIM SANBORN: No, well, they were projections. But they were projections in extremely remote areas. And so I had no proof that they had occurred unless I photographed them with a four-by-five camera. So that what I was left with was large, you know, 30-by-36-inch images of the projections on the landscape.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So the photography was documentation.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. And the photography for me has always been documentation of a sort.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: And I've always photographed my own work. I couldn't at CIA. But all the other photographs taken of my work are mine. So I've always used it to document.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. [01:04:00] Now what about the CIA photographs of your work? Were you happy with them? Were you allowed to influence them or discuss it with their photographers about what you could get?

JIM SANBORN: Well, the basic requirements at CIA is that you can't have any people's faces in the photographs—either inside the buildings or outside the buildings. So CIA photographs of their grounds are always dark so you can't see through the windows. So we had to photograph it on a weekend when nobody was around. And I was able to look through the cameras of the CIA photographer to frame the shots. So I was able to get the kind of image I wanted. So this tape is going into the Archives?

AVIS BERMAN: Of American Art.

JIM SANBORN: And it's not going to be listened to soon?

AVIS BERMAN: No. And you can put restrictions on it. So the answer is, you can make restrictions about it.

JIM SANBORN: Right. So anyway, so we photographed my piece at CIA, and we took 150 photographs, both large format, four-by-fives, and slides. And basically, we took Kodachrome slides for part of it. And Kodachrome can only be developed at Kodak. But CIA had their own laboratory at Kodak. And so basically, I went in a couple of weeks, and I got all my slide boxes back, like many slide boxes. And of my 150 slides, five were not mine. And you'll have to read my book to find out what I'm doing with them.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Or what was on them. [Laughs.] Right.

JIM SANBORN: Or what was on them.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. [01:06:00] Well, I look forward to reading it and hope it will be out soon. Okay. Isn't that funny. And you didn't say anything. I also realized about the other GSA pieces. I think we've covered this with *Kryptos*. But looking back over your larger public art oeuvre, what place might they have—are any of them a departure from this is the—

JIM SANBORN: What was?

AVIS BERMAN: The bankruptcy court, Martinsburg, and Greenbelt: Did you find—did they—do any of them represent new developments or ideas in your work? Or are they in the stream of it?

JIM SANBORN: No, they're just part of a continuum. Each one sort of bled into the next. And in some ways, I mean, it was more about the development or the destruction of my back. So as my projects developed, they got lighter and lighter and lighter, and used less and less and less stone. To the point now where I don't use any stone in my projects anymore because I just can't work with it. So they're all basically metal screens and cylinders now. So that's been the major change.

AVIS BERMAN: So you didn't have any assistants who just did brute strength stuff?

JIM SANBORN: No, because they can ruin their backs, too, and then I get blamed for it or sued or whatever. So it's not worth it.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. What do you consider the last public art piece that you did?

JIM SANBORN: You mean just recently?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you said to me at lunch that you're not in public art anymore. And what I'm doing is I want to lead into what we should talk about—

JIM SANBORN: Well, they aren't finished yet. There's two of them right now. They've been—the artwork is done, the cylinders are done, and the other screens are done. And they're being stored in two different locations [01:08:00]: one is being stored at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, downtown Philadelphia, to be installed sometime in November; the other one is being stored in Maryland, to be installed in a private project near White Flint in Rockville, Maryland. And that's going to be installed sometime in 2010.

AVIS BERMAN: So you have a public piece in Philadelphia.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And is it going to be there at Thomas Jefferson?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, it's right in the center of the campus at Thomas Jefferson.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. Because, as I said, you had said to me, so I kind of wanted to explore that idea that you felt you weren't in it anymore and where that came from and what happened. And what you mentioned—

JIM SANBORN: Yes, unless, I mean, unless—I'm not applying for RFQs anymore, Request For Qualifications. If GSA has a project that they will include me in, I'll go for that. But I'm not—or somebody has a private commission they want me to do. Or somebody has a program they want a piece for, and they come directly to me, and they want me to do it, I'll do it, certainly. But I'm not going to compete anymore. I can't do it. Competition is just too extreme and dumbed down.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you had said that public art is really different from what it was in the '80s and '90s. Could you elaborate on that?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I think recently—recently part of the problem is there are a whole lot of architecture firms and not enough to do. So they're turning to public art. And apparently they're being accepted. And I find it galling to have what you call a public art program but actually it's a public architecture program. It's called Art and Public Architecture. [01:10:00] But now a large portion of any—I've talked to quite a few people who have been on panels for public art projects in the last five years. And I would venture to say two-thirds of the short-listed people, and sometimes 100 percent of the short-listed people, are architects: architects—teams of architects—two architects, an artist with an architect, or just a straight architect, or an architect that fancies himself as a sculptor and whatever. But it's—

What it's done is that it's created a situation in which a lot of artists who are just artists can't compete. And the problem is that architecture firms are pretty much graphically oriented.

And they have large staffs, in general, who just specialize in putting together very slick presentations. And they can speak architecture. Okay? So on every panel, including GSA panels and other art panels around the country, usually the architect for the building is on the panel; or maybe the architect and the landscape architect are on the panel. And so what happens is—you know, there's always been a movement toward using an architect as opposed to using a contractor when you build the structure. The AIA, the American Institute—I mean—is it the AIA?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. The AIA and a lot of organizations stress the fact that you're not going to get a building built right unless you hire an architect. Or you're not going to get a building to look right, if you don't hire an architect. And so this has been going on for many years. [01:12:00] And so it doesn't take a sophisticated panelist, if they're not an architect, to be told and to understand that, well, if we want this project built right, and we can trust that the person who's going to build it can manage the multi hundreds of thousands of dollars that's involved here, we need to hire an architect, not an artist. Because artists are basically flaky people with alternative lifestyles, who can't manage money and make strange things. So the stereotypes tend to be inflated both ways. And it doesn't weigh favorably on the artist's side. It weighs very favorably on the architect's side. And I find it tragic because what we're getting is a lot of architecture—I mean, a lot of public art that's really architecturally inspired. Or if it's a trained architect who makes sculpture on the side or makes sculpture, or their rendition of sculpture, which is usually at least in the things that I have seen have been fairly traditional but have very slick architectural presentations—to the point where you have a three-dimensional virtual walk-around through the entire city, up to the artwork, around the artwork, day and night, seasons past, summer, winter, fall, all occurring on a very slick, virtual presentation on a large projection screen.

Then the artist steps up with a small model made out of clay or glass or ceramic or whatever it is, and it's not as impressive. [01:14:00] And these presentations blow away the panelists who, at least the unsophisticated ones, automatically say, well, this person is way more qualified than that artist over there, despite the fact that that artist has been working for 30 years. But since that artist is not a computer maven, they can't be that good. So the whole playing field has changed. And I think it's really sad because artists are—artists are not allowed to make buildings. But it seems like architects are allowed to make art. And I find that incredibly discriminatory. I mean, artists aren't allowed to make buildings, design buildings, and build buildings generally from a municipality standpoint, from a governmental standpoint. You need to be accredited. You need to have a license. You need to be a builder, an engineer, or whatever. But you can't just be an artist. But an architect can be an artist anytime they want to be.

I just had a huge argument with the guy who won the World Trade Center, the new World Trade Center design. He came to my Fourth of July party. And we had a huge row about this very point, you know. And he was saying, Well, there's no art that's original. There's nothing—there's no art that's original. What difference does it make? I mean I'm an architect. I can make art. What are you talking about? No art is original. I said, "Well, I mean, you know, come and see what I'm doing. How many artists have you seen doing what I'm doing?" Well, he came around after a while, you know. But nonetheless, it was still a very, very difficult sell. But it's one-sided, and it's unfortunate.

But there have been artists in the past who have grossly mismanaged money in public art programs. [01:16:00] Grossly mismanaged—or mis-designed or ill-designed, ill-conceived artwork that fell apart. And those artists do need help. But I don't think there's much, you know—I just think it's unfortunate for the world of art because I think creativity is getting lost. And I've talked to a lot of people who have programs—the few, the programs that I—the last eight or so that I have not won, in conversations with the directors of the programs, they're all very disappointed. And they see a trend—the same trend occurring and repeatedly. And find it to be a tragic error. I mean somehow there's no way to—I'm not sure how exactly you improve the situation. But something's got to be done because it's not fair to a lot of artists.

AVIS BERMAN: And these directors who are disappointed were by and large—most of the winners of the competitions chose as architects as opposed to any—

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So it wasn't another artist they were largely disappointed in. It was the architecture.

JIM SANBORN: They were disappointed—they were disappointed that the architects were snapping up all the art projects, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: I have two friends who were just, you know, on separate panels, one here in DC, in particular, that, of the five finalists, four of them were architects. There was one artist.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, that's—

JIM SANBORN: But the thing is that it's so extremely expensive to have a computer, a powerful one, to make a three-dimensional, virtual, walk-around artwork, that it's prohibitive. And especially if the artist is mature and has been used to working the same way for 30 years or 20 years or whatever it is, that artist might have gained a tremendous amount of experience in building the projects and is capable of doing it [01:18:00]; but they can't relearn—you can't teach an old dog new tricks. That's not always true. But there are certain tricks that old dogs just don't feel like learning.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Exactly.

JIM SANBORN: And, you know, it's discriminatory.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's also a different orientation. Because, yes, if you're doing a piece of public art, presumably it's got to be in harmony with the site, which includes the land and the orientation and the building. But if an architect makes the, quote unquote, "work of art," it's going to be completely subordinated to the architecture.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, totally. I mean this is the thing. It will not offend the building architect. The architect will defer to the building architect. So most of the time, when it's an architect designs the public art, you don't even know it's there. There's a slightly change in the paving color. There's a slight change in the façade. There's a slight change in the light quality when you walk into the room. It is subliminal to snoring. I mean it's just—it's ridiculous! You know. And then in addition to that, they are just designers, you know. I mean James Carpenter is a prime example. Have you ever interviewed him?

AVIS BERMAN: No.

JIM SANBORN: I mean, Carpenter Design Studios in Manhattan—I mean, you know, early on, 10 years ago, he and I competed on separate projects, which he generally won. But he's basically a designer. He's a designer that has a design firm. And basically it seems like, when you go to his website, that they are now primarily designing buildings because they're more lucrative. And they're getting lots of commissions to doing buildings. But he did a lot of public art projects, and he just cleaned up—just cleaned them up one after another. And he's a trained designer—designer/architect. Has a staff of 15 to 20 architects working full time for him. [01:20:00] And he just gets short-listed, you know, on 50 or 100 projects a year. And if they're not making any money on the buildings, they'll just collect a few public art projects. And it's really sad because the guy is not—you know, I've seen his work, and it's just unfortunate that it's—you know, I was on the ATF Panel, and it was miserable. David Levy and I were the two arts people on the panel, and—

AVIS BERMAN: ATF?

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Is that Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

JIM SANBORN: And firearms. It's in DC. And I exploded at the meeting because the shortlist the GSA brought us was two-thirds—or three-quarters—architects, not artists. And that was a few years ago.

AVIS BERMAN: And did they rethink that? The shortlist?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. They retooled it. And basically, they had an architect win it. And then David Levy and I made such a huge row, they opened the competition up again. Or they



actually hired an artist, just a straight artist, whose work that the architect knew. And David and I were left out of the voting. They just went ahead and did it with a different artist. So it was a miserable experience. So now the GSA panels—I have a good friend who's gone through the screening process for the GSA panels, and it's very rigorous. They try to screen out ingrates like myself.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] Well—

JIM SANBORN: David. I don't mind because I would rather be an artist being considered than be on a panel. [01:22:00]

AVIS BERMAN: I just realized I should've asked you—just jumping back to *Kryptos*—once you said that you would be an artist who would consider taking the commission, what kind of security clearance did you have to go through?

JIM SANBORN: Well, it was pretty minor because it was—the whole CIA, when they were building their new headquarters building, it took years to build. And the security level at the agency was dropped tremendously during the whole period because of the volume of contractors they had coming every day, you know. I mean there were people that—there was one time I was in the security office, and I was getting cleared. And this whole biker gang shows up for the roofing company. And they had to turn in—they were, like, turning in knives and blackjacks and brass knuckles and guns and everything. They had this big box full of this stuff that these guys had to turn in to get into the agency, you know. It was like I'm sure they didn't have major, long, security clearances to get in at that point in time. They were somewhat lax.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, it sounds like whoever got the roofing contract probably had an in with someone to get—

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Hey, listen, I admire anybody who can go on a roof when it's 100 degrees outside, go for it. I don't care if you carry a submachine gun onto the roof. So, I think it was pretty minor. It's nothing like if you were trying to get security clearance today. Or any kind major—where they call your relatives and all that. I don't remember having anybody called.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: Maybe short of my parents or something.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, your parents did live to see *Kryptos* and some of these other things.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, that's right. They did. That was great.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: Yes, they were very proud of that. It was nice.

AVIS BERMAN: It was a big, big deal. [01:24:00] I think that this is a good stopping point because I think I want to do some of the Los Alamos stuff tomorrow. And then we'll finish and we'll do more of that kind of thing—that theme.

JIM SANBORN: Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: So anyway, thank you very much.

JIM SANBORN: Sure.

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AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Jim Sanborn for the Archives of American Art GSA Oral History Project, on July 16, 2009, in his house in Washington. Now before I get to asking you some emendations on what we discussed yesterday, you happened to mention the Big Dig Project in Boston. And you had something to do with that. And that was probably earlier than where we were. So why don't we start with that. You had mentioned it was an

incredible experience, whether positive or negative.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean, I was selected—and I'm not sure what year it was, I mean, the Big Dig. I wasn't supposed to do the project until 2007. And I suppose it was mid-1990s I was selected to do the central portion of the park that was going to be generated by the Big Dig. More or less they were taking down the overhead highway and putting it underground. They were left with a huge sort of central park kind of median down the center of Boston. And so I was selected to do the center portion of that project. And went through several months of model-making, panel meetings, and all of this business. And it was one of the few times in my career where I've turned down a project of significance.

I turned that one down after a long deliberation and after a long process going back and forth to Boston many times, because I felt like the project was doomed from the start. And the paperwork required and the fact that the piece wasn't to be installed for 10 years with no increase [00:02:00] in the budget over that length of time. So whatever you proposed then in 1997, you had to build for that price 10 years later. That was something which I felt was a ridiculous concept. And so I walked on the project after working on it for six months. And basically was not paid anything to do what I did prior to that. But I was fine with that. And then I learned years later that the project was dropped after the other artists, who had continued on, labored for years and years and years, had worked on it and then were disappointed in the end. So it was one of the better things I ever did. Also freed me up for other projects. [They laugh.]

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Who was the patron for that?

JIM SANBORN: It was the City of Boston. It was the Arts Council of Massachusetts—I'm not sure; it might've been the mayor's office that time. I'm not exactly sure how that was done. Yes. And I think Andy Lester was one of the artists, and I believe it was James Carpenter was the other. Three of us involved in that. And then a local artist was also included.

AVIS BERMAN: What were some other negative projects that you remember?

JIM SANBORN: I didn't really do any projects that were difficult. The most difficult projects I do in general—and I've done very few of them—are for corporations. The corporations waded into the public art field because they were given special exceptions and amenities by the counties, cities, municipalities that they're building large projects for. They're building projects for those places, but they have to get zoning permissions. [00:04:00] So in exchange for putting public art in, they are given increased density and things like that. And that apparently is, I think, a flawed concept because they don't really want the art. They're not that interested in the art. They are required to do the art, and that relationship a very difficult one to maintain for both sides. And so I did have bad experiences in the distant past, in the '80s. I mean, the project was completed on time and all of that. But I was treated like a second-class citizen by the company that regarded artists as being flakes and taking off with the money and not completing it. And so it wasn't until this year where I agreed to do another project—last year I agreed to do another project for a developer. That's yet to be completed, and that's going to be done in 2010. So, so far so good on that project. Had a reasonable experience.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Are there any projects that you didn't get that you really wish you'd gotten?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I think those are all too numerous to mention. I mean I only get maybe —years ago I'd only get, you know, five percent or 10 percent of the ones I applied for. And so you get to—so you get quickly to a point where you just don't even think about losing projects. It's not, you know—I always wish I had done projects for more inspired architects. But I didn't get the project, those kinds of projects that I wanted to get. But that's, you know, that's the game.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Also yesterday we, you know, you talked about architects getting public art commissions.

JIM SANBORN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AVIS BERMAN: Are there any other—in these last 10 years [00:06:00]—are there any other big problems or negatives that you've seen about the public art scene besides that?

JIM SANBORN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: No. Well, the only other thing is the application process. And the transition from analog to digital. That process has precluded a lot of artists from commissions. And I think that is very unfortunate as well. To make the transition from the slides, I mean I still have hundreds and hundreds of slides [phone rings] that I can't really use anymore.

AVIS BERMAN: Just let me pause this. [Audio break.]

JIM SANBORN: So what was the question?

AVIS BERMAN: Let me see. Oh, this is just—I want to ask you some more about public art when I asked you what it meant to—what makes something a piece of public art. And you talked yesterday about the physical qualities, the presence, the light. I guess I wanted to ask you more about either the psychological or the logistical access—excuse me, aspects. Or about what makes it—is it how much access, how much public? Does the patron make a difference? What is it—

JIM SANBORN: Um—

AVIS BERMAN: —that makes it more than a big outdoor piece for you, I mean, in other words.

JIM SANBORN: Well, I mean, you know, I mean the better public art projects are experiential. I mean, you know, you're confronted by something which is [00:08:00] unfamiliar and at the same time exciting—hopefully—and intellectually stimulating in some way. I mean those components—if those components aren't there, then it's more or less an artist's private statement that you're looking at that was conceived in another location and has to be taken just on the value of its form, removed from the site. Now I think that's unfortunate. I mean, that's where the plop art situation comes in. But I think that, you know, this sense of place, the history of the location, that history could be going back millions of years as far as I'm concerned, and that space has more or less been—that space itself has been passed through over millennia. So that the spaces that these places are, you know, are important in themselves. And so that somehow the artwork should relate to that past. And possibly the future of what's going to happen in that area. But I don't know how to—

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Because it was just, you know, you had obviously discussed what you had thought made a successful sculpture, but beyond that.

JIM SANBORN: I mean, you know, it's the commissioning agency, the patron who donates the money and the accessibility. I mean, you know, I do a piece that's in a public space in a downtown area where there are lots of people walking around it, it's seen by hundreds of thousands of people. When I do a piece in the courtyard of the CIA, which is completely private, seen by a very small group; but it's been seen by millions of people—at least in image and content and scope. [00:10:00] I mean, you know, it all depends on where you're doing it and what public means. I mean my least public project was my most visible.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: So I mean, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

JIM SANBORN: But I think that's sort of—you can go to the strength of the object itself. And if the object is evocative or becomes [inaudible] evocative and not when it gets propelled into some other realm, in these days the Internet or whatever, and gets a far larger audience than it would've originally.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now yesterday you mentioned that at a certain point there was a 10-year gap between your public art and your private sort of studio/gallery installation work. Has that gap ever been resolved or caught up? And if so, when do you think that happened?

JIM SANBORN: No. If anything, the gap has widened. My public art has diverged further from what I'm doing now in my gallery work. That occurred partly, as I said before, because of

physical reasons of not working with heavy objects. I mean I'm somewhat unique in the field in that I do every aspect of my public art. Which means I design it, I make the model or maquette myself, I do the photography of the maquette, I do the presentation myself; I don't have assistants do it. There's nobody else involved in the design process except for my partner, Jae Ko, and she helps me build the models and this kind of thing. And offers, you know, intellectual support as well. And also technical support when I'm dealing with Asian languages. And that's important. [00:12:00] But aside from that, from digging the foundation and digging the hole in the ground, and bending the rebar, and installing the rebar, and pouring the concrete, and all of those things, I do all of those things myself. I don't use contractors. And it's the only way that I've been able to extract a large percentage of the commission price as profit. And I don't also then relinquish—I don't relinquish responsibility for the work to others; and, as a result, take chances with either the piece being injured, damaged, or not built correctly if I'm completely responsible for every aspect of the work. So that's important to me financially and intellectually. It ends up being a very pure process. That's the only way I've survived doing public art, is to buy that and spend, you know, 80 percent or 85 percent which is the usual amount that artists spend paying contractors, and the artist makes 15 percent—I would not be a public artist, or I would not have been a public artist, you know, for 30 years. It would never have happened. I would've had to teach or do something else. That's the only way I've been able to do it. And I don't mind doing it because I, you know, if you calculate the hourly rate that I invest in digging a hole in the ground, I get paid pretty well for digging a hole in the ground. [They laugh.]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you know—yes. I guess you're paid for your labor on a certain level as well as your vision.

JIM SANBORN: That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: This is a quick question about the IRS, the Martinsburg facility, is that there were two other artists on the project. And I wondered if you consulted or had any interaction with them even though they were in different areas. If you met or had any discussion about larger areas with them. [00:14:00]

JIM SANBORN: Only at the opening.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

JIM SANBORN: You know, I think by the walk-through in the beginning. We were all invited the same day on the walk-through. This was before the project started, the site visit. That's the only interaction we had. I mean, I am not really a collaborator, and I never have been. I'd rather work entirely on my own. I think there probably is value in collaboration in the art world. Certainly there are some artists and artist teams and whatever that have done very well. I think, you know, collaboration can bring a certain level of heightened expertise to a project because you're diffusing the responsibility amongst a couple of people instead of just one. But I'm hoping that the 30 years of experience that I've had and whatever engineering and technical ability that I had made up for my not drawing someone else into the project. I think that art by consensus is somewhat watered down and can be less effective. And if the artist conceives of an idea, he or she is certainly free to ask an opinion, but they don't necessarily have to follow it. Whereas if it's a true collaboration, then probably all the collaborators are making concessions in some way for, quote, "the greater good." That doesn't necessarily mean it's better art.

AVIS BERMAN: Just going to ask you a couple of questions about the *Kryptos* experience again [00:16:00]: You had said after the time that the CIA roused you and ABC News from the place, and you weren't allowed to be photographed, you did not come back to the CIA for 16 years.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you come back after that, after that period?

JIM SANBORN: I was asked to come. I was invited back to review a condition report that they had made on *Kryptos*. And to check on it to see how it was doing. I mean, certainly other people had gotten into CIA in those intervening years, other *Kryptos* fanatics. But especially before 9/11 there was a bit more openness on the part of the agency. So they did let some other people in. So I did get at least photographic reports of its condition that were in the media and on certain Internet sites where people were allowed in to photograph sections of

it. I wasn't allowed even to look around which I was sort of amazed at.

AVIS BERMAN: And since then you have been—you've gone back since but only to check.

JIM SANBORN: Only that one time.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay. Because I thought you had said in the last couple of months ago there was another invitation.

JIM SANBORN: That was it.

AVIS BERMAN: That was it. Okay. Now this is just because it was, to use the word cryptic, on the tape, I mean, you had mentioned off tape—but, you know, I had asked you if you had any regrets or changes about *Kryptos*, and you said no, you know, if it doesn't kill me. And I wondered if you just wanted to explain that, elaborate on that, for the tape.

JIM SANBORN: Well, it could only be an effect that perhaps people who are in the spotlight [00:18:00] or have high-profile media images have crazies that try to contact them or stalk them or whatever. Or it might be that cryptography brings out the crazies. It's very possible if cryptography itself, the John Nash Syndrome, *Beautiful Mind* kind of mind is sort of in some ways required for cryptography. And there is a certain level of madness involved in cryptography as there is a certain level of madness involved in making art and doing anything that's highly creative. Moments of, you know—most creative moments can be considered madness on some levels. And if you're going around thinking about something that hasn't been thought about before, you can, on the one hand, think, you know, oh, this is a strange moment. I thought of something that hasn't been done before. You know, I mean just the act of doing that, you can be considered pretty whacko. But the bottom line is that over the years, I've received thousands of—and others—the CIA office, the multitude of *Kryptos* websites that have received emails. And I get letters routinely on my doorstep that are threatening. And you know, just a few days ago I got an email that was forwarded by somebody who is concerned that there was an individual looking for a closure event regarding me, and he was in Georgetown, and he had a weapon. So that kind of thing is what I'm talking about.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Well, I just wanted to put that on the tape, you know, that there had been actual death threats as opposed to—you weren't making some overly dramatic—you weren't making a melodramatic statement. [00:20:00]

JIM SANBORN: Right. Yes. No, I wasn't, unfortunately. [They laugh.]

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. Okay. Now I want to switch to the work that began that you're still involved with, which as you said yesterday when you were on a trip to New Mexico, you, quote unquote, "discovered" Los Alamos.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And you began working on the idea—the birth of the atomic bomb or the Atomic Age, which occurred, actually the first was the year you were born.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And I wondered how you decided you were going to do that because you had sort of said you had had it with secrecy and all that. What changed your mind? Or what made you go back to a certain, you know, that theme?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I mean I had concluded my projection work over a three-year period, and had become—it had become tiresome and physically grueling, doing the projections in the western U.S. and Oregon and Ireland. And so I guess I was looking for something, my next thing. And at White Sands National Monument I did pick up a pamphlet about the Trinity Site. And the Trinity Site was that site 20 miles north—or maybe 30 miles north—of White Sands National Monument. White Sands National Monument is really an outrageously beautiful place. And the fact that this horrendous explosion happened not far from there in a remote, beautiful valley [00:22:00]—although it's called the Valley of Death, I believe, in Spanish—I thought it was ironic and fascinating all at once. And in this pamphlet I picked up, there was an image of some parts of the detection devices for the explosion and a description of the site where the explosion occurred. And these devices were sort of thrown

together with cardboard, paper, and looked like duct tape. And I really liked the looseness of the—you know how sort of haphazard yet—

AVIS BERMAN: Deadly? [Laughs.]

JIM SANBORN: Yes, it was haphazard and beastly all at once. And so I really liked that idea. And so I read a lot about it. Of course, the seminal book on the subject, Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. And also *Dark Sun* were two of the first things that I read. And Rhodes's account was particularly detailed and allowed me to work from his sources. And I had spoken to him and asked him who the best sources of information were on the subject. And dealt with some other people: a fellow named Howard Morland, who had made a model of the hydrogen bomb in the '70s. And had had a magazine article in *The Progressive* magazine, redacted by the government. And then subsequently un-redacted. So he succeeded in more or less exposing a secret program which I thought was also fascinating. [00:24:00] And so the more I got into it, the more interested I got in the subject. And I finally reached a truck driver in Milwaukee, John Coster-Mullen. And John Coster-Mullen had for the previous 10 years, at least, been studying both the Little Boy and the Fat Man devices and had compiled a tremendous dossier on the exact measurements of those original devices. And the Trinity device was the one that was detonated in the Jornada del Muerto Valley—the "journey of death"—valley in New Mexico. I guess it was July 16, 1945 at five a.m.

And that same device, Fat Man, was exploded over, I guess it was Nagasaki later. So I chose to work with the Fat Man device because John Coster-Mullen was working on the Little Boy device, which is the other device, and which was exploded over Japan. And so I more or less set about to recreate the original laboratory environment for this project at Los Alamos. So I made several trips to Los Alamos in over about a five-year period of going back and forth a lot. I was able to procure a lot of the original—not a lot of—but a lot of original equipment from the Manhattan Project that had been sitting in physicists' basements for 50 years. Because the laboratory had, in the 1950s, started selling off their scrap materials.

In the 1950s they were very liberal [00:26:00] about allowing pieces of the bomb prototypes and things to be sold off as scrap metal. And so the physicists who went to these sales, a lot of these physicists from the 1940s from Los Alamos just chose to remain in Los Alamos and live in the area around Los Alamos. And so these guys were—they were mostly in their 80s when I arrived at the door. I put up notices at retirement homes and coffee shops around Los Alamos, asking if anybody has any pieces of the Manhattan Project, I'd be willing to exhibit them in a museum.

The problem was is that museums in general, the Smithsonian included, had exhibited nuclear material previously. Their experience with the *Enola Gay* was not a positive experience. And so the *Enola Gay* was removed and not put on display downtown in Washington, but was later displayed at the Udvar-Hazy Center—I think this was Loudon County, Virginia—near Dulles Airport. So our nuclear past, the dropping of the atomic bomb and all of this, was more or less neglected for ethical reasons. But it was still an important part of our history and I thought something that should be revisited. In addition to revisiting that, I felt it was important to revisit what the difference was between pure science and technology. And so that interface between those two things, pure science and technology, is what has occupied my conceptual artistic life for the past 10 years at least.

So I set about collecting all of this material [00:28:00] and then recreating from photographs, which would be unavailable today after 9/11, photographs from Los Alamos, that they were released to me, photographs that I found from other sources. The KGB had a lot of—the design of the atomic bomb wasn't, quote, "classified" in the former Soviet Union or actually even in Russia. So you could get bomb dimensions and things. And so I more or less built the first ever highly accurate model of the first atomic bomb for this installation. And worked for about six years on the project. And then finally exhibited the show at the Corcoran Museum. And then it went to the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, where I took the president of South Korea through the show. And more or less attempted to show it at Nagasaki. But it was still too raw a nerve for them to exhibit.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: And so that whole secrecy thing became again important to me, albeit it was a very different kind of—it was an institutionalized kind of secrecy. I mean, it's a different

thing to keep a code secret than it is to keep a nuclear secret. And the idea behind doing this show, you walk a very fine line between the Right and the Left. The far Left and anti-nuclear movement is intent on exposing our nuclear secrets because Einstein was an example of the thinking. And he felt if there were no secrets, there's no reason for a defense establishment. And if you don't need a defense establishment, and if everybody has the information, then you have a level playing field [00:30:00], and there's no reason to go, you know, committing espionage, having wars, all that other stuff.

Well, you know, a lot of that changed in 9/11. And there are hostile countries desperately trying to find these secrets out. But at the time it wasn't that way. And I think the anti-nuclear movement, and John Coster-Mullen and Howard Morland in particular, are still intent on exposing these things because it was of value to do so because it reminds people of what was involved—it reminds people how easy it is to build an atomic device and how easy somebody else other than physicists can build an atomic device. And so that the only way to—the only deterrent for nuclear weapons is to hold them absolutely securely or destroy them. No other option is valid. So destruction or absolute containment is the only way to end nuclear weapons.

On the other side, I got a tremendous amount of information from the far Right, the keepers of the weapons themselves. So I had to walk a fine line between those, the liberal and the conservative establishment in doing what I do—as any researcher of any subject needs to do. And it impressed upon me the need. I mean, it sort of impressed upon me the value of the project I did at CIA. The fact that I did the project at CIA, I did *Kryptos*, certainly assisted me in my *Atomic Time* endeavor and the current one that I'm working on now. Because I did have a track record on working with a very thorny subject. And was able to utilize information from two diametrically opposed camps. [00:32:00] And that was important to me. So anyway. So I worked on *Atomic Time* for a very long time.

Then that, once I finished *Atomic Time*, I cast about for the next project and discovered—or actually remembered from Richard Rhodes's book that one of the seminal events in the building of the atomic bomb was the first fissioning of uranium. And incidentally, along the way, Richard Rhodes and I became pretty good friends. And Richard came to Gwangju Biennale. He came to Gwangju and helped work on the Biennale there. Then Richard and I were on a panel together at the Corcoran Gallery for the opening of *Atomic Time*. And he's also got a new project out of that, he told me, about nuclear things. And he's starting a book tour now this week, I think.

Anyway, so I noticed that the Carnegie Institution in Northwest DC, in a quiet residential neighborhood, had a department known as the Department of Terrestrial Magnetism. And they had built a large electrostatic particle accelerator to do nuclear studies of the structure of the atom. And they started building a machine in the 1930s, mid-1930s, not long after Robert *Van de Graaff* had designed the first one. And that machine was used for nuclear studies for a very short period of time at MIT. But the machine itself was difficult to operate, and it was very large. [00:34:00] So when it was discovered in Europe that uranium had the unique property of, when it was bombarded with neutrons, the nucleus of uranium split, and for every neutron that went into the nucleus, two came out. So you got two for one. You got a free neutron from every atom inside that nucleus.

That was a tremendous thing because of the billions and billions of atoms that are inside a tiny piece of uranium. And if each one of those atoms released a free neutron for every one that went in, you all of a sudden had free power. And if you just got enough uranium together—and uranium does give off neutrons itself; so every once in a while these neutrons go out. So if you put enough uranium together in one place, roughly a cubic shape maybe 25 feet by 25 feet by 25 feet, and it's a natural uranium that comes out of the ground, and you put it all together, it will spontaneously fission and create intense heat. And that's what became a nuclear reactor. So the first reactor was built in Chicago by Enrico Fermi. And that was the first nuclear reactor.

Well, around the discovery of the fissioning process, the original fission was actually done in a petri dish. It was done with a tiny piece of, I guess, piece of radium and a piece of beryllium metal. And basically, it was done in a small container. So let's just say it was done on a Friday in Europe. [00:36:00] And the news traveled by telegraph around the world. And at the same time, that weekend, on Saturday and Sunday, there was a conference in Washington on nuclear physics, in which Enrico Fermi and Niels Bohr and Edward Teller and the largest names in nuclear physics had attended. It was put on by the Carnegie Institution.

And it was a symposium. And all of a sudden this news came through. And one of the papers that was being presented at the symposium discussed the possibility that uranium could be fissioned.

And so that day it was realized that that was a possibility, the physicists at the Carnegie Institution that had this machine they'd been building for five years said: Hey, listen. Let's try our machine to see if we can duplicate the process with a particle accelerator. And this machine at the Carnegie, the atom-smashing machine, which they chose to call the atomic observatory—that one there on the wall; they called it an atomic observatory because they didn't want people to know that it was actually splitting atoms and giving off massive amounts of radioactivity. So they called it an observatory like an astronomical observatory.

So the atomic observatory actually—they fired up on that Saturday and got a uranium-lined container and were able to fission uranium with the particle accelerator that Saturday. And invited over Enrico Fermi and Edward Teller and Niels Bohr to that basement accelerator room to witness this happen. [00:38:00] The fact that they were getting radiated didn't seem to matter to these physicists. The radiation at the time was fairly significant where they were in particular. But it was relatively harmless because of the amount of time they were in there.

So I thought that that was an amazing event. And I went about researching that event and the machine extensively at the Carnegie library where they had the original manuscripts and the physicists' notebooks. And so I took those—I took a camera in and photographed all of those notes and drawings, and then enlarged the drawings full size so that I could reconstruct the machine. And so basically over the last three-year period I've rebuilt that particle accelerator and have installed it on an island that I've had for about five years in the Chesapeake Bay, so that I have enough acres removed from people. And I have a fairly secure environment where people won't accidentally come in contact with my activity. And so I succeeded this past January in fissioning uranium on a very small scale, the scale that they fissioned uranium at the Carnegie using the same machine, basically, of my own building. But it was more or less the same proportions and the same ion gun and the same target material. And they used a cloud chamber to visualize it.

So basically, I succeeded January and then have been documenting the event ever since down at the island. At this point, its first venue, which I've just found out about it, if everything goes right, it's going to be the Biennale of the Americas in Denver this coming summer. [00:40:00] So the machine is about 28 feet high and generates about two-and-a-half million volts and fissions uranium. So it's a really gorgeous machine. But again, this was all pure science. And this machine predated the atomic bomb. But the atomic bomb would not have been possible without the results of this machine and fissioning uranium. Fissioning uranium on a large scale is the way you enrich uranium and ultimately, in a nuclear reactor, you can make plutonium. And with particle accelerators you can also make plutonium. And so tiny amounts of these things were the way the scientists at Los Alamos were first able to build the atomic bomb. So that's basically my latest project and will probably carry on for another couple of years hopefully with it being shown in various venues.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. Well, in other words, also, though, scientists, Bohr and Fermi, they saw—in other words they saw it could be done.

JIM SANBORN: That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: So it was the—

JIM SANBORN: It was proof positive that it could be done. And it was proof positive that it could be done with a particle accelerator as well. Which meant if you could do it with a machine, then you could make all of these things. You could make plutonium. You could make uranium. You could make artificial elements. Before that point the elements that were available were all naturally-occurring elements on the earth. By the discovery of the fact that you could bombard an element and make other elements, trans-uranic elements or you could make elements related to uranium but were modified by the bombardment, you could make synthetic elements, most of which were radioactive but were unseen in nature. [00:42:00]

And that was important, and, at the same time, absolutely scary because you created—you more or less have created a monster. And that monster could be used for curing cancer, but



that monster could also be used for dirty bombs, nuclear weapons, and everything else that's negative about it. So that interface, that moment in time I felt was best visualized by this particle accelerator which was the first, what is called, Big Science Project. Now we have the Large Hadron Collider in Europe, which is a gigantic version of what I built—what was built—and what I recreated—in 1935.

AVIS BERMAN: What did you say that was, the—

JIM SANBORN: The Large Hadron Collider in Europe.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. How did you get uranium?

JIM SANBORN: Well, you can buy it on the Internet. Yes. I mean, I bought it before 9/11. I think you can probably still buy it as samples. Yes. There's a thing called United Nuclear, and they have a little bit of it. What they are is pieces left over. The U.S. military uses literally tons of what's called depleted uranium or uranium-238. Uranium-238 is used for two things: It's used for many things, but it's the heaviest of substances, uranium is. And so basically the races—what is it called—the sailboat races in the—

AVIS BERMAN: America's Cup.

JIM SANBORN: In the America's Cup, some of them used depleted uranium in the hulls of their—in the large heavy keel of their ships to keep them upright because it's small and dense. [00:44:00] Jet airplanes use uranium as weights on their flaps to keep their flaps down. And it's also used in weapons for destroying tanks because it has the property that if you take a piece of uranium-238 and you hit it really hard against something, it catches fire. It's naturally pyrophoric. So what happens is you shoot a projectile at a tank—you shoot a projectile, a uranium projectile, at an armored tank, and it burns its way through anything. And it burns its way through to the inside of the tank where it sets off all the ordnance inside the tank and blows the tank up from the inside. It also pollutes the entire site and the tank and the land and the humans and anybody hit by it, by a piece of uranium. And that uranium stays with them and stays radioactive for about 1600 years. So all through Iraq, Iran, Vietnam, and everywhere else there are these radioactive sites, thousands of them, on which kids are playing and people are, you know, living with daily from the dispersion of radioactive metal 238. So it was easy to get a little piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Before when we were talking, you were mentioning *Atomic Time* and other we should go back to. And you were saying how, you know, weaving between the Right and the Left. And also things changing since 9/11. How did 9/11 affect your work or your attitudes towards it?

JIM SANBORN: Well, I was here that day, and I was at my coffee shop. [00:46:00] And all of a sudden people started screaming and saying, You have to see this! And they had a television set inside the coffee shop. And we ran inside and watched the World Trade Center planes. And about that same moment we heard an explosion, and we saw a large column of smoke coming up from the south, which was where the plane hit the Pentagon. And I raced over to where I was living at the time, my studio. We didn't know if there were going to be more planes or whatever. But it was the only place that I was living which is in any way secure. So I went over there to listen to the rest of it. Also it was like I had a high vantage point to see what was going on. And so—but from that moment on, and continues today, my sources of information that I had depended on for years were closed off. And I would not have been able to do *Atomic Time* after 9/11. It would have been a thousand times more difficult—a million times more difficult—because the sources of information were shut off. So I'm glad I did what I did when I did it. I'm glad I worked with the uranium when I worked with it because I couldn't work with it anymore more or less on a large scale.

As part of *Atomic Time*, I had gone around uranium mines in the United States. And I'd also collected uranium from the areas around the world that supplied the uranium for the first atomic bomb. And I took those pieces of uranium and attached them to pieces of four-by-five film and allowed them to irradiate the film to make an image. They're called autoradiographs, where the piece of uranium takes its own photograph. So I was able to get large pieces of uranium and also sort of expose the fact [00:48:00] that the Bureau of Land Management is very lax at controlling access to uranium mines. And that there are thousands of uranium mines all through the western United States, mostly in Utah, which were sort of wide open to the public. And people go in there all the time. And they're highly

toxic places to be around. So I just thought that was a fascinating thing. But I was able to use these pieces as part of my exhibition as well. A lot of those sources of supply had been closed off. Although there is now a recent [inaudible] from the Bush Administration which stated that all the uranium mines in the West could be reopened by whoever owned them. And uranium is now being processed in the United States after a long, long hiatus. And so they've more or less opened up Pandora's Box in the United States for uranium exploration and mining and refining. Which is a very sad state of affairs.

So that saddened me as a result of 9/11. Also saddened me that the sources of information and the device, the atomic time device that I had built, was more or less a dinosaur of atomic weapons. And so it was an historic object. It wasn't something that would be rebuilt today at all. And even if you had fissionable material, fissionable material like uranium or plutonium, it would be incredibly wasteful. You could build a weapon like this for far less effort, with far less fissionable material. So the fact that the design that I used is still classified, and even more classified now than it was when I did it, is a bit ludicrous. [00:50:00] And so—but the main thing is for researchers now it is much, much harder to talk about our nuclear history than it used to be.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, were you investigated after 9/11?

JIM SANBORN: Not that I know of. No. I know that people who I came in contact with were. And the people I got my depleted uranium projectiles from were surrounded on the day of 9/11. The guy who I got these depleted uranium projectiles from, the photograph, his home was surrounded by the ATF and the FBI that day because they knew that he held a large cache of uranium, although without—it was a little like having cannon balls without having any gunpowder. There's nothing you can do with it.

AVIS BERMAN: He had the shells.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, he had the shells. That's all. So anyway. So that's the way it transpired. So it's made research and made a lot of people's lives much more miserable. I mean, it's made, you know, Iraqi and Americans' lives very difficult. It's made everybody's life more difficult. But I felt as if my new project sort of predated all of that. So a lot of stuff I didn't have to put up with that I had to put up with with *Atomic Time*. So it seemed an appropriate subject. I don't know whether I'm going to go back further or go further forward from 1935 to 1939 in my next work. But I don't know yet. I haven't gotten that far.

AVIS BERMAN: Well. And the *Atomic Time*—at the *Corcoran* what kind of reaction did you get there? Because there's certainly all sorts of layers of Washington people who might not necessarily pay attention to conventional art but would—

JIM SANBORN: It was very—it was probably the best received, best reviewed artwork that's been shown in Washington in a long time. [00:52:00] I was very flattered and very fortunate that it was reviewed that way. And in general every review about it, short of the city paper, which has nothing—problem was the city paper reviewer was a former employee of Los Alamos. So he felt that any artist working with scientists was not an artist, was a scientist. So I like pushing the limits of what art is and what science is. And that's just what I do. And so if somebody has a difficulty with that concept, that's their own problem. But in general it was well accepted. It was particularly well accepted by the scientific community. And there are many scientific journals, the journals of the nuclear science industry, were very positive about it. Said it was the most accurate recreation ever done. And I was happy about that because I worked hard to make it accurate. As is the accelerator project. But I'm sure, again, that *Kryptos* had a lot to do with it. And that the CIA commission went a long way in insulating me from potential problems with what I've been doing for the last years.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess you have street cred on a certain high-flown level.

JIM SANBORN: At a certain level that's true. But I think that really is true of anybody—like Richard Rhodes, I mean, he was the one that impressed this fact upon me more than anyone, and I really respect him—is that he treads that fine line, you know, that razorblade edge between the Right and the Left and conservatives and liberals, and has to try to dance on both sides of the line consistently. [00:54:00] And so it's just part of doing good research. And I'm hoping I did good research. And I'm just presenting the facts. I'm not necessarily making judgments about what it is. I suppose by the fact that I have dredged it up, I could be accused of some sort of nuclear muckraking. But that's fine.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you're not the first. But you are making it three-dimensional.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And you called it—

JIM SANBORN: I feel as if I'm a three-dimensional—I'm a nonfiction artist.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. [Phone rings.] [Audio break.] I guess you are a nonfiction artist. But on the other hand, these are so elegant-looking. And maybe it's because maybe my little bias toward machine age or streamlined and the '30s, and that's when these were made. I mean, it all looks so elegant.

JIM SANBORN: Well, there are—I mean this is the thing that was very, very important to me. The *Atomic Time* catalogue is called *Atomic Time: Pure Science and Seduction*, and for a very good reason. Because I felt as if the experiments themselves were conceptually elegant. And the objects they created were physically elegant and required their hiring artists and jewelers to build them. The tiniest parts of the internal core of the atomic bomb were made by jewelers and hired by the Manhattan Project to do these things because a brute machinist was not able to do the finesse. At the time in the 1940s, machine work was very primitive compared to what it is today. [00:56:00] I had the advantage of being able to use higher technology methods to machine the pieces. So actually, my object was probably more—a more fine, better-looking, well-machined object than the original. But it was still—they were still all very beautiful objects. And in some ways—and sometimes I expanded on them. I mean I would take something like, you know, the piece, the device for determining critical mass, which was actually a fairly small object in a Los Alamos photograph. And I more or less inflated it to a larger object. Because it increased, I felt, the beauty of it.

So I was able to take certain aspects of the science and enhance them to make them more beautiful. Just the wires and cables and stuff that's on the floor, I arranged in sort of an Edvard Munch *The Scream* fashion because it tended to reinforce that kind of terror involved in it. I did include sound in the installation. And it was the sound of Geiger counters actually detecting radiation from uranium—or actually radium—in wristwatch dials. But it was actually real-time sound of radioactivity. And it was a sound that was prevalent and everywhere in these laboratories because it was the only way these people could protect themselves, or knew where not to step, or which path not to take, and how to shield themselves. So they were surrounded by hundreds of Geiger counters.

And that was the big deal. There were some lights involved. [00:58:00] But most of it was a sound. It was an aural experience inside these laboratories. The labs were generally fairly dark because they needed a blackout situation. You know, the buildings had very few windows because windows transmitted radiation. So they're mostly in solid cinderblock or concrete buildings. They used the old ice house at Los Alamos, which had very thick, stone walls to assemble the devices. So my re-creation of *Atomic Time* was more or less what the inside of the ice house looked like. It had no windows. It had drop lights over the displays. No big giant fluorescent lights at all. They didn't exist in laboratories. So they were very dark places that relied on sound for safety. And that's more or less what I tried to create as accurately as possible.

AVIS BERMAN: But I mean the Corcoran really got behind you. This was a terrific catalogue, I mean, too.

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess they didn't have—they were able to fundraise or they weren't—

JIM SANBORN: Well, yes, it was not easy though. The subject still was not easy to deal with. They were quite prepared with legal defense in case I was prosecuted because technically what I displayed was classified and still is in the United States. But I wasn't taken to task for it because my sources—there was an article about the guy who—there was an article in the *New Yorker* a few months ago about Atomic John. That was John Coster-Mullen, who was my major source, that was in *New Yorker* magazine. So John Coster-Mullen has done several things related to this. [01:00:00] But I was the first one to more or less take his measurements and make them three-dimensional. So in a way I more or less proved his theories of the way the things were assembled.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did he come and see the show?

JIM SANBORN: Yes, he came and stayed. And then people that attended— [Ringing sound.] I had Los Alamos scientists.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, do you need to get that?

JIM SANBORN: It's a fax. It's [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: I'm sorry, you had Los Alamos scientists.

JIM SANBORN: I had Los Alamos scientists who came to the show—people who had actually worked on the program and been in that room, and said it was the most chilling experience they'd ever had because it reminded them so strongly of what it was like when they were there. And so it was proven to be accurate. I'm hoping this [19] '35 accelerator will have the same effect. I don't know. It's a different kind of thing.

AVIS BERMAN: Well—

JIM SANBORN: I don't know of anybody—nobody is still alive that saw this. The last Carnegie person who was associated with this, and actually who was there, just passed away last year, which is unfortunate because he gave me a lot of the original stuff. And the Carnegie was very great about it. They allowed me—they gave me access to the basement room where Bohr and Fermi and everybody was. And the blackboards were still on the wall with Enrico Fermi's formulas for the event. And, you know, with his scrawlings on there. They're still there. But this is a dank basement underneath the big particle accelerator. And they were storing lawnmowers, contractors' two-by-fours, and then the old science equipment was just moldering away and rusting in dampness and all this stuff. [01:02:00] And so I said, "Listen, I mean, you know, what are you going to do with this stuff?" He said, "Well, I mean we're thinking about clearing it all out and getting rid of it," you know. I said, "Listen. Don't. I mean if you can give me some of these things, at least I can put it into the installation," you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JIM SANBORN: So they did. And that was great! But I don't go anywhere like that without my Geiger counter. [They laugh.] So when I walked into this room underneath, my Geiger counter kind of went off the chart. And so I started looking around the room. And on one of the walls there was a little wooden cabinet with two little doors. And I walked up to that and opened up the cabinet, and still in the cabinet from 1935 were the original chemicals—at this point highly unstable, highly radioactive. Polonium-210 which poisoned our Russian friend. Uranium nitrate, uranium hydride, uranium—all the compounds of uranium were in this cabinet because nobody wanted to get near it. And I don't think anybody ever opened those doors in 20 years, at least, because they didn't want to mess with it. Yet the building was open. So I know that a couple weeks later men in moon suits went in there and removed it all and donated it to that six-foot-thick granite room at the Smithsonian, under the Smithsonian History Building where Marie Curie's radium is. So I at least contributed to the historical preservation of toxic materials.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And possibly less exposure to other people.

JIM SANBORN: And less exposure to other people, that's right.

AVIS BERMAN: I love this. I never go anywhere without my Geiger counter. [Laughs]

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: No, you're probably more experienced than all the scientists who are there now.

JIM SANBORN: Well, there are none left. The hardest part of doing my project, my current project, was finding a scientist who was familiar with that kind of accelerator. [01:04:00] And I did finally find a guy who was absolutely, completely indispensable to my project, whose name was Steve Brown. And he works at NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center. And I found him through my friend Peter Wasilewski who I'd used for my lodestone project 20 years before. And he operates two or three accelerators. They're modern versions of mine. But

they still have some similar principles. He was available to me for two years. And made himself, on his own time, available to help me get this going and made it work. And then another fellow, a scientist named John Singer, of the Jos, J-O-S, Foundation. John Singer was very instrumental in helping me with the electronics involved in making this thing work. And then of course the Carnegie was very supportive. So those three institutions and people were really a big part of what I was able to pull off.

AVIS BERMAN: Did the Carnegie give you any funding or did anyone give you any?

JIM SANBORN: No. They just gave me the library, access to the library and support.

AVIS BERMAN: Did they realize you were recreating what the—

JIM SANBORN: Yes, I told them I was recreating the machine. I'm not convinced I told them I was actually going to do the experiment.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well—

JIM SANBORN: Which I did. I mean, fundamentally big science very often requires a gigantic machine to study an absolutely minuscule event on a microscopic level. So that's more or less what I did. I used a huge machine to study a tiny event. [01:06:00] And so by all standards, the amount of radioactivity produced—yes, there was significant radioactivity, but it wasn't of the highly penetrating kind that's going to injure anybody. I mean, nothing close to anything like a dirty bomb or anything like that. But there is a large movement in the United States of people trying to build these things called fusors, which is a type of fusion that people are—lots of amateurs are building. So there are also like amateur science students in high schools building particle accelerators in their bedrooms. I'm, you know, quite appalled at that.

And actually, to tell you the truth, seminal experiences of my life were—there were a couple: My dad was in the Navy Reserve before the Library of Congress; I was about 12 years old, interested in science, and I wanted to build a cyclotron in my basement in Alexandria, Virginia. And I started assembling tons and tons of cinderblocks, not knowing a whole lot about it. And I asked him if he could take me to the—it's the Naval Research Lab on the other side of the Potomac River from the Navy Yard in DC along the Anacostia River. And they had a large nuclear water reactor there. And I remember going into the room. I had to wear a badge. I went into the room, and I climbed up on this set of metal stairs which you could see through; climbed down onto this catwalk which was directly over the nuclear reactor. And down there under the water, maybe 50 feet down, was this deep blue glow.

I stood there and looked down through my legs and past my feet at this blue glow. And it was just the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. [01:08:00] Then we proceeded to another room on the other side, through another door, to a Van de Graaff generator just very similar to the one that I'd just built out in this field. It's since been destroyed. But it was still being used as a particle accelerator to study atomic physics. So that experience was fascinating, and it was very influential to my doing this project.

And I also had another friend who operated a nuclear reactor for the Bureau of Standards in Gaithersburg, Maryland. They had a reactor out there which I visited. Then there was another reactor. Actually, they had a reactor at the University of Maryland Department of Physics. And I did get assistance from one of the scientists at the University of Maryland and took a tour of their facilities for particle accelerating. And so it's been an interesting three-year project. But it's been very hard. I built the machine in probably two years, and it took me an entire year to make it operate. And it was a very frustrating experience day after day after day working with this thing and then finally getting it to work.

AVIS BERMAN: But you must have—I mean, but now it sounds like, you know, you're far enough along that you can see—

JIM SANBORN: Yes, it's pretty much over. I mean I'm in a documentation phase, both producing videos and stills and images and installations about what I've worked on for three years.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now I wanted to ask you that besides *Kryptos*, what do you consider your most pivotal pieces that you've made? [01:10:00]

JIM SANBORN: *Coastline* [1993] for the National Oceanic & Atmospheric headquarters, a museum about the ocean, in Silver Spring, Maryland, which was a large wave pool. That was able to recreate the sound and feeling of being at the ocean in a downtown area. And I was very happy about the way that piece turned out. I'm hoping it's still operating the way it was, you know, that I designed it. It takes a good deal of maintenance, something that scale and that technical. But it certainly worked beyond my wildest dreams. Although I made a working model of it, very precise working model of it to be sure it would work. And I worked with a wave engineer, who was one of the [inaudible] wave engineers in the world, on how to design a tempest in a teacup, which is what I did. So it makes it look as if you were dealing with, you know, many feet of water, tons of water, when in fact you're only dealing with about 25 inches of water. And I think that piece and *Kryptos*. I don't know if there's anything else.

I did like the MIT projection on the floor of the Microbiology Department; I was happy about the way that one turned out. And I'm happy about the way the piece works in Fort Myers, Florida, the projection cylinder, and how it illuminates and revitalizes the downtown area of Fort Myers. I felt like I had done some sort of service—or assisted them in trying to make a somewhat bleak, forgotten downtown into something much more dynamic. [01:12:00]

And I think some of the other pieces for universities I think are pretty good teaching tools and are instructive. I know my piece down at—I did a piece for the Department of the—what is it?—Energy, Coast and Environment; they all seem a bit working against each other. But it was at Louisiana State University. And I did a piece—I did two projection cylinders and two screens for them that are very effective on a circular building. And that piece was about—because the department is the Department of Energy, Coast and Environment, it was more or less about wetlands, offshore oil rigs, drilling, and the environment. So I chose to do a work that more or less described and listed all the occasions throughout written history of oil spills that occurred naturally, which man had nothing to do with. And this occurred over hundreds of years. And so I got firsthand accounts in Greek and Russian and Arabic and Latin of explorers from Herodotus on through various other people who described massive oil spills. And eruptions of explosive gases from the earth which either injured people or would cure them and were at sacred sites where gas and water exited caves. [01:14:00] So it was sort of about Mother Nature doing this as well.

AVIS BERMAN: And yesterday on the tape you alluded to a book project you were doing. You said you can read certain things in my book. Would you like to summarize that for a few minutes?

JIM SANBORN: Yes. I mean, I guess what precipitated that—I mean, *Kryptos* continued to have this fairly active life. And there have been many articles written about it. But the last article in *Wired Magazine* was written by a writer named Steven Levy. And he's a Manhattan-based writer who is very savvy and a very smart guy. And frankly one of the only writers I know—even including Richard Rhodes—who is capable of describing an extremely technical, difficult subject with a clarity that even I could understand. So he wrote the *Kryptos* piece, and he's going to be writing a foreword to my book about *Kryptos*. And that piece apparently stimulated yet again another massive wave of Internet interest in *Kryptos*.

That stimulated a New York literary agent to call me and ask me if I would do a book about *Kryptos*, which I've agreed to do. It's more or less *Kryptos* from the source, which is what I was going to call it. And it's my story of how *Kryptos* was developed and what my inspirations were, what my earlier inspirations were for writing the plain text. And also it's connection with *The Da Vinci Code*, a sort of grudging connection with *The Da Vinci Code* book. And the crazy, truly insane response to *Kryptos*. [01:16:00] And hopefully I'm going to publish many of the wild responses to people who tried to decipher *Kryptos* but didn't get it—but still their decryptions are interesting reading nonetheless.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I was really surprised when you had said yesterday that the NSA, that they were all trying to get it. That they were so invested in, you know, decoding this. Whereas you would think, oh, this is a work of art by an artist, and they would've been more relaxed about it. But I guess it isn't in—

JIM SANBORN: Well, you know, the reality is—I mean, cryptography is probably the most closeted of endeavors. It is done in secret. It is done in private. It is just absolutely a private endeavor. It did involve teams of people during the Enigma, you know, the decryption in England. But in general, it's a very private thing. And cryptographers are notoriously private

people who don't have exciting lives. Actually, an exciting life is anathema to a cryptographer because they have to keep secrets. Anybody who has to keep a massive amount of secrets doesn't have a lot of friends. They just don't. They don't have social lives. They don't have a lot of stuff. So all of a sudden cryptography became cool. And *Kryptos*, I think, really helped make cryptography cool. And cryptography became a leisure endeavor, where people—as you were saying earlier, crossword puzzles and this kind of thing. There are puzzles and all that have been around. Code puzzles have not been as obvious as other kinds of puzzles. But now cryptography is cool and trendy. [01:18:00] And there are a lot of people, especially Internet geeks, finally found a home in cryptography. And so it sort of created this worldwide phenomenon that has this life of its own on the Internet, of which I was largely not privy until fairly recently.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, also think of all these people who are writing software. I mean there's a whole industry writing codes.

JIM SANBORN: Writing codes. It's all about writing codes.

AVIS BERMAN: So that's a whole group of the population that never existed before—

JIM SANBORN: That's right. Never existed.

AVIS BERMAN: That would be much more involved with this or would see it as a neighboring activity.

JIM SANBORN: Yes. Absolutely. So in that way it was the right piece at the right time. And maybe it didn't seem like it the first couple of years. But certainly in the 1990s it came to a fore and now is propelled into, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: I just want to make something clear for the tape. You used the term plain text. That means versus encoded text?

JIM SANBORN: That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: Because that's—you don't just say text.

JIM SANBORN: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

JIM SANBORN: Yes, but I mean, I had to compose several paragraphs, which they are called K1, K2, K3, and K4. That text written in English by me and also Howard Carter are the elements that are—K1, 2, 3 have already been deciphered. K4 has not been deciphered. It's the plain text that I have copyright on. And the encoding system isn't copyrightable. But it doesn't matter because frankly, you know—anyway, since I have copyright on the plain text, then there is some proprietary owning of the text, which thank God, some part of it I can own and am able to control [01:20:00], so other interpreters don't try to imply that my artwork means something that it does not. And that is a challenge. There are people who decipher *Kryptos* and say—they call up the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or a major network and say: This is the decryption of *Kryptos*. I don't care what Sanborn says. He's just lying. This is actually the real thing. And sometimes they come at it with lawyers. They bring lawyers with them. They bring all this stuff. They don't want to divulge it. They only want to divulge it on air. Okay? And it's created a big problem for networks and newspapers in order to separate the wheat from the chaff.

So anyway that will go on hopefully for a century, long after my death. And, you know, I have made provisions for if somebody does decode it after I'm gone, there are provisions in place for acknowledging that. But, you know, you can acknowledge that, and then 50 years later it'll be forgotten and hopefully be dredged up again. And somebody else will be interested in it. So that's all. And the plain text itself is cryptic and alludes to things beyond *Kryptos*. And that's also part of it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Kind of like the Oracle—

JIM SANBORN: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —of Delphi.

JIM SANBORN: Or anything else.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Anything else you'd like to add?

JIM SANBORN: I don't think so. I think we've got it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I think we're pretty much done then. Thank you very much.

JIM SANBORN: You're welcome.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]