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Yael Greenberg: Today is Friday, June 27th, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, Oral History Program Assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio in the Tampa Campus Library with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni in order to commemorate 50 years of university history. Today we will be interviewing Mr. Vincent Ahern, who came to USF in 1976 as a student. He received his MFA degree in 1982, and currently he is the coordinator of public art for the Institute for Research in Art for the University of South Florida. Good morning, Mr. Ahern.

Vincent Ahern: Good morning.

YG: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa, and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

VA: Well, I had received a degree from Appalachian State University in 1971, thinking that I'd eventually go into law. Over the course of the '70s I debated back and forth on what I actually was going to study in graduate school; eventually coming to the conclusion that I wanted to pursue art. I had spent some time out in San Francisco, visited a number of museums and became intrigued with what was possible with the arts. After coming to the conclusion that I wanted to study art I started looking for universities. And the track record of the University of South Florida, particularly with graphic studio intrigued me. And I decided to pursue an undergraduate degree here. I continued on, I did my master's degree, and as you just mentioned, finished that up in 1982.

YG: What kinds of things in the early '70s were you hearing about the art program at USF?

VA: Well, one of the things that really intrigued me was that they were bringing the major contributors in the field of the arts to the university to do projects that involved the faculty, but also allowed the students access to these artists. And at that point in time, obviously a more mature individual than your typical freshman, if you will, realized that that was a wonderful opportunity to get engaged with the very core of what was happening in the arts. And so that access to professionals that had arrived at a degree of achievement in the field really intrigued me. And that's what brought me to USF.

YG: Can you tell me a little bit—who were some of these professionals in those early days?

VA: Sure. Sure. People like James Rosenquist, who's continued to have a long and lasting relationship with the University of South Florida. Currently there's a retrospective of his work underway with the Guggenheim Museum. It opened in Texas just a few months ago. It will travel onto New York, eventually on to Bilbao, Spain; A major opportunity, obviously, for any artist to have a retrospective and to have it organized by one of the major museums. That's clearly a barometer of his accomplishments. There were others. Phil Pearlstein was here, Bob Roshenberg. So, really, the major contributors that were available were brought in to graphic studio at that point in time. And as I said, that intrigued me.

YG: Can you tell me the first time you saw the university campus as a student? What did it look like? What did some of the immediate surrounding areas look like as well?

VA: You know, this is remarkable because of what I've ended up doing with the university, but I clearly recall the very first day that I stepped onto campus and looked at the vast open spaces. And at that point in time had acquired a bit of a background in art, so I realized there were opportunities in the environment for sculpture or for art, and so my very first impression was, Wow. Where's the sculpture park? That this is a great opportunity to build permanent works in the environment. And passing thought, but yes, the vastness of the university really took my breath away.

YG: Okay. You graduated; you went on from an undergraduate degree to a master's degree in Fine Arts, and you graduated in 1982.

VA: That's right.

YG: How did you come to be, eventually, several years down the road, the coordinator of the public art program here at the university?

VA: Well, the very last semester that I was here as an undergraduate I had the opportunity to work on a public art project with Alice Acock. It was a temporary work that was done, largely created by the students under Alice's direction. And eventually represented Alice in the 1981 Whitney Biennial. But as I said, the work was temporary in nature. It was constructed and a few years later it was taken down. So I sort of put my foot in the world of public art at that point in time. As time passed on, my degree was a Master's in Fine Arts in the area of sculpture.

So, my interests obviously lay in sculpture, which is largely what is done in the public art realm. And both in terms of technical background and in terms of our historical background, that suited the needs of the university to a T when they began creating public works. It happened that Margaret Miller, who was the director of the museum at that point in time, 1989, needed to find someone to run the first public art project that was to be commissioned for the campus. This was a work by Elan Zimmerman for the H. Lee Moffitt cancer center.

And, initially, Margaret asked me if I would assist her in developing the contract that was—we needed to put a contract in place with Allen for the project, and the university was struggling with this because the model for contracts for permanent structures is architectural in nature, which is a very extensive, detailed contract struck with a very large firm. Artists aren't very large firms, they're individuals, and essentially it's a cottage industry. And so, what's happening is the university had this humongous contract, the artists couldn't accept all of the responsibilities and liabilities associated with such a contract, and so, they were back and forth really, for over a year.

And so, she asked me if I would meet with the university attorneys and with the artists and see if I could function as kind of a mediator. And I did that. We were able to come to terms that worked for both the university artists within a month of fulltime attention. At that point in time Ellen—I had gained a kind of rapport with Ellen and she asked if I would be willing to manage the project. The reason that she needed that assistance is she was doing two other projects simultaneously with the one at USF. And they were both on the west coast, one in Los Angeles and one in the San Francisco area. So, the time that you would have to devote to day in, day out details of this project simply wasn't available. I agreed, and we were off and running.

I quickly gained an awful lot of enthusiasm for what was possible in the public realm. Unlike most art, which is shown in galleries and museums, public artworks is shown in the public environment, and therefore there's this public interaction. And the folks that typically don't come into a museum do encounter public works. And the kind of dialogues, the kind of education that I saw happening before me as we constructed this piece really left a lasting impression. Thinking that now there's a great value, that now works in the public realm can give to society.

And so I became enthusiastic, we had other projects coming up. Ellen was quite satisfied with the work that I had done as was Margaret, and so she asked me if I would continue and organize future projects, and I said sure. And so we were off and running. I was hired initially on soft money and then eventually a faculty line was developed so that I could continue on in the position. And then 13, 14 years later, here we are.

YG: Prior to you becoming the official coordinator of the public art program here at the university, what did the university do with public art projects? Because I know that there were public art projects before 1989 at the university.

VA: Well, there were but there were very few of them. Joe Testa-Secca¹, as you know, was commissioned—a marvelous kind of history involved with that. But the very first projects that were done at the university were done in the same time frame that the very first buildings were being constructed and Mr. Testa-Secca received commissions for both the administration building and the science auditorium back in 1960. After that there were very few public art projects that none, that I'm familiar with, until legislation was passed by the State of Florida in 1979, establishing the Art and State Buildings Program.

This is a program where one half of one percent of any new construction funds are set aside for either the purchase or commission of artworks. So, obviously that set in motion, in a formal sense, the beginning of collection development in the public realm. However, it took the Florida Arts Council, which was responsible for setting up the guidelines, some six years to establish those guidelines. And so really, only two projects that I'm aware of occurred—three—prior to my assuming the role as coordinator of public art; and those were handled by Margaret Miller, who was also responsible for directing for the contemporary art museum. She quickly became aware of, as I had mentioned with the Ellen Zimmerman project that public art was going to be a fulltime responsibility and she couldn't do both that and direct a museum simultaneously, and thus the need for a position such as mine.

¹Joe Testa-Secca is an artist in Tampa and former University of Tampa professor.

YG: Why do you think—obviously there was becoming more of a need for somebody to take hold of these art projects. But why do you think that USF, maybe particularly in those early days, wanted public art on the campus?

VA: Well, I know that President Allen at one point in time said that the arts would be his football team. That he was a great supporter of culture and saw that culture would—in the arts—feed the environment that really we all come to expect from a university. And so my suspicion is that Dr. Allen had an awful lot to do with that. And then we were fortunate in that the early faculty members in the art department, people like Harrison Covington, who went on to become dean emeritus of the college, hired very early on and brought to the position great enthusiasm, great passion, great determination, and so developed a very significant program in the early '60s. So, that by the late '60s for instance, we have folks like Donald Saff² founding an institution that's become an internationally renowned graphic studio.

Out of this sort of determination, passion, and desire to build a significant arts environment for the Tampa Campus. So, I think it's a culmination or a confluence of the energies of a president with a great vision, early faculty with both vision and enthusiasm and energy, and then good hires that built a very strong program.

YG: Has that mission changed? Is the university interested in putting up public art for different reasons today than it was in those early days?

VA: Well, I think, you know I talk about my first days as director or coordinator of the public art program as my stealth years. And by that I simply mean that really not a whole lot of folks were paying attention to what kinds of projects we were taking on. And what we were trying to do is to, again, work with the very best artists that were out in the world. And so we brought in people that had established major careers in the field of public art and took on very ambitious projects. Projects that, if we limited ourselves to that one half of one percent, would not have been possible.

I think here an important fact to insert is that we have a collection now valued at approximately 2.5 million dollars. Of that expenditure, 1.3 million has come from gifts from the private sector. So we've really maximized the dollars available for public art. And to do so early on was to kind of take a risk. To say, well, if we're going to do this

²Donald Jay Saff is an artist, art historian, educator, and lecturer, specializing in the fields of contemporary art in addition to American and English horology.

let's do it right. And doing it right means that we're going to have to raise some additional funds. So let's select artists who can excite the community and take the chance that we get the monies necessary to build the project.

Now, obviously we couldn't build it without getting the money but we had already made an investment in time in these artists. We were fortunate in that the Tampa Bay area was extremely generous. We also developed other strategies that enabled us to expand the budgets of these projects. We used the intellectual resources of the university. It was a great treasure chest of individuals who contributed in kind gifts valued at tens of thousands of dollars. We talked to the architects for the facilities and planning, and also for the particular buildings. I said, "Look, you've got money for sidewalks, you've got money for lighting."

The artists could contribute these things. Perhaps we could take the money that's line itemed for those needs and put it in the public art projects. So, through a series of strategies and the generosity of the community, we were able to take on, as I said, very ambitious projects. When I now talk to my colleagues from around the country, and they are aware of the collection that we have because it's gained some national attention, and they realize what the budgets are for our startup for projects; they're astonished that we have the collection that we do.

So, again, I think a series of strategies, that willingness to carry on kind of the tradition started with President Allen, Harrison Covington, and others of, you know, pushing to be the very best we possibly could be. It has made it possible to develop the collection. Does the university build projects now for different reasons? Yes. The stealthy years are over. And in a real sense, the projects that we did, did come to the attention of the central administration. And they realized that they had in place now, gathering places, structures that really were having a very significant impact on the look and feel of the environment of the university and that these were places.

And often times the projects that we took on weren't just that. They weren't just objects, they were places that we were developing. And they were places that were being utilized by faculty, students, staff, visitors. They also realized that as any educator will, that a significant portion of education happens outside of the formal confines of the laboratory or the classroom. And we were providing places for those kinds of dialogues to occur and that kind of education to happen. And they weren't there. I mean, literally, when I came here I was impressed with the vast open spaces. I was also impressed with the fact that there wasn't a bench to sit on any place.

You walked a mile and a half across this campus through, at that point in time, a fairly hot environment with little shade from trees and no place to sit down. No place to be on campus. So, the university's changed their, well, I don't know if they've changed but they've evolved a sense of what this place should be. And one of the things that I know they want is for students to spend more time on campus. We've been able to give to the university not only aesthetically important projects, but I think developed places that allow students to stay on campus. So, yeah, I think in a way it has changed. We've also become a research institute and much of what we do in the way of developing projects is very much engaged in the forefront of research in our respective field.

YG: You mentioned the idea that the public art program at the university is gaining—is nationally recognized as a significant collection. In terms of other universities, such as similar to our size, particularly in Florida, how are we doing? Are we ahead of the curve? Are we right where we should be? Or are we—I don't necessarily think it's a competition but how do we stack up to other universities?

VA: Well, we are ahead of the curve. Not to pat myself on the back because this has been the cause of many people, including a number of presidents at the university. One of the things that we did before anybody else was hire someone fulltime, myself, to administer the program. When the legislation forming the Art and State Buildings program was passed, it was passed in such a fashion that projects could be funded. But there was little or no money to administer the program. And also no money to maintain the projects once they were done.

As I mentioned, I was hired on soft money. Money, in other words, raised by the Contemporary Art Museum because Margaret Miller, the director, also a visionary, recognized that the potential for this program was great but it was going to require someone to put their full time energies into developing it. And so we really led the way in terms of having a full time administrator for the public arts program. Even now, although other universities, the University of Florida, Florida State, to a limited degree, the University of Central Florida, has caught on. They've caught on from our model of having a full time administrator—administrator.

Other than that, it would be a voluntary basis. And these projects take years to develop. It requires not only that the administrator serve as a liaison between the myriad of people that get involved in the project. Subcontractors, folks from facilities and planning, folks from physical plant, obviously finance and planning; all of those components come into a project. And if you think of an artist coming from another city, out of state, having to deal with 30 or 40 individuals embedded in our system. It's a daunting task.

Over time, obviously, an administrator can become familiar with who these folks are and how to get things done, and so that role has been critical. But even more so, the ability of an individual to devote fulltime attention to the artists' ideas, one of the differences between art in the public realm and, again, the sort of work that you might see in a museum and gallery is that when we select an artist, we don't give them a check and say, Do your thing. And we'll all sit back and be amazed. It's a dialog. It's a dialog between a selection committee that is carried on in between meetings, obviously by the administrative program. So, that dialog between the public and the artist is one of those things that distinguishes development of work in the public realm.

You need a fulltime person to do that. Different artists have different needs. Some of them need help in identifying subcontractors, some of them need sort of ongoing encouragement pulling the ideas, if you will, out. Others simply need support in the fashion of, they've got an awful lot of things to get done and they can't handle it all themselves. Can you assist them? Of course we can assist them. Then we find ways to do that. As I've mentioned, we've turned to the university's resources: students, faculty, and staff have been involved in these projects.

Well, an artist doesn't have time, living in New York City, to identify a Jack Robinson, professor emeritus from archeoastronomy who spent three years of time working with the artist, Nancy Holt, on the project Solar Rotary to make possible, but I do. And we can have a wonderful experience with those people because they're involved and because we get to know them so personally, but also they have a wonderful contribution to give to the program. All of that's made possible by having someone who can focus on issues like that. So, that has put us ahead of the curve, if you will, in the State of Florida.

YG: Before we talk a little bit about the particular projects in the public art program. I want to see if you can take me through the process of a single project from the beginning stages to the end. How do you find an artist? Really, from conception to placing the actual piece of work on the campus.

VA: Sure, the very first thing that happens, I get a copy of the project schedule for facilities and planning for new facilities, including budget and time of implementation, and when construction will begin, when the architects will be hired and so on and so forth. And over the course of the last decade we've evolved a system with the director of facilities and planning that when that information is available and when we see we have a project coming up, I will typically meet with the director of facilities and planning and say, What's the opportunities here from an architect's point of view? What possible sites

might we be looking at? Obviously I have in mind the budget that we have going into it. And so I put the notion of opportunity together with budget and my wheels begin to turn.

Once that's happened we organize a committee, I organize a committee, and part of the organization of that committee is dictated by the guidelines that are produced by the program, or produced for the program by the Florida Arts Council. And it stipulates that certain individuals will be voting members of that committee. There are two art experts that I identify that will be voting members. The architect for the facility is a voting member, and an occupant is a voting member. The user agency representative, which is the role that I play on the projects, is also a voting member.

So, there are five of us who will vote. Well, that's fine but it isn't necessarily enough. There are other experts that really contribute to the project. One of those experts clearly is the director of facilities and planning. And so I always invite that individual to participate in the program. And under the years that Steven Giff was here, Steve came to every meeting that we had. We've now had a change in leadership in that position. Ron Hanke is the new director, and Barbara Donnely has assumed the role that Steve Giff had previously played.

Adrian Corter is the director of physical plant brings a wealth of information. And obviously is responsible for maintaining the university in the broadest sense. So, he is a real asset in our selection process and attends all meetings. He can help us identify a potential maintenance problem before we build it into the program. And so, again, an ex officio member for, non-voting, but very much contributing to the dialog, and it's a dialog we all hear. Sometimes, depending on the situation, a single occupant isn't enough. There may be a variety of faculty who have special interests. There might be students who have a special interest in the project we're going to undertake. So, we invite them to serve on the committee.

So, a committee is formed, bringing together all of these people. And the very first thing we do is that we decide what we're going to try to do with the project. We write a program, the same way that you would write a program if you were building a building. You know, do we want a fountain? Do we want a mural? Do we want an icon for a particular location? Do we want a garden? We make a description of what it is we want and then that's factored into the possible sites that are available and the size of the budget. And then another part of the equation comes into play. Where we're typically dealing with, as I said, the occupant is generally the head administrative official for the college that's getting the new facility. So, often times it's the dean or the someone that the dean has appointed in any rate. And we turn to that individual and say, Mhmm, we've got 37,000 dollars and our ambitions suggest we're trying to do something in the realm of

100,000 or 150,000. This means fundraising. Are you willing to make this a priority in terms of identifying a potential donor to contribute to this project?

And the answer to that question is fundamental with where we go next, which is to identify potential artists. Obviously if you have 160,000 dollars versus 37,000, you can look at more established artists. And also the scale of the project can be grander and so on. But really, it's which list of artists you can go to. Now, I don't mean to say that in demeaning fashion at all because I am equally proud of the projects we have done with regional artists as I am with the projects we've done with internationally renowned artists. But it gives one an indication of where they can go.

The people who identify potential artists are myself and the two art experts on the committee. Occasionally the architect for the facility will contribute notions. That's the general approach, and what we do once we've decided on what group of artists we're going after. And of course, it's based, in part on what kind of project we're trying to do as well as the budget, we then began to identify potential candidates, first by name, and then eventually I contact these people. Have a phone conversation with them, I tell them about the project, the timeline, the budget, you know, what we're trying to accomplish and see whether or not they're interested. If they are, I have them send me slides, catalogs, videos, whatever information we can gather to help the committee and I become more familiar with the artist and we proceed to review that material in a meeting.

We select, then, in that review meeting from slides, a presentation that I make, we select three finalists, typically, and invite those finalists in for a kind of interview. We have them make a presentation of the work that they previously completed and talk to us about their sense of this project, how they might approach it. Based on that interview we select a finalist and enter into an agreement for the design of the project, eventually leading to the fabrication of the project. So it's a two-part agreement: design, development, fabrication, and installation. Again, it models somewhat architectural model that one deals with when they're building permanent facilities but scaled down and worked in detail so that it works for again, the artist and the university.

YG: What is the average time length of a public art project from beginning to end?

VA: If I had to pick an average off the top of my head I would say three years. Some have been done in a shorter timeframe, some have taken longer. We've worked as long as four, five years on projects. Quickest we've ever done a project, there are smaller budgets that maybe we're commissioning a painting that maybe we'd complete that in a year. There's a good reason for the time frame. Part of it is the selection process that I've just run

through for you. But to kind of abbreviate an abbreviated fashion said, okay, we have a design development process. Well, that's another whole set of steps that's built in for very good reasons.

We want the artists to create projects that are site specific, site responsive, site sensitive. All those words slightly difference nuance in meaning but they all get back to the fact that what we're asking artists to do is to not dream something up in their studio without ever having seen the university or understand the college that it's being built for, the audience that will come to enjoy it or the history of this place, we want them to mine the history of the university, come to an understanding of what that site is in the broadest sense of the word. Not just the physical location but what it is in terms of discipline, what it is in terms of the history of that discipline, who the individuals are that are not only students but also faculty, if they're doing research, what that research is.

From this, amazingly, ideas, images emerge. Often times the artist is meeting with, let's say it's a science center, a group of scientists doing research. I could give you an example. Over in St. Petersburg campus, Ned Smythe³ did a project called *Our Shadow* based on the black dragon fish that lives a mile deep in the water and has this capacity to illuminate itself through a photochemical process. At that depth there's virtually no light, so it's lighting up the edges of its body, almost like neon light, to attract bait that it consumes. Well, this fish can't be brought up alive because the pressure changes from that depth to the surface would be such that it would crush the fish.

A researcher for the Knight Oceanographic Research Center was often doing research in the deep trenches in the Pacific, came into Peter Betzer's office, Dr. Betzer's office, the director of the center, the same time that I was there with the artist Ned Smythe. Ned was talking to the other scientists about what visuals come out of their images and he said, "I've got it!" Walking into the office holding up this videotape. He says, "Got it?" "What is it?" He said, "We've got a videotape of *idiocanthus paschola*, the black dragon fish." And he put it into the VCR and up pops this amazing fish.

Well, that fish becomes the core of the project that Ned does for the Knight Oceanographic Center lobby on a wall. 28 feet long, 8 feet high, and it's a mosaic on a cement surface on an Italian tile embedded with gold. He replicates the vision of the black dragon fish as you've seen on that photograph. It's accompanied by other elements; a, what he calls a seabed, a seeding area made from coral in a series of columns that rise up from the floor of the lobby. Again, utilizing coral, which of course, has the history of

³In St. Petersburg in 1994, Ned Smythe created the keystone sculpture and Venetian gold-tile mosaic *Our Shadow* in the newly built Knight Oceanographic Institute.

sea life embedded in it, to make a project that announces to the visitor at the Knight Oceanographic Center what it's about. And it kind of opens the door, if you will, for the visitor, the student, the faculty as they enter into that facility. A wonderful kind of merging of the site, in the broadest sense, and the artists' vision. It's this kind of phenomenon that continues to leave me very enthusiastic about what's possible, what's you know, public art.

YG: I want to move on to some of the specific projects.

VA: Sure.

YG: And in preparing for this interview and looking in old Oracle's, we came across the idea of *the Picasso*. If you could enlighten us a little bit about *the Picasso* because I know there is no Picasso art on campus, so, if you could talk about that.

VA: Sure. In 1971, '72, somewhere in that timeframe, Pablo Picasso gave to the University of South Florida the rights to build one of his metal maquettes. A piece called *Bust of a Woman*. And he gave those rights to the university promising to take no fee, but with the stipulation that Carl Nesjar, a Norwegian sculptor who would introduce Picasso to a means by which large scale sculptures could be created utilizing cement. The stipulation was that Mr. Nesjar would have to supervise the construction of the piece.

So, the university was very enthusiastic about the chance to build something that obviously would bring instant recognition, and planning as they were in that time frame, a major art center, decided to build a Picasso in conjunction with this arts center. I remember the date, 1972, '73 and if you're familiar with the history of the country at that point and time you realize we were experiencing a tremendous economic decline because of the gas crisis. People were in long lines waiting to get five dollars worth of gas, so on and so forth. And so the economy suffered.

Obviously, to build this project and to build the arts center would require that kind of generosity that I mentioned earlier, because at that point in time there was no art in state buildings funding. And so the funds to build the project, which at that point in time amounted to about \$500,000 had to be raised. We couldn't raise the funds. We did however do a number of things in that timeframe—the university did, that would eventually come to the surface in the early '90s. One of the things we did was an engineering study done by Griner Engineering by an individual who was hired as an engineer at the time, James Sawyer. He went by the name Tom Sawyer, like the connection to the literature.

At any rate, they created a series of maquettes. They obviously engaged Carl Nesjar in the discussion, and they created an engineering study for this project that was to be at that point in time, they were going to build it at 102 feet. It would have been large enough to have been seen from interstate 275 and would have obviously been a dominant structure on campus. Couldn't raise the money, didn't build it, and the files were gathered and actually archived in the galleries that eventually would become the contemporary art museum. In 1992, '93, somewhere thereabouts, Dr. Frank Borkowski was president of the university at the time.

I guess must have seen some of these old Oracles also because he approached Margaret Miller, and Margaret eventually myself with the possibility of reinvestigating the building of the Picasso. And we did that. One of the first things I did was to read the old files and, again, get an understanding of the folks involved and saw the name Tom Sawyer. And so I called Griner on the off chance that he was still employed there since he had so much early information, or information from the early effort, and he was. And he said, "Come on down."

You know, I thought I was going down to meet with an engineer and I ended up meeting with the president of the company, who never told me he was the president of the company, he just said, "Come on down." And anyway, he was very enthusiastic and agreed to support again the project and provide certain in-kind gifts, but we still were going to need significant funds. We also would need Carl Nesjar involved. So, we contacted him, Carl, as I mentioned, lives in Norway, and we invited him to come to the campus and work with us in terms of what it would take and where it might be sited and so on. So, we ended up doing a study that sighted the project adjacent to the Lifsey house, the president's home, that was under design and development at that point and time.

And then we still, obviously had the biggest hurdle to overcome, which, again, was funding. And so Margaret Millet led a group that went to Spain to talk with a number of foundations, obviously Picasso having been born in Spain is honored there in a number of ways, including foundations to support the use of his work and images. The visit was made and we had the possibility of some funding but we were looking at 1.5 million dollars. At this point in time my research had continued. One of the folks that I talked to was William Ruben, who had been the director of the Museum of Modern Art and shown the maquette for our bust back in the '60s.

And I asked for his input and he actually discouraged us. He said, "You know, Picasso—" at this point in time, Picasso died in the mid '70s. Had been dead for, obviously, a number

of years and to build a project that many years after his death might not be something that would end up garnering an awful lot of respect. Even though Picasso gave us the right, and even though Nesjar was still alive, he felt queasy about that idea and shared that sense of concern with me. Another even occurred in that same timeframe. Claude Picasso, who's Picasso's son, now living in Paris, contacted the university and was asking for a fee if we were to decide to build this project.

Now Pablo obviously didn't ask for any money but his son wanted some sort of finances to exchange hands if we were going to build it. And asked us to cease and desist on any further efforts until those arrangements were made. The culmination of Claude Picasso's request and the response from the art world, really in the form of William Ruben's comments, plus the difficulty of raising those kinds of funds and the consequences of spending those kinds of funds, that's an awful lot of money to spend on the arts. All three of those things came together to convince the president that we better not continue to pursue this project. And so, that's the history of the Picasso as it stands today.

YG: I would like to talk next about the Solar Rotary project. It seems to be a very popular place for students to hang out, if you will. I passed by it all the time. Can you talk a little bit about the unique features of it? Sort of give us a little description about the Solar Rotary project?

VA: Sure. Sure, it's a project by Nancy Holt, who was one of those artists who we, in the stealth years, identified and decided we would go after this very ambitious project. I think we had at the time 43,000 dollars to do the project. Eventually the project would cost a little over 100,000. So, Nancy agreed to take it on, designed Solar Rotary as we know it today, and then told us what it would take to actually get it built. And we realized he had a significant funding need. It coincided, the design of Solar Rotary, with the 100th anniversary of the *Tampa Tribune*. And so working with folks from development, we made an approach to the *Tribune* and they agreed to give us 57,000 dollars.

In return we—and it's really the first time we did it. We realized that's more than 50% of the budget, let's give them a naming opportunity. So, Solar Rotary, there's a plaque there that credits the artist and provides the title. But there's a second plaque there that identifies the site as the *Tampa Tribune* plaza. So, we had the funds to build it. The piece itself is an amazing piece. It functions as a henge. Meaning that, like Stonehenge, it utilizes the movement of the Sun, *vis a vie* a particular spot on Earth, to mark certain events.

There are five historic dates associated with the State of Florida that are marked in plaques, 12 inch bronzed plaques in the ground plain. And these plaques each mentioned the historic date. The date, for instance, that Ponce de Leon sighted Florida. I believe it's March 27th. Each year on March 27th, at a time specific, 12:17 PM, the plaque is perfectly surrounded by a shadow cast from the structure itself. There is a, in the center of the Solar Rotary, 20 feet above ground plain, there is a circular form created by using the materials that the piece was built out of, a 5 5/16 inch diameter pipe that's held aloft and causes a circular shadow to be cast on the ground plank. Well, that circular shadow perfectly centers the plot in such a fashion that the shadows cast from the horizontal poles are precisely equidistance on either side of the circular shadow.

All of this was critical to the artists and critical to the project. I mentioned professor emeritus Jack Robinson and his role in wanting to calculate where a shadow will fall at a specific time on a specific date at a specific site. That was three years of research and development that was required. We worked with Jack to do the calculations, we worked with graduate students from engineering to do measurements down to a tolerance of 1/128th of an inch for any placement of any part of that sculpture so that the piece would in fact function in the atomic moment that it was predicted to function in. Then the piece had to be built to exact intolerances. No dimension of the piece could be off by anything more than a quarter of an inch in any direction; vertical, horizontal, distance from the ground plan, etc. or the piece simply wouldn't function.

In fact, works, and we've checked this to the atomic moment, and so, on these occasions, let's just say five plaques, and local apparent noon on the day of the summer solstice, these solar events occur where in alignment, a very precise alignment is visible to the viewer, provided it's a sunny day. If you recall this year, a week ago Saturday, was summer solstice and we were having an awful lot of rain. However, the sun's movement through the sky slows down just a bit around solstice. And so you can see it a few days before, a few days after. Now it's not exact. It's off a little bit to the north or a little bit to the south but it's pretty darn close, too.

So, we had the opportunity, my assistant and I, to go visit the sight this last Monday at local apparent noon. Which here, by the way occurs between 1:31 and 1:32 PM. That's a calculation of where we are on longitudinally, and of course, the fact that we're in daylight savings time. So, clocks move ahead an hour. We're on the western edge of the Eastern Time Zone. So, apparent noon, local apparent noon occurs between 1:31 and 1:32 PM for the day of summer solstice. We went there the other day at that time and, sure enough, our shadow was there to kind of celebrate the solstice.

YG: *It All Heals Up*, which is a current, or 2002 public art project; could you talk about that?

VA: Yeah. That was a project done by—I mentioned Jim Rosenquist and his ongoing relationship with the university. And actually being one of the reasons that I first came here back in 1976. Recently the university built with the assistance of All Children's Hospital, a brand new pediatrics research facility for the St. Petersburg campus. This new facility that brought into the university some of the leading scientists and doctors working on diseases that afflict children, and they would be housed in this new research facility designed in part by the local architectural firm, Albert Alphonzo, who had done a number of wonderful buildings.

In this particular building, they were creating a five-story structure that had one wall, approximately 40 feet wide, five stories high, solid brick. He gave us an opportunity for a site that was rather unusual. The wall seemed to beg to have something on it and the something on it as it turns out is a giant Band-Aid. A 40 feet long, 10 feet wide, designed and then painted by James Rosenquist as a gift to the university. Again, generosity plays such a big role in what we're able to do, and here we had that—it's funny, a lot of our budgets are in the thirties, this one happened to be 37,000 dollars. And so, as we sat together as a group, the selection committee said, Gee, you know, it'd be really wonderful if we could do a major project for that wall but that's going to involve an artist who can work in that scale and it's an image that will be present in downtown St. Petersburg. We really need a top-notch artist and this isn't a very big budget. What do you think?

And Margaret Miller, actually, was one of the art experts serving on that committee, as was Peter Pho, who is the curator for our collection, and myself. And we all sort of sat around and Peter finally suggested, "You know, maybe we could ask James Rosenquist if he would kind of contribute his services." And I thought, Gee, that's an idea. Jim has a great affinity for children and particularly is concerned about children who suffer from various illnesses. And so I called Jim and I asked him, and about a year later, after I sent him a brick for the building, he wanted to know what color that brick was. It was very important to his decision to do this project.

But after he got a sample of the brick for the building, he said, "Yeah, I'll do it. And I'll do it for free." The reason he wanted that brick is the Band-Aid, it's almost like being peeled up from the skin of the building. And so he saw the brick as a metaphor for human skin. He wanted a brick that would reference a diverse group of races. And so it couldn't be sort of a bright white or a sort of pinkish brick. It needed to be something that could suggest white, African, American Indian, a myriad of races. And it was the right color. And so Jim agreed to do the project. He designed a project that was more than the budget

that we had. Even though he wasn't taking any money, we still needed to build it and it was going to exceed the budget.

I turned to Dennis Sexon, who was president of the All Children's Hospital Foundation at the time and who obviously does fundraising for them. He said, "Dennis, we're going to need significant additional dollars." He said, "What do you think?" I said, "Somewhere in the vicinity of 100,000. And we haven't checked it all out yet but that's probably what it would take." He said, "I think I could help you out with that. I'll make some calls." 24 hours later I get a call from saying, "Look, you know, I used to play little league baseball with this guy and he's agreed to donate 100,000 dollars to the project. The guy is Raymond James from Raymond James financial institution. And they contributed 100,000, which enabled us to build the project and to set up an endowment that will maintain the project in perpetuity.

So, the idea of the Band-Aid that Jim had was, he wanted, he was a pop artist, so his work derives from popular culture. He wanted an image on the building that would immediately let children know as they go by that this place is about them. It's for them and about them. And a kid's Band-Aid that's sort of a bright, decorative, Band-Aid, something all kids relate to. Jim has children and he talked about occasionally putting Band-Aids on his kids' finger, even though there wasn't anything wrong there; just because it made them feel better. And so he felt that if we put a Band-Aid up there that was brightly decorated like a kid's Band-Aid, that kids would understand.

The day we were installing it I had the opportunity to watch a group of kids go on by with their mom who immediately looked up and said, "Mom! Mom, look! A giant Band-Aid!" This is for us. Jim's there, Jim Rosenquist is there, taking this in with just this wonderful smile. So, again, one feels so strongly about projects when you're that closely involved but with good reason. To see the effect that this has, again, in the public realm is always something that kind of keeps you going, and not just myself but the others that are involved.

YG: Just a couple more questions.

VA: Sure.

YG: I would love to get to every public art project but unfortunately we can't. What projects would you like to talk about that are significant or special to you or to the university or to some other regional campuses?

VA: Oh boy. That's always a tough question. Each project in its own way holds special memories for me. There are clearly projects that have had a larger impact. They're larger in scale, they simply assume a greater role within the university. One of those projects is a piece that we did with a San Francisco based artist, Doug Hollis, called *Unspecific Gravity*. It is typical to what we try to do in terms of creating a project that is for and about a discipline.

In this particular case, *Unspecific Gravity*, makes reference to the fact that water is used as a measurement for specific gravity. This piece is about water, it's about molecular structures. Doug created on a one acre site, a garden with a significant contribution, again, from a local contributor, Time Warner Communications, that functions as a gathering place, as a place where elements of science are reflected in the fountain, which is made up of a series of stainless steel columns holding aloft molecular models of the H₂O molecule, with seats that take the form of a hemispherical shape.

And atom split in half if you will, embedded in the surface of these seats, the electronic structure of the 11 most common elements, brass embedded in terrazzo to make this expression. So, the electron, proton, neutron, the symbol for the element, also included in the terrazzo seats. Drip line areas; something as simple as a cushioning for the laurel oak trees around that site that enable them to weather the conditions in Florida and the foot traffic. Foot traffic, we put an amazing amount of pressure on our heels. And just walking across the roots of trees, we'll eventually damage and kill those trees, so we put in these drip line areas made of p-rock that actually cushions the footfall of the visitors to this sight. We took the desire lines that people dug in. The kind of worn areas in the landscape where people want to cross, and made those pathways.

So, preventing erosion, allowing for this garden like look. So, Doug Hollis' *Unspecific Gravity* is certainly one of those. Tim Rollins' KoS, the project that they did for the College of Education. KoS referring to the Kids of Survival, a group of 11 students that Tim began working with in the 1980s as a teacher. Students couldn't read and Tim was hired to teach them to read through the intervention of art. This took place in Middle School 52 in the South Bronx.

Tim went there, realized that one of the things that he could do so that they became enthusiastic about reading is to read to them. And he read the classics. And he read the classics with the understanding that they would have this assignment. They would first understand what he was saying, they, second, would interpret what was being said by the literature, and finally, here's the carrot, they got to express what was being said in the great literature in the form of paintings.

Well, this experiment took off. Tim moved to the South Bronx. He opened right next door to Middle School 52, the Art and Knowledge Workshop, where the kids left the sort of formal corridors of their education. When the bell rang at three o'clock and entered into their personal education, where they took on everything from homework to home life, and then did paintings. Eventually they started showing the paintings, and to make a very long story a bit shorter, they came to the attention of the New York art world. Soon they were being invited to show in museums. They became internationally renowned as Tim Rollin's KoS.

More importantly, of the original 11 kids, 9 of them went on to get a college education. For the College of Education, what better group to commission than Tim Rollins' KoS? They came in and in turn worked with kids from Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco County to develop the idea for two year olds. One based on Kafka's America, a second based on *The Frogs*, a play written by Aristophanes in four or five BC that now adorn the walls of the atrium area at the rotunda for the College of Education. A very special project. There are many others but those are two that I would definitely want to mention.

YG: Okay. Real quick. I'm going to change the tape for a final thought.

Track 1 ends; track 2 begins

YG: Okay, we're back. We just changed tape. And before we end the interview, there are just a couple of questions that I have. Specifically, where do you see the public art program in the future in the next decade of the University of South Florida?

VA: Well, we've clearly developed a momentum. We have a collection now that increasingly is in the attention and awareness of folks around the United States and even internationally. And I think beyond the kind of recognition that the program has brought the university, there's the realization by the university that this is not only good for the people who are directly involved with the arts at the university, it's good for the entire campus in a variety of ways. And so I think the strong support for what we're doing.

One of our needs, however, remains funding. I mentioned early on in the conversation that there was no funding for administration; there was no funding for maintenance. Maintenance is a reality and the university has stepped up to the responsibility by providing a very modest budget to maintain the collection. As the collection ages, like anything else, it requires more and more attention though. One of my dreams for the future of the program is that the endowment that was started with the Raymond James

gift and the James Rosenquist contribution be expanded to deal with the maintenance needs and the support needs that the public art program has.

In a more immediate sense I have some ambitions to tell the story, which you could see is always hard to squeeze into a few words; so, I think I need a book. And I'm working towards developing a publication that will provide a history for the program. So, those are some of the immediate needs and dreams, I suppose, of the future of the program. In terms of projects, I think there's an interesting phenomenon going on. In the United States, more public art projects were built from 1975 to present than had been built in the previous 200-year history of the country.

So, a phenomenal amount of public art is being created for universities, for municipalities, for states. And with that, there's a growing sophistication in approaching development of projects and exchanging ideas in the State of Florida. Myself and a couple of colleagues got together here in Hillsborough County a few years back that led to the formation of a group, the Florida Association of Public Art Administrators. We were the first statewide organization for public art administrators. I served a couple years as the president, the founding president of the organization. I continued to serve on the board of directors, this in turn has led to a national organization, the Americans for the Arts have formed a group called PAN that is a coming together of public art administrators from around the country.

So, dialogue is happening between folks who administer programs. And through them actually, dialogue's beginning to happen with artists. Now that seems strange. Even artists of national reputation have not had a forum to get together and discuss their ideas. So, there's a coming together of the folks that will move public art forward, and I see that as explosively exciting over the next 10 to 20 years. The more that there's an exchange, the more that ideas I think will percolate, and new directions will be found, investigated, and supported. So, those are some of the things that I see in my somewhat fuzzy crystal ball.

YG: In terms of public art on some of the regional campuses of USF, are you—looking through the inventory of projects, you're not only coordinating projects on this campus but it seems like you're coordinating projects on some of the other regional campuses.

VA: Yes, I actually am responsible for the public art component of any new facility for all of the campuses. And, you know, I think it gives me a rare opportunity. I'm often told by my colleagues that they envy the kind of chance I have to sort of look over the walls of the various disciplines. You know, there are walls out there. It's like, well, I'm in

medicine and, Oh, I'm in radio broadcasting, or, Oh, I'm, you know, whatever, a business faculty member and that's my area of specialty. And the dialog between those specialties doesn't happen very much but I get to go peek over the walls and actually meet the scientists and the people who put on television programs and so on.

It was just a wonderful opportunity to enrich myself with information about those disciplines. Similarly, being able to work on the various campuses, each campus has its own personality, its own unique kind of presence, and I get to have conversations with the folks that make those campuses unique and bring something too them. So, I very much feel in a way that a function is kind of a bridge back and forth and it's an exciting opportunity to get to know a vast group of folks that make up the University of South Florida in the collective sense. It doesn't just live in one place.

YG: Because many of our regional campuses are going more on their own paths in terms of being more independent from the University of South Florida, is that making your work more difficult?

VA: I wouldn't say more difficult but I certainly think that as I enter any project, I enter it with the recognition that the folks that I'm working with have an awful lot of vested interest. There have been [for] years. And bringing that project to the place where it actually could be built, the new facility I refer to here, in the case of campus administrators. There are years in developing that unique quality that makes the given branch campus special. And yes, they want to be heard, and we'd be foolish not to listen with an open mind to what their arguments are.

So, if you mean by that as I enter the campus, do I come in with the guns loaded and ready to roll? No, I try to leave the vessel empty, ready to be filled with information. And as I said, one of the remarkable things, and I mean this, that to be able to walk into an area that you have no expertise in and leave after four years, certainly not being a scholar in the field but having some appreciation for what's going on, that's, you know, it makes the job rich. The same kind of parallel circumstances when one moves from one campus to the other. So, no, not more difficult, more interesting.

YG: Two more questions. In your 14 years of history here at the university, what are you most proud of?

VA: Well, I think the fact that we've been able to put together a collection that enables the viewer to move through it almost in a way that they would move through a museum. One of the potentials of a university collection is that the works aren't so far apart as they

might be in a city; that there is no dialog between one work of art, visual dialogue, and the other. That's possible on a campus, but what was critical is that that happened at the highest possible level; in other words, that we were able to bring in the leading contributors. Then, when we do projects with regional artists, they're working to that standard.

So, the kind of dialog that happens between our pieces is A, that it's possible, and B, that it happens at the highest level. I think those two things make me particularly proud. Now, that's occurred on the Tampa campus, it's occurred on the St. Petersburg campus. Quite frankly, we haven't had project opportunities sufficient to make that apparent in Sarasota and we're just now getting to do some projects over in Lakeland. So, there's more to go. But we've got two campuses up and running that, in terms of the public art collection, that really are, it's like visiting a sculpture park. That sculpture park that I wondered where it was all those many years ago? It's starting to be there.

YG: Final question. This is something that I've asked all of my interviewees. If you could leave a statement for the camera either to future students, faculty, colleagues, etcetera, or to all the wonderful people that you've worked with over the years, what would you want to say about the University of South Florida and its influence on your career?

VA: Well, in a very strange sense I would say stay young. And by that I mean that one of the real advantages of coming to the University of South Florida in the '70s as I did is that it was an institution with great ambition and with great potential. And it wasn't locked into a kind of tradition that prevented it from thinking beyond the edges. The very fact that I could come here and sort of dream of building a sculpture park with a pocket full of change, if you will, that Donald Salph could come here and create, sort of out of nothing, a graphic studio, which would have an impact on the print world measured in a worldwide fashion. That was possible because there was youth in the institution. So, if I had a recommendation for future generations, it would be stay young.

YG: Vincent, thank you very much.

VA: You're welcome.

End of interview