Kevin Cassidy

All right, today is November the 24th, 1999, and this is an interview with Kevin Cassidy, who is the Facilities Manager in the Art Department at Columbia College.

First of all, I'd like to ask you what the circumstances were that brought you to Columbia, and when did you come? OK, I first came to Columbia in 1974. I came to enroll in a course to learn filmmaking. And in support of learning filmmaking, I decided I should take a course in photography, to just learn better how to see through a camera, and soon found that making photographs was a lot more satisfying than the hard work of organizing film, which requires the cooperation of many people, a lot of equipment. It's really for people much more organized than myself. So I was drawn to photography, which I decided I would study—am, in fact, still studying—if I'm jumping ahead, I'm currently in the Master's program in the Photography Department. But to try to remain chronological, as much I can, given my tangential way of thinking, I then became a Photography major. I was able to attend school full-time as a Photography major for one year; then financial constraints made it necessary to get a full-time job and attend part-time. It was during the time that I... let's see, I-when I first came to Columbia, I waited tables, drove a cab, bartended, all the kinds of things students often do, but found I was getting behind in bills and I needed to get a steady job, which I found at Helix Camera. I wanted to-I thought it would be useful information for me while I worked there. But that was not a happy experience for me, working retail. While it was related to photography, that really didn't much matter to the duties I preformed in the store, which was just a matter of selling things to people, and... so I luckily happened upon an ad in the Reader that a Chicago area college was looking for a darkroom manager. I had worked in the Photography Department as a TA, while a student, and I felt that might have some and also, I had been a manager at Helix, so I thought I might have the necessary experience. It turned out the college was Columbia—the ad didn't specify Columbia, for some reason—and I arranged for—

And you hadn't heard about it, obviously, while you were here. The job?

Yeah.

No. This was after—or while I was on hiatus from Columbia. I was hoping to come back and finish a second degree. I had a degree in English before I came to Columbia.

Could we back up just a moment, and maybe you could speak to—are you from Chicago, and how did you hear about the school and why did you choose to come here? And what had you heard about Columbia before you arrived here?

Um, let me try to remember how Columbia came to my attention... I believe it was through a friend in Kentucky-I was living in Kentucky, and a friend in Kentucky who was a photographer knew about Columbia, from other photographers, I think. And while working in Kentucky, part-time—let's see, I finished my degree in '73, and took about a year of happy drifting.

And where is your degree from? It's from Bellerman College, which is a small liberal arts college in Louisville.

OK.

And so after college, I just stayed there, and made friends with, as I say, with a photographer named Ted [Wathen], who had finished his Master's in photography in Gainesville. And his family was from Louisville and he was back there. And I had become interested in photography, I was making my own pictures, and as I said, was especially interested in filmmaking. I had done no filmmaking at all, and my friend Ted said that he had heard that Columbia College was a good place to learn it, to learn filmmaking, to learn photography. And I think wrote for a brochure; I remember a little square yellow booklet that came. And I made a phone call to Columbia, they
invited me to come and see the place. When I arrived-I don’t know if you want to put this in the official story-

Sure! (laughs)

I’ve since learned that what happened to me was quite typical. I made an appointment, but somehow it never was communicated to anyone that I was coming to learn about the College. Virtually no one was available, and I ended up talking with Gerry Gall, Bert’s brother, who at the time was the Director-well, he ended up being the Director of Printing Services, I’m not sure that’s what he was at the time I met him. But I remember him kind of being called away from what he was doing, somewhat grumpy, you know, because he was being interrupted. But once we started talking, he was very nice; he was very helpful and friendly, walked me around the facility, which at the time was at Lake Shore Drive and Ohio Street. And as you know, it was pretty funky. Which appealed to me, at the time. I was... it had a gritty realism to it, I guess. The whole place did. And at that time, the Filmmaking office and Photography office and probably the Art Department were all in one big office, on the floor just down the hall from the darkroom. You know, the film screening room was across from that office, the darkroom was next to the screening room. So everyone was right on top of each other. The class where I met for Photo I was the same room that I met for Film Techniques I, you know. So my combined interests were reflected in the way the information was presented. It was all just there, as part of the learning. So um... I was a good student for about a semester and a half. And then found myself—you know, being a rather undisciplined person to begin with, I found myself not attending classes as I should, and sort of drifting, again. I guess I was drifting when I came to Columbia. But I had some excellent teachers. I studied Photo I with Brian Katz, and I had Photo II with Charlie Traub, who was the Chairman of the department at the time. I guess it was his first year as chairman. And really learned a lot about photography-not so much technically, which I think was my own personality, as much as the instruction—but more the aesthetic... and I don’t use that word in terms of the formal study of aesthetics, but... what I learned is that photography could... I hate to sound highfalutin, but that it could be a way of life, a way of understanding life.

Mm-hmm.

It wasn’t just a matter of making pictures, which of course, it does, but that to be a good photographer—and what I learned about the photographers who had been important in the history of photography—that it was really their way of understanding the world. And that was really what I got from my instruction at Columbia, that it was not just a matter of what you did, but who you were. And I bought into that, you know, and it really came to make all the difference for me, in... you know, I recently said to a class of my own—I’m teaching now, I teach part-time as well as work on the staff—I was talking about my own work to them, and found myself saying that I really don’t know how I would have been able to tolerate the world without this way of dealing with it. And I was saying that as something I was offering them, that this can be a life strategy, not just a way to make a living. And so that’s what I learned, in my early instruction. As I say, I needed to have a steady income, so I took the job at Helix, which was not satisfying for me. And so I was so happy to see that a college was looking to hire someone, because I knew that that was the environment that was nurturing for me. And it turned out to be Columbia; it turned out that the interviewer was Brian Katz, who had been my instructor. So, you know, quite inadvertently—and that was very fortuitous. I was to have been interviewed by John Mulvany, who was the Chairman of the department then, but he was out of town, so Brian was called in to conduct the interview. I think it quite possible that at first meeting, John Mulvany might not have been all that impressed with me, and I might not have gotten the job. So it was very fortuitous that I was even given the job to begin with. And that was as assistant darkroom manager. I worked under Steve Fukawa, who’s still the darkroom manager.

OK.

And I did that for about...

Wow, he’s still the darkroom manager?

Mm-hmm.

I don’t know if he’s been interviewed either.

Well, he’s seen a lot. He’d be a guy to talk to. So I worked under Steve for about two years, and in that time got to know John Mulvany, and as you know, he was also Chair of the Art Department.

Right.

And he needed a facilities manager for the Art Department, and he asked me if I wanted to do that. And having absolutely no art background, I of course said yes, that I would do that. Again, because I felt that it would be good for me, that I would learn things I needed to know about making art and being an artist, even though my medium
was photography. And that has certainly proven to be true.

Do you remember what year that was?
If you give me a second...

That's all right. Take your time, or we can come back to it.

This must have been 1979 that I started working in the Art Department.

Great, OK. So you've been there 20 years.
Yes. Uh-huh. Yeah... Ronald Reagan was elected in '78, is that right? Or was that '80?

'80.
OK. Well, yeah. So it would have been '80 when I switched to the Art Department, because it was around the time of Ronald Reagan's election. So I moved into the Art Department, which at the time was a fairly small department. It occupied two floors of the Michigan Building... I'm trying to remember this clearly now... it occupied two floors of the Michigan Building, and its space was luxurious in terms of the amount of students and what had to go on. So I think... I'd have to check actual statistics. In my memory, we were offering maybe 24, 28 classes altogether, whereas now we offer 200 classes in the Art Department. And it was still a pretty funky enterprise, you know. There were terrific teachers, but we really kind of patched things together as we needed them.

Mm-hmm.
And probably some of that style still exists... and again, this is a tangent, but you know, the Art Department, I think, is really having growing pains. It's obvious that we've reached a size where we have to do things in a more structured way. And you know, there's something gained and something lost when you do that. But it's absolutely necessary. And so I have worked in the Art Department for 20 years; the thing is, it's rarely the same place two years in a row, you know. It's grown consistently in all the years that I've been involved in it. You know, if you look at enrollment figures, you'll see a slight increase every year; some years, a fairly sizable increase. You know, there've been times when enrollment has gone up like 14 percent, 12 percent, from one Fall to the next.

Yeah.
We've added many programs over the years. When I first went to work in the Art Department, there was a concentration in fine art, one in graphic design, and one in interior design. And the interior design program consisted of one classroom and some lockers. And the Art Department now offers concentrations in those three, but also in fashion design, product design; there is a Master's level program in architectural design—what am I forgetting? Illustration has its own concentration. And as I said, we now offer over 200 classes, and we occupy three and a half-four floors of the 623 South Wabash building. I'm not sure what that is in square feet. But it's the equivalent of a fairly sizable business.

Mm-hmm.
And you know, as I probably indicated, I was pretty much of a classic hippie slacker when I came here.

I want you to expand on that a bit, because maybe you could address a couple issues. What appealed to you, coming to Columbia? I mean, did you feel like you found where you fit? Exactly.

Or was it strange and then you grew to like it?
It was strange and I felt like it was where I fit, you know? (Laughs)

Had you been to Chicago before, or a large city?
Well, I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago.

Oh, OK, and then you went to [Louisville].
Yeah. Though I never actually lived in the city until I returned from Kentucky. And there was culture shock there. Louisville, even though it's a sizable city, is considerably slower paced and sleepier and... I guess friendlier comes to mind, though I don't find Chicago to be an unfriendly place. The style is different; Louisville's warmer, you know, both in climate and social interaction. And it takes a while for someone coming to Chicago to get used to it, to get used to the way things are; that people are not unfriendly, but probably somewhat guarded, you know, because it's a big city full of a lot of different people who you don't know. So I guess when I came here, I was very anxious to place myself within a community, because I lived in an apartment up on the North Side, and I didn't really know a lot of people. And you know, so coming to school was the place where I could come and be most comfortable. It was also, as I say, I had grown up in the '60s, and like many thousands of people, was attracted to the sense of there being a different way to live, different from—I'm not sure, at this point, what it was we thought we would be different from. But different from what, at the time, we referred to as the straight world, you know, the career-oriented, financially successful model of how to be a mature, effective person.
Coloring within the lines.

(Laughs)

That's right. Coloring within the lines, and you know, coloring the grass green, not blue, or whatever. And so I'm sure it's well documented elsewhere, there was a great sense of freedom, kind of. There was a great sense of permission drifting through the whole culture, and it was certainly reinforced at Columbia.

Right. Could you describe, maybe, some of your fellow students at that time?

Yeah.

Because I want to, then, have you talk about going from being a student at Columbia to, you know, staff/faculty, which-how did that work in? But if you could start with describing your fellow students.

Um, yeah, well, they were from all walks, you know, as of Columbia still is. All kinds of people. The people I befriended and fell in with, I think it would be fair to describe them as... arty hippie types. And you know, superficially, certainly everybody had long hair, and no one had a regular job, and... having fun was certainly a priority. You know, one of the first people who comes to mind is Michael Trupaya. Mike is a very successful photographer here in Chicago. He lives up in Highland Park now and plays chess with Phil Jackson, you know.

(Laughs) Another ex-hippie.

Another ex-hippie.

Maybe not ex, but...

Well, you know, he had a very good business sense, knew how to be practical, and he's been very successful. Not a trait I share. But you know, he's a very hardworking guy, his business is based on-he's the eminent-he's the guy you call when you need reproductions of your work, for whatever reason. So every artist in Chicago calls Mike to photograph their painting or their sculpture, you know, when After Image or Art Forum needs a picture of your work, you call Mike to make it for you. All the major collections in the city— the Morton Newman collection, First National Bank, you know, whoever has a large collection of work, Mike's the guy that photographs it for them. I remember once going with him, nominally as his assistant, but mainly because I just wanted to see the art, to make photographs at Morton Newman's home. Morton Newman died a few years ago, but a good chunk of the Art Institute's collection was donated by Morton Newman, and he had this beautiful townhouse on Division, right at the lake, and I went with Mike there because Mike had to make some pictures of his collection, and met this wonderful character, Morton Newman. You walk in his house, and the wall is covered with Picassos. And on top of the TV is a little Giacometti sculpture-on the TV! That very famous surrealist object—I think it was made by Man Ray, I'd have to check my history book—but it's the metronome with the eye attached.

Oh, yeah, yeah.

That's on his TV set, you know, like you would have or a regular person would have a little Hummel figure, you know? And he told us a wonderful story: he had a piece by [Duane Hansen], the sculptor who makes very lifelike figures, and then dresses them—I'm sure you've seen them. He'll have like a security guard, and then it's placed in the lobby of a building. A woman waiting for the bus with her suitcase and her shopping bag next to her—and in fact, that's the piece he had. It was a woman waiting for a bus, sitting on a bench with her suitcase and shopping bag. And apparently, once while the Newmans were away, their alarm went off, and the police came to investigate, and were inspecting the house, and one of the policemen was in the room where this sculpture was, and he saw it out of the corner of his eye, and it so startled him that he whirled around and shot it. (Laughs)

(Laughs) I thought you were going to say started questioning, but shot it!

No, no, it scared him. I'm sure the reaction was like someone had snuck up on him. And Mrs. Newman, who was a very nice lady, spent her time kind of wandering around muttering about people traipsing through the house and how awful it was to have to live in a museum. And to me, it was just amazing that he had—you know, hanging on his walls were the paintings that you see in art history books. It was just really an unimagining collection, that you actually have this in your home. And I guess, in fact, the house now is kind of a museum: it's not open to the public, but the collection is still there. And I have another friend who does curatorial work; I know last year, she spent the whole year there cataloguing his collection. At any rate, I guess that story is just an example of one of the kinds of things that happens because of working here, the kinds of experiences we get to have. Another interesting one was the day I got a call that Robert Rauschenburg was looking for someone to drive him around the city; he wanted to make photographs. And I just jumped at it,
you know, without thinking twice about it. And I’m trying to remember how it came to be... I believe Mary Dougherty, who is Peter Thompson’s wife, and Mary did teach here for a while, part-time; I’m not sure she must have been at the College at the time this happened. She was involved in the Artists in Apprenticeship program that existed for a while, which was a kind of... sort of a sophisticated Head Start program for high school graduates who were coming from the poorer areas of the city, who may not have been completely prepared to be trained as artists.

What was the name of that program?
Artists in Apprenticeship, and it was Mary Dougherty, and it was headed by a woman whose name will come to me before we’re done here, I promise. Eileen Cherry was her name. Anyway, I got this call from Mary that the gallery that was representing Rauschenburg was looking for someone to drive him around. And I volunteered to do it, and it was to be on Sunday morning, early Sunday morning; he wanted to drive around before he had to fly back to New York. And I happily did it, and I went to pick him up Sunday morning at the Mayfair Hotel, I think, the Mayfair-very swank hotel on Lake Shore Drive. And you know, I went into the lobby and the maitre d’ called him down, and he came down, and he was casually but very stylishly dressed, and he was with his companion, who he introduced as his bodyguard, who was this very buff blond guy, you know, in like this very expensive leather outfit. And I went “Ooh, Jeez.” Anyway, so I bring them out to my car, which is a Volkswagen diesel Rabbit. And I think they were both a little surprised at that, and you know, the bodyguard had to climb into the back seat, and he was kind of taking up the whole back seat. And we drove around, I just took him to places in the city that I found interesting. We went to Maxwell Street. We went to look at murals around the city. We went out to a lot of the Latino neighborhoods; he was very interested in sort of the public art of Latino culture, painting the windows and walls and things. And he was making photographs of all this. And I guess it shouldn’t surprise me that I found him to be just a very odd person. He’s one of my heroes, as an artist. You know, I think his work really opened my eyes to a lot of the possibilities of image making. And he had this very idiosyncratic sense of humor; he would make jokes and laugh and laugh and I had no idea what he was talking about. But still, I mean, it was just an amazing experience to drive around in my Volkswagen Rabbit with one of the most important artists of the 20th Century.

And he called Columbia? Or did he know of Columbia to ask? His gallery.

I mean, that speaks for the reputation of the department and the school. Right. Right.

And now we’re gonna turn the tape over. I don’t want to miss any of the words, but what I’d like to ask you about next is: based on your time here at Columbia, could you describe the mission of the College, and its relation to the larger society and higher education, and also art, the art, you know, represent it if you could, its relationship to that of the country? Mm-hmm.
different times. Novelist, poet, filmmaker, photographer—and I don’t list this as these are all things I’ve accomplished, but these are all dreams; different forms of the same dream, really, that in retrospect, now, I see as my desire to make something that meant something, you know. In our culture, having observed the activities within the Art Department over all these years, there is a sense of many are called but few are chosen. And I see this not that Columbia chooses few, it’s that art chooses few. Not everyone is an artist. Everyone can make things. I guess what I see now is that—and I don’t know that I understood it at the time you know, in Columbia’s mission statement, we say that we want to help students author the culture of their time. And when I first—I think that statement was formulated, I’m not sure how many years ago, eight, ten years ago was when I first started hearing that, and at first I was rather skeptical of that. I wasn’t sure that it was good to have a program of authorship, you know. I had a sense that culture created itself at a more grassroots level. I still think that’s true, but I think what I understand better now is that culture is authored, you know. And a lot of it’s authored accidentally.

Mm-hmm. That the commerce of society is part of what authors culture, and that the buildings we have, the institutions we have, the cultural institutions we have, do grow out of probably economic or more practical relationships. That what we do—I mean, for example, someone or a number of people invent this thing that eventually becomes the internet, and that invention, at first, is a very lively and weird thing, where people are finding out what they can do and what they can say, and how they can shake the world with it. And now, fairly quickly, we find it kind of being tamed, and channeled into business activities. You know, being used for financial profit. That’s not all bad, because it just means that it will continue to exist and provide a lot of opportunities for people to express themselves. So the thing is, this internet was made for one purpose, but it gathered meaning in a different way. What it finally means in the culture has evolved on its own. So I guess it was originally set up for the military, you know, the internet. What we make, for practical reasons, becomes meaningful in the interactions of people. And what I see that art can do is very consciously make the meaningful thing. And that’s what I try to tell students, that I have now, is that what you do is going to mean something, and it can mean something that helps the world, it can be neutral, or it can actually mean something that’s detrimental. And you have to form values that allow you to decide what you’re going to mean, what your life is going to mean. Now, that doesn’t—I’m not trying to aggrandize it, and say that a single life makes all that much difference. I mean, even the lives of the really great and famous people move things one way or the other just a little bit.

Mm-hmm. Most of us just kind of throw our little carrot into the stew, you know. But even at that, you can be aware of what influence it has.

And certainly offer meaning to others who don’t have that opportunity or inclination toward art. Right. And finally—and I hope this doesn’t sound selfish—is that it forms a meaning for yourself, that... I truly believe—I’ve seen art save people’s lives. I mean, not from death, but from having a stupid life. The difference between having a meaningful life and a stupid life. Or an unconscious life, if you want.

I love that. Saving people from an unconscious life. Or has saved people from an unconscious life. Right. And the unconscious life is finally detrimental to the overall society.

That ties in with what I wanted to just touch back on, because I’ve heard this several times, from a lot of different sources, that image of Columbia as a haven for people that were lost, as you used the word lost, or didn’t fit in, or felt alone, and coming here and having that feeling disappear. Mm-hmm.

You know, and I wondered—and it ties into where I wanted to ask you about, you know, you touched on this already, the growth of the College. Mm-hmm.

Are we at risk of losing that haven sort of place for the person? Because certainly, our society and this metropolitan area, and the nation, that need for a haven for people who don’t fit in or might be lost isn’t gone. Right.

But is Columbia losing its identity as a destination for those people? I wonder. I think we’re at risk of that. I don’t know the solution. I think as long as the people who come here, as long as we can maintain the tolerance—or even more than the tolerance, as long as we can maintain the invitation, to say that, you know, “Bring us your weird and lost and hungry,” you
know, that we understand that that's a very fertile ground, that your-what's the word? I don't want to use the word lostness, but the inability to conform, perhaps, is very fertile ground for creativity.

Right. And welcomed here, and often not welcomed in most institutions.

Right. Perhaps not. Now, I understand that we have to establish structures of evaluation, of what our students do, and that we have to be in fairness to them, we have to realistically evaluate their abilities, so that they don't walk out of here thinking that they're the greatest artist of the 20th Century, and then just fall flat on their faces. So you have to be realistic. But I think that does happen. I think-I've seen in the Art Department that it's a self-evaluating process, that students need not be discouraged or failed or held to standards that may not suit them, but that over the course of time, the student finds the form that they need. They find the discipline that works. They find the discipline that doesn't feel like discipline, you know, that's the right fit. Again, I mean, there is a threat to that, in that Columbia is no longer a cheap place for an education; it costs money, and it's apparently gonna cost more all the time. And people may not be able to afford to drift around through the departments, you know. Again, I don't know the solution to that.

Has that been, in your experience, kind of a consistent challenge, then? Not something that's necessarily new to Columbia?

I think it is. I mean, it's especially difficult in art, where the standards are so malleable and open. I mean, what makes good art, what separates good art from bad, is-itis's not purely subjective, it's not that, but neither is it a bar exam, you know, where there's particular things you can ask and particular sets of knowledge that prove that you're a good artist. I mean, there are times when the placement of this cup makes it become a piece of art, an object of art, by its use, by the way an artist uses it. There are other times when it's a paper cup, you know. And the times when it's art and the times when it's a cup are not clearly defined. So... evaluating the knowledge of an aspiring artist is a very tricky thing. And encouraging people to pursue it is also a tricky thing, in that we know what lies ahead for most people who choose to be artists. Most of them will be-not poor, but most of them cannot count on financial security. They're gonna scrape. And so you know you're encouraging people to take this risk. I think you're also encouraging them to take on countercultural posture. I think, you know, more than ever, we live in a culture of wealth, and you have to say to people that "If this is what you want to do, you have to consciously let go of that. You're not gonna have it; you're not gonna be wealthy." But, as I was saying before, you're gonna have a meaningful life. You're gonna get to do something that actually creates meaning. And it's a whole other can of worms about if what you make means to other people means to you and all that, and it's really quite beside the point.

OK, there was a brief interruption due to battery failure, and we're continuing the interview. And just to expand on what it sounds like you're saying is your philosophy of teaching, that you're not giving students specific values, but that finding meaning in their lives and values is really a part of your philosophy in the classroom.

Yes. And to find the values for themselves, but I think also what I was trying to get at was the notion of authoring the culture of your time can be a tricky one. You don't wanna be programmatic about it; you don't want to make art that is didactic, that says, "Here's what the culture should be." What you end up with then is like Soviet propaganda poster art. What you do to author the culture of your time is just jump in with both feet into the foment of the question. You know, you do your best to take your experience of the world and give it form, in a way that distills it and gets to the essence of how you see things. It doesn't mean that you, by that, eliminate confusion; you might cause more confusion. But the point is, you're not passively receiving the information of the culture. You're participating in that information. And I think you have to do it to have a meaningful life. I mean, I think if you're drawn to it, you really limit yourself if you don't pursue it. I'm not sure where the tape if I've already said this or not-

That's all right. I was using the example of the person who spends their life providing better toasters to people. A good toaster is a good thing to have; it's a good thing to make. There's nothing wrong with earning a profit from providing people...
with a good toaster, and all that is a valuable and necessary activity. It’s not the same kind of meaningful activity that I’m describing, which is impractical for most people. I mean, there are some people who can make a secure living by producing their own art. You can count them on two hands, you know. Most people have to have another motivation for making their art, and what I believe myself, the thing that saved my own life, and what I try to give to students in terms of saving their lives, is that the attempt to make a meaningful thing is in itself meaningful. It empowers you as a person. It allows you to get up every day with a sense of having a purpose in the world. And even if it can’t be directly applied, even if it can’t be pointed to as clearly as the toaster, you know, you live with a sense of being who you need to be and participating the activity that you have to do.

And I’m gonna make the same reference: you talked about finding poetic people at Columbia, and I don’t know if that was a victim of-and that you had already been exposed to or found poetic people at your college in Kentucky.

Yeah.

And you’ve been at Columbia 25-plus years, around that?
Yeah, around 25 years.

Is it harder for poetic people to survive in a larger college than a smaller one? I mean, is that one of the challenges Columbia’s going to face, or can that be maintained as a place for poetic people to thrive and to teach and to be at?
Yes, I think we have to keep it in the foreground of our planning and our sense of who we are, that we have to remain a welcoming community, a place that invites the misfit. I’d like to come up with a better term than misfit, but the person who needs something other than what, for the sake of conversation, I’ll call the straight life. The typically-see, I hate to be descending about how other people live their lives, I mean... there are people, I think, who can step into roles that are seen as socially productive. They can have their own personal financial success, and I’m guess I’m talking about the typical professions of, you know, the lawyers and the doctors and the account executives and again, I don’t know how to emphasize enough that it’s good work and valid work, and I don’t mean to look down my nose at the squares, you know. But there are those people who are not squares, you know, who are not geared to that life, and they need a place to find out what to do and how to do it.

And perhaps—and I think this is something that has come up in these interviews, that when you talked about our culture of wealth, and that has grown—is Columbia or that place for the misfit or the non-traditional needed more than ever now?
Right. Absolutely.

Even more than maybe in the ‘60s and the ‘70s, where...
Yeah. I think it’s certainly needed as much, if not more, in that in the ‘60s and the ‘70s, there seemed to be many places for people to go, many avenues for people to find what they needed as individuals. Yeah, I think that at Columbia, we have to re-commit ourselves to that early mission.

Even as a large institution, you’re saying? You’re not saying—it doesn’t sound like you’re saying “Turn back the clock to this little place,” but as the institution of its size today, that we need a re-commitment.
Yes. And that probably means it’s probably harder work to do it now. It probably means that we can’t afford to be unstructured and loose, the way we could when we were small. We have to have the structure in place that can support probably many smaller communities within it. I guess we can’t expect that everybody’s gonna know each other the way we did, you know, back in the late ‘70s. You know, we’re gonna have to accept that there will be separate pockets of hopefully welcoming, warm communities for students, and the work of structuring that is that the people within those pockets are aware of how they have to communicate consciously with each other, ‘cause we’re not all on the same floor, sharing the same classrooms the way we used to. And we have to acknowledge that the shared community of everyone isn’t just gonna happen the way it used to, that there have to be structured channels for supporting the very kind of impractical—oh, what’s the word I’m looking for? The very kind of sloppy human place that we have been, and I guess I use sloppy with great affection, I don’t use it as a criticism. But very human, very... the College, in my experience, kind of grew organically, you know. The thing is, organic growth can get to be uncontrolable or unfeasible, and I think we wanna keep the fertility and creativity of how it has been. So the structuring, I hope, would not be about making it a grid instead of a garden, so to speak, but that the garden has to be within a support that can allow it to continue to work.
I think that's interesting, because one of the themes that comes up—and this is very typical—but for longtime employees, faculty and/or staff, that they look back at the good old days very nostalgic, and in many respects there's that sense of longing for them. But are there things that are better now, could you speak to that, that you wouldn't want to go back to because of what you have now? Absolutely.

I mean, because you kind of admit that you aren't looking to the future with an overabundance of trepidation; it seems like it's a challenge to you, but you aren't trying to turn the clock back—which I don't want to say other people are, but there's a greater sense of nostalgia with other people. So what's better today? What's hopeful about the future at Columbia?

It seems to me, when I was first the Facilities Manager of the Art Department, we would plan for the coming year with a sense of “It might not happen,” you know? Maybe no one's gonna come, you know? “We can't make that $10,000 addition, because we don't know if people are gonna be here for it.” Well, inevitably they were there, you know, and they were crowded. But because we didn't have the resources to plan—I mean, it's not that we couldn't plan, we couldn't pay for what needed to be done prior to the arrival of the students, you know? And so that was always terrible; we were always trying to catch up. We were always behind what we needed to be offering. And now I think the College is in a position where we can say, “Well, we're pretty sure they're gonna show up. The students are gonna be here, and we're pretty sure that there are gonna be 20 of them, not 10, so we have to have a room big enough for 20.” And that means if we don't make the room for the 20, 20 will show up and 10 of them will leave, because there's nowhere to sit. So we need to do that, and it seems to me—not that I'm privy to all the finances of the College—but it seems that we're in a much more secure place, and that we're much more able to say we can make that commitment, you know. We're gonna be here next year, the students are gonna come... and that really seems like a fairly recent shift in how we see ourselves. And that's, of course, much better. I see an improvement, is that the word? The level of accomplishment among the faculty is greater than it was when I first arrived. I had wonderful, wonderful teachers, and I wouldn't have traded it. However, it's very impressive like to look at the Photography Department, and see that they hire people like Barbara Kasten and Dawoud Bey, and of course Bob Thall, who developed his career while he was here, which is even more—I'm even more proud of that. But you know, to look at the Photography Department, which has been nationally known, but really has major league photographers on the faculty now, that is better: that will attract better students, you know. It raises the level, it turns the whole enterprise up a notch to have that kind of name recognition among the faculty. And again, that's not to say that these are in fact better teachers or better artists than the people who have been here, but it does give you more options when you have that kind of clout and recognition.

And depth. And depth. There's been great improvement just in getting a wastebasket when you need it, you know, just much better... much better support, just on the day to day. You know, everything from, as I say, getting a wastebasket, to getting on an elevator that is smooth and efficient and looks nice. You know, all those things make a difference in the quality of life at the College. And while I did come to a very funky place and like it that way, I don't mind growing up. And I have; personally, I've grown up here, you know. I've spent my adult life here.