

## Charles Traub

Do you want me to begin?

**I'll start with just giving—today's date is December the 7th, 1998, and this is a phone interview with Charles H. Traub, former chairman of the Photography Department at Columbia College Chicago.**

Yeah.

**And we'll start with, you know, what the date was—**

You might want to say also that I'm the original founder of your Museum (*laughs*).

**Oh really?**

Which no one seems to acknowledge, but I'm putting it in to make sure that they know that.

**Great.**

I was the energy and the conception behind it, yeah. It wasn't called the Museum, it was a gallery at that time, but the idea was to move it towards that.

**So that was the photography museum that exists today, but your initial conception—**  
I, I conceived that, I did.

**OK—**

Brought that forth today. When we moved into that building. I guess it's still in the same place. In the Michigan Avenue...

**At Harrison, on the corner of Michigan and Harrison.**

Yeah, right. And I put together the first board on it, hired the first curator and so on and so forth.

**Great. And maybe we can come back to that, yeah.**

We'll get to that, right.

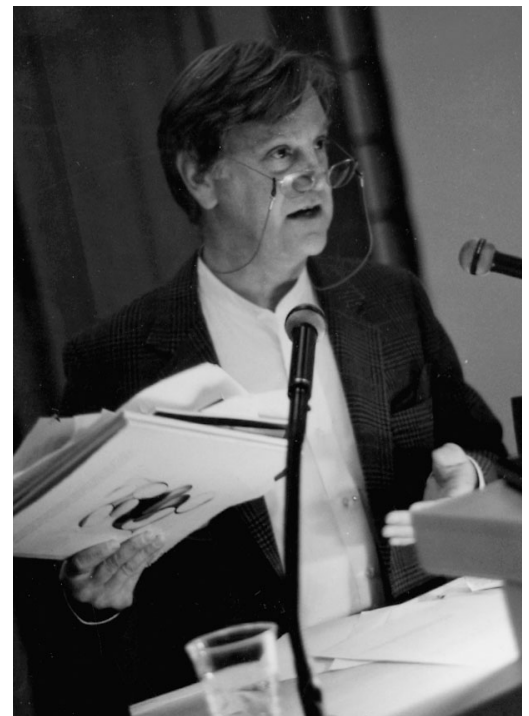
**OK, so why don't you tell us when you came to Columbia and what the circumstances were?**

Ah, I came to Columbia as a part-time instructor or teacher in 1970. And I was hired by Jim Newberry, who was then the chairperson, along with, I think, several other people. I was still in graduate school. I think there was one other, maybe two others, hired, and there were about three other part-time people already teaching at the school at that time. We were hired to begin—do the beginning courses and, I think, one Photo II, what we called a Photo II. The Photography curriculum was beginning to grow, and a good many of the instructors came from the Institute of Design, had been graduate students, because that was the leading graduate program at the time. And Jim had graduated from there, and it was very, of course, terrific to have a part-time job while one was in graduate school. (*Laughs*) So that's really the circumstances. And shortly thereafter, I think in the following year, I was actually hired full-time as the sort of second lieutenant, if you will, to Jim Newberry. I was, I think, the first full-time hire there, you know, in terms of—certainly in terms of the Photography Department, and one of the few other than chairpeople who were there at that time.

**OK. And what—why did you, you know, move from part-time to full-time, and how did your relationship with the institution develop and evolve over time?**

Well, I think that we... Jim and I, at that time, we haven't spoken to each other in many, many, many years, he's very angry at me because subsequently we had a terrible

falling-out over the Department, but at the time, he was a little bit older than I was, I was fairly young. My God, I must have been 26 or so, something like that. I'm not sure how—let's see, I was 25, I guess (*laughs*). Ah, about 25, yeah. 25 going on 26. It was clear, I mean, that photography—that was what they called the boom in photography interests. It was still the '60s, for all practical concerns, obviously, and photography really seemed to be the medium of interest for young people, and Columbia was affordable for photography. And of course the open admissions policy allowed people to enter into the curriculum both full-time, you know, as full-time students and part-time students. But there were a lot of adult education things going on, or what we now call adult education, and photography was so popular and growing really rapidly, and frankly, with Jim and I put together and kind of re-did the curriculum, because it was expanding, and we put together—and I



was in charge of doing this—a two-part structure for teaching Photo I, or the introductory course. One part dealt with the laboratory and the other part dealt with the aesthetics and history of photography, and I think it was a six credit hour course, maybe as much as 15 contact hours, or maybe more than that, I can't remember exactly. But it was a unique course, and it required a lot of manpower to run it, actually, and a lot of planning to make it work. The idea was to put all photo students on exactly the same page, so that we made sure they all had the same basic skills and the same basic critical, historical perspective, at least at the introductory level. And frankly, it worked. It worked beautifully. In fact, I think I have rarely ever encountered a course any better taught than that one was, the instruction that we gave to them, anywhere that I've ever been. And also, as it develops, over the next couple of years, we actually had two teachers for it. One for the lab and one for the classroom critique, and they were teamed up, and I managed all of that. And those were the most popular courses, because they were open to everybody. And at one point, it seemed like we had courses going around the clock. I think we had, at one point, a course that started at 8:00 in the morning and those classes went until 12:00 at night. *(Laughs)* And they were moneymakers, by the way, for the school. They produced tremendous revenues for the school. They were very popular courses. Photography was a very popular curriculum, and it was a highly structured and demanding curriculum as well. We thought it out very, very well, at a moment when photography was really burgeoning in the public interest.

**What did you base, or what were some of the origins of your philosophy of education in photography?**

Well... there's no question what our origins were, and it's very important. They did not come from the school itself, they came really from the field of photography. What we recognized was that a tradition, or rather a thinking about photography, had new relevance for that particular moment in history. And that origin is clearly the Bauhaus and clearly the Institute of Design, which was the new Bauhaus in Chicago, and a new tradition of Chicago photography and teaching of photography, which was immensely important in the history of photography. Our mentors—almost everybody at the Columbia Department's mentors were the same. We had Aaron Siskind being the principal mentor, Harry Callahan being also important in that, and Arthur Siegel. Only Harry is alive today, and Harry is a very important American photographer, both of the other two are very important too. And they were people who came out of the Institute, and they were noted people, they were major people, in fact, even at that point, who were one of the few really teaching people in photography around at the time I went to graduate school. And much of their philosophy of teaching came from the Bauhaus, and particularly from Maholy Nagy. And, well, we changed that, and we made it more accessible, and less, perhaps, precious, if you will, and we also added to it practical, job-oriented—what do you call it, I can't think of the word I want... Utilitarian, we gave more utilitarian practice to it. But Maholy believed in that, too. So the root is clearly there, and we demanded excellence of craft and excellence of vision, and a responsi-

bility to the medium as, indeed, and this is, I think, one of the breaks with really what was being fought with us in the school, as a pure and fine art. We saw that as the basis of what we were doing. Whether you were going to be a commercial photographer or a journalist or whatever, but we saw that the fine art of photography was the major criteria which drove the medium, which I still believe today, and which is still, I think, correct.

**That's very interesting.**

We were not trying to do job training, you know. We were trying to teach it from pure and from critically driven sources, not only of our own education, but what we knew as the field at that point, which was moving fast, and history was being rewritten, even at that point. And I think because we welded that older tradition to the kinds of students that we had and the moment in history, I think it was the reason we were so successful.

**Could you just elaborate a little bit on what you mean by the older tradition?**

Well, the older tradition would have been the Bauhaus, Callahan, and successor in the Callahan-Siskind-Siegel momentum that came out of the Institute of Design, say from 1955 or so through the '60s. There was a very strong tradition of photography as a creative vehicle in Chicago. Chicago is a major place because of that new Bauhaus tradition. I even wrote a book about it, by the way, a book you might want to look at, called *The New Vision: 40 Years of Photography at the Institute of Design*, where I chronicle that earlier history. That's an Aperture monograph that came out in about

1980, I think. You can still find it, I'm sure it's in your library somewhere.

**Yeah. And what did you mean when you talked about "and also the students" that you had at that time?**

Well, that was, of course, the biggest problem that, I think, really faced Columbia College, and I don't know, really, the total character of the students now, though I have a number of graduate students who do come from there. We had a tremendous mix of students. We had inner city kids who were barely literate, though bright and often talented; we had some rather mediocre suburban students; and then we seemed to have, and particularly in Photography this was true, a whole number of students who had gone somewhere else to school and decided that they really were interested in the arts, particularly in photography. And they dropped out of the other schools and they came to Columbia for the last two years or whatever. They were—what do you call those kind of students?

**Transfer students.**

Transfer students. And that mixture was very, very complicated to manage. And that's why we, I think, essentially—I'm oversimplifying—established a kind of baseline of expectation, to make sure everybody had the same general background. In addition to that, you had people who had been out of college, who were, you know, professionals or returning students or people who got interested. We had a tremendous number of them, and often, they were mixed up, all in the same class. I think the benefit of that is there was a tremendous kind of social-cultural

exchange, which held some people back and probably pushed others forward, but by and large, really probably fed the general level of everything. But it was difficult to make sure that you were... assisting everybody in the right way, and our biggest grief was, and I don't know what's happened since, was, at that time, John Schultz was running a wonderful writing program. Is John still there?

**Mm-hmm.**

Yeah. Which you probably know about, which was giving students voice to their writing, and I think in and of itself, it was quite successful, but we felt that it, along with other things within the school curriculum—we were somewhat mavericks in some ways, we were difficult—that those students could not—you know, often students who came in from the inner city and who were on that open admission thing had no remediation in their basic writing and reading skills, and so they were terribly deficient, and you know, asking them to write down a description of their work, they couldn't do it. And these problems were significant. We felt that Columbia—and they may have, over the years they have done—had to do more to remediate certain essential things that were missed by these students in their lower education. You know, in K through 12. Now, to balance that, I think the point is really well taken here, and I believe this again to this day: I think that we in the Photography program, by dealing with it both seriously and giving it hands-on in the most direct, not obscure, way, and by really training and teaching students to think and to see, if you will, seeing being the equivalent of thinking in photography, they learned they had talent. They learned they had things to say. They learned that they could

make something of quality. And I think it gave a lot of students who otherwise might not have gotten it—and I'm talking more about inner-city kids—incentive to learn. And I think it was their first real involvement in passionate learning, and I think they got it, and it led them to other things, and taught them how to learn, if you will. And I still think photography is a wonderful vehicle for that. And I think we were very successful in many, many cases. I also, over the period of time that I was at Columbia, this came a few years later, I think we did three, maybe four trips to Europe over the interim, interim courses that we took students to museums and different things like that. They were credit courses, we took a historian, a photographer, and maybe another two teachers. I think, usually, three teachers and about 20 students. Some of those students had never been out of Chicago before, and they were going to London and Paris and so on and so forth, and it was a fantastic door opener. *(Laughs)* And Columbia allowed that. I mean, they allowed that flexibility and experimentation, if you will. But I think what we were critical of was that they weren't getting some basics in reading, writing, arithmetic.

**Right.**

Some of those students, and not just inner-city kids—and this is true today, too—couldn't figure out what a ratio was, when we'd tell them to mix chemistry of 1:4, we had to explain that, detail by detail. We had to actually show what a 1:4 ratio was. As opposed to a fraction. *(Laughs)*

**You just mentioned that Columbia allowed that kind of experimenta-**

tion to offer a course that involved traveling to Europe. Yeah.

**Could you elaborate more on how you would define or describe the mission of Columbia, you know, its educational mission? And then maybe relate—I mean, you've talked about some of the conflict, perhaps, between the Department and the institution over remedial work, but if you could also address, you know, how photography fit into that larger mission.**

Well, when did Columbia—what was the title of Columbia? Media Arts? Isn't that how it called itself at that time? Is that right?

**You mean what it was known for?** Yeah. It was called the School of Media Arts, wasn't it?

**You know, I do not know.**

Yeah, I think that's correct. And of course, photography was a major medium. Well, I think that the uniqueness is, and I think it was largely Myron Alexandroff, I think he listened to people and he took things and he had some close, intimate advisors in some ways, but in the end, I think it was really his, Mike's, vision. I mean, I think he saw—and I think if you talk to him, by the way, I think he understood the social experiment also that was the Bauhaus. I remember him telling me, in fact, that he knew Maholy or that he had done something, you know, with that. Because in the '40s, or rather really in the late '30s, early '40s, Maholy had had a very definite vision of combining photography and... those kinds of interests of within the plastic arts with the social sciences and philosophy itself. In fact, there were Dewey—he got a lot from Dewey, he got a lot from

the University of Chicago kind of thinking. And in making design, art, and architecture part and parcel of a humanist experience. And I think that that, by osmosis, if not directly, influenced Mike through his own background and social concern. I think what he had was a kind of... more predisposition to real social activism in terms of, you know, what we call traditional liberal view of involving and helping the needy and helping those who were underprivileged and giving them a chance. I think at the core of his passion was this idea that open admissions—and again, I'm just speculating, because I, you know, and then I'm trying to remember—was a means really to level and equalize the dispossessed with the haves. *(Laughs)*

**Right.**

And I think what the philosophy [got us] was that we could do things that maybe didn't follow the traditional boundaries of education, that taught students that kind of responsibility, and I think it rather sort of demanded that the teachers as well, that we weren't going to be elitist, we weren't going to be precious, and so on and so forth. And also that we could really make things happen by infusing everything we did with some sort of social consciousness. I think at some point it became a little knee-jerk *(laughs)*, and a little too... you know, it was all well and good, but if you didn't—you know, our feeling was, if you weren't actually remediating the fact that Johnny can't read here, what are you gonna do? You know, you can give them all the hope in the world, but still, reading and writing were important. And we felt that we weren't taking care of that need. But I think that the school allowed—you know, if you came up with a new way of doing it, in general they

allowed you to do it. As long as it worked out economically. I mean, I remember Mike over and over would say, "Well, let's see if it works." And he'd take out his paper and pencil and write down some numbers. If the numbers worked out, he was generally OK about it. Which was quite pragmatic and realistic and, I think, made the school work. I think he didn't do things that were terribly risky, you know, in terms of that they would fail, because they couldn't support themselves. They had to justify themselves that way. I think that... they hired people, they let you hire people that, you know... who had the skills and the right stuff. They weren't co concerned about all the other academic bull-shit that was around at the time. And schools over the last 20 years have certainly followed that tradition more and more as we got more and more part-time faculty. I think part-time faculty—and I'm sure you're aware of it—are terribly exploited. But nevertheless—

*(Laughs)* As one of them.

As one of them, I'm sure you know that. They are terribly exploited. On the other hand, they allow you to be flexible, they allow a school to grow, they allow a school to get talents in. I personally don't believe in tenure, myself, today, even still; I think Mike probably didn't believe in it, really. I don't know, you'd have to ask him. Is he still alive, I hope?

**Mm-hmm.**  
Yeah.

**I'll be interviewing him next week, I think.**

I think tenure's a destructive thing, which is not to say that I don't think people should have job secu-



rity, and unions, and those kinds of things. But we didn't have all that mechanism there. We also had some demons (*laughs*). We had some chairpeople who were ruthless, demagogic, they looked after their own interests, the chairs often didn't cooperate, so and so forth. No different than anywhere else. But I think there was real flexibility in hiring young, bright talents of the moment. And I think it made a difference. At least it did at that time. I mean, it was a terribly formulative place. I think I was chairman there when I was 27 years old, something like that. I mean, where else could that happen? (*Laughs*) And I had a tremendous responsibility, you know, we had 500, 600, 800 students probably, and 35, 40 faculty members. It was a tremendous growing and learning experience for me. We had a lot of politics, like every place else, but I think that... there was some consistency in it. I mean, there was cronyism and there was some vision of one department might have had more direct interest and gotten favoritism in one way or another. These things happen everywhere anyway, for whatever reason. But the bottom line is that the Photography Department as a department was immensely successful, and it produced money. We did a lecture series, one of the first of its kind in the country if not the first one, we brought in major worldwide photographers to talk. We did it, in fact, with Cornell Kappa from ICP, this is something I initiated, I think, about '73, '74, I could look it up. It was called Contemporary Trends.

**OK.**

And I believe you still use the title today. And we did 12 people

initially, and we did it with Cornell Kappa, who later founded the ICP, the International Center of Photography in New York. And that lecture series, you know, produced real money. People paid for the series, they paid for individuals, we had sometimes 500, 600 people at those lectures. Later on, that idea, and I think this is very important to say, though I'm not sure that he will acknowledge it, but I'm sure that it's true, that—you can say likely or probably—the structure of Columbia's Photography Department, the workshops that we ran, the adult education courses, the whole structure of it, and this lecture series was a tremendous influence on Cornell Kappa himself, who later took his Concerned Photographers Organization and turned it into the International Center of Photography here in New York. I mean, he clearly learned lessons from us, and made a success of it here in New York. Just in the photography realm.

**That's interesting, how Columbia influenced—**

Pardon? I'm having trouble hearing you.

**Columbia's influence nationally.**

Yeah, there's no question that he learned lessons from that. And that was his first successful Concerned Photographers/Contemporary Trends lecture series, which they still do today, by the way, at ICP.

**Really?**

So I—it was our idea, we got it him to do it, because we needed a big name and we needed people out from New York, and he organized it, he got paid \$3000 for it. I remember, at the time, it seemed like a tremendous amount of money, but nowadays, it doesn't.

**This is a good time maybe to—if you have some dates for us. You said that you were Chair at 27. 27 or 28, I'm not sure.**

**OK. Do you remember what year that was?**

Well, let's see, it would be '73 or '74. Maybe I was 29. You know, you'll have to look it up. Or I can go back and look it up, but I just don't have it handy.

**And how long were you Chair, approximately?**

Ah... 'til—I think four years.

**OK. And how long did you stay at Columbia?**

I left Columbia in '77, so I would have been there seven years, I think, total.

**OK. It's interesting, and I've heard this from other interviews, that—when you said, "Where else could that happen?"**

Yeah.

**And if you could maybe return to that idea of—maybe opportunity or, you know, and how did that translate to the students as well? Now, were you aware of it at the time, or is that more, you know, looking back at it? What? That we had an opportunity there?**

**Yeah—**

Oh yeah, we were aware.

**—that Columbia offered you the—**  
Sure we were aware of it.

**—opportunity that wasn't available—**

Absolutely. I was still a graduate student when I was hired full-time. I think I was hired for \$10,500. My wife was pregnant with my son, and I mean, I was doing work, we

pursued our personal careers as artists as well, or as professionals. It was incredible for me. It was a major opportunity. Yes, we were very aware of it, and there were people—you see, there were several other graduate schools in Chicago. There was the Art Institute of Chicago, and even by somewhere in the mid-'70s there, I think Illinois started its graduate program, and still the Institute of Design, which, by the way, was waning at that point, waning largely because Columbia was so successful (*laughs*), and knocking the steam out. Though we didn't have a graduate program, there were scads of available teachers around (*laughs*), and we hired the best of them. And some of them were the best in the country, so, you know, we did exploit the part-time faculty. We didn't pay them terribly, and people very much wanted to teach for Columbia, there's no question about it, it was a very popular thing to do, and we were... As I said, these Photo I /Photo II sequences that we had devised, you know, they needed a lot of man and womanpower, because they went, you know, they went 'round the clock, they were really popular courses. They were filled all the time. And we didn't have enough darkroom space; that, you know, wasn't until we moved into the new building, and we planned this wonderful new facility that we really had enough space. And even then, it was pressure.

**And when did the new facility...?**  
Uh, you'll have to check that. I mean, the Fall of the year that the building opened, we opened that end. I planned it out. The new—well, at that time, I mean, I don't know what's been done since, but there were two floors of photogra-

phy equipment and darkrooms and space, and at the time, it was pretty state of the art. I worked with David [Avison] on that, he was another part-time person who was a physicist and then kind of an engineer type, and we came up with a great plan, we worked with the architects, and it really was a wonderful space when it opened. And the gallery space as well was started at that time. I guess that was '75, I'm not sure exactly the date there. I mean, that's another thing that I would like to note. I think that Mike put together the funding or whatever, the money and the support; to make that move to that building was a quantum leap, obviously, in establishing everything. I mean, we were always looked down on because we were this little school struggling, you know, we were heady and full of ourselves as young bravados, you know, particularly the Photography Department, and we really had to fight to establish our national reputation. But once we got that new space, then there was no question. Then it was major. By the way, this is another thing to be noted from the period and it's remarkable, and I have to give Jim Newberry credit for starting it, though I ran a lot of it. In the little darkroom space we had in the old building, there was four or five walls which we called the gallery, such as it was. And we put up shows once a month or so that were museum quality shows, that even today, you wouldn't have a chance to have that kind of intimacy with that quality of work anywhere, probably. And I'm talking about work from [Bresson], whose major show is up now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. The major figures of photography showed in that little gallery, and it was as jewel-like as it could be in terms of the quality of work that

was there, which the public hardly appreciated, and I think the school didn't appreciate it either, by the way. But it was the foundation of what is now the Museum, and I can guarantee you they would die right now to have some of those shows that we showed at that time, including a major Bill [Brandt] show that probably no one has ever put together as good as. And the students that were there, I mean, if you were to interview students from, let's say, 1971 or '72, who saw any of those shows, would say, "Oh, yeah, I saw an original this and that, right at Columbia College in the darkroom." (*Laughs*) And that was another—of course, the medium was different there, it wasn't quite as popular a medium as—the preciousness hadn't arrived. But we were showing pictures at that time which were valued somewhere between \$50 and \$200, which are now valued at \$50,000 apiece. So, I mean, that's what's happened

**How were those arranged? Is this through just connections that you and Jim Newberry—**  
Yeah.

**—had, you know, international, national, with other photographers?**

Well, we did—sometimes we did it with other photographers, sometimes we just asked them for a show, sometimes we did it with maybe with a gallery, but rarely, I think, with a gallery, and sometimes we just... you know, photographers then often had assemblages of their work, we'd call them up, say, "Would you show some work?" We'd get some work in, we'll pay for shipping and matting and whatever, you know. And the quality of what was shown there is

astounding. I mean, I don't know if there's a list of everything that was there, but it would be astounding. People would be astounded at what was shown there.

**Yeah. Was there a name of the area that you showed it in or anything?**

Just called the Photo Gallery.

**The Photo Gallery.**

Yeah. It was in the—it was adjacent—it was really the area where before you go into the darkrooms, and it was just some black walls that we sort of fought to have fixed up, and so on and so forth. Nobody thought much of it except us.

*(Laughs)* And the students who saw it. I mean, the school had no appreciation, frankly, of what the quality of what was being shown there at that time.

**You've mentioned—the Photo Gallery is another one, and I think the development of the curriculum, the classrooms to Europe, the lecture series, Contemporary Trends, and the adult education. Any other important events or contributions or things that happened, you know, during your tenure here that shouldn't be lost or forgotten?**

Well, the lecture series was major, it was a major cultural contribution, by the way, to the City of Chicago. No one was doing anything then, and that was a public lecture series. I wanna really emphasize how important that was. And also, it was the foundation also—it [drew] attention to the seriousness not only of the Department, but of the school. Because it was of a world-class level, and this is how people got interested in the Gallery and the Museum. When we went into the new building, people saw that, you

know, photography also was becoming a major medium of expression and collectibility and so on and so forth. So that has to really—the importance of that is really important. And also, in the Museum, at the time, and I don't think we called it the Museum, we called it the Chicago something-or—you know, Center for Photography, something like that. We put out several publications, early publications. We showed Chicago photographers, and then we did some major contemporary outside shows as well, which we did little catalogs on. This wasn't being done in Chicago at that time. You know, the museums still hadn't—you know, the Art Institute had a pretty active program of photography, but more historical. To really take somebody contemporary and put together a contemporary theme show, Columbia was the only place that was doing that, and we did this. And I'm very proud that we did this. We supported and launched major careers. I think the other thing that's important is that—and I don't think it's—and I don't know that it's ever come off right, but I think that Mike and the general environment of the people there, that the humanist quality that Mike projected wanted to nurture a kind of cross-disciplinary interest. It did not happen enough, but I think now that—and I'm sure Columbia's highly computerized—that the computer is such a major part of education that those reaches are much more possible. We were terribly fractionalized and departmentalized, and that was a mentality, probably, of divide and conquer, which is one way to make things run. In fact, I'm in an institution like that now. But nevertheless, there was a kind of community of common interests that was fostered amongst the chairpeople that tried

to reach to a higher kind of intellectual relationship, if you will. I think the only reason that we probably fell short of it—and this is all speculation—is that we never really had much money.

**Mm-hmm.**

We never had enough money to do the right thing the right way, you know? It was always a matter of... sort of taking from Peter to pay Paul, including the lecture series, which supported a lot of other things in the school, by the way. The lecture series was productive, and we did not get our money back from our own lecture series. Now, we bitched at the time, terribly, and I guess if I were Mike Alexandroff I would have done exactly the same thing, to strengthen, to do whatever I had to do to make other things strong in the school. But as a chairperson and as an administrator in my department, we want that money back in our department. Which is, of course, the struggle that goes on in all schools all the time. I think the contribution of the school, also, was to the media arts, and I think it understood, clearly, the power of visual and performing arts as a communicative and valid discourse of serious study that could be learned and could teach people how to learn. I don't think there's any question about it. And I think it affected many of the people who were there teaching, and huge numbers of students, including many students who went on to great success, in various areas, not only in photography but in all the realms of the school. You know, I've been away from Chicago for so long, so I don't really fully appreciate the impact of the school upon the city. But I know what we did, in photography, and I know that, in



fact, that it is a major institution that survives and believes in the—and I think that Mike let us do this, that it was as valuable to be a dancer or a photographer or a filmmaker as it was to be a writer or historian or chemist. *(Laughs)* And without being elitist, at the same time. So, I mean, it's hard to specify, exactly, what that's about. I think also that education was available to the masses, so to speak, rather than just rich kids from the North Shore. And that made a difference. I mean, in the '70s, early '70s late '60s, some of those graduation ceremonies were just unbelievable, you know? They were performance pieces in and of themselves, and students were wildly dressed and music and imagery showing and... it would be nice to see something like that today.

*(Laughs)* It's probably more conservative today, but they were wonderful events, you know? Mike gave a speech every year, you should get that speech, which was the same speech, I think, the whole time I was there. But it was so wonderfully written and so inspiring and so clearly his philosophy, that I think it should be reprinted *(laughs)* for history.

**Many people have made reference to that.**

Yeah. I mean, it was always the same speech, you know, maybe slightly tweaked, and it drew attention to the political currents of the time, and so on and so forth. But it was a wonderful speech, there's no question about it. And the truth is, there was no reason for him to rewrite it. It summed it up perfectly, you know? *(Laughs)* There's only so many speeches you can give at such events.

**You mentioned some of the challenges that faced Columbia while you were here.**

Uh-huh.

**The remediation, perhaps you want to talk more to this, but the factionalization of the departments, and then the lack of money that always seemed to be a pressing concern.**

Yeah.

**Anything else that you remember from that period that was particularly challenging to the institution, or to your department?**

Well, yeah. I mean, I think that the school was the new boy on the block, you know. It didn't have a history, it didn't have a record of excellence, it had this open admissions policy, and so there was this sort of snobbery from, you know, the other universities in the area, that we're academically not solid, and so on and so forth.

**I just want to interrupt you to turn over the tape.**

Yeah.

**OK, we're on again.**

That we're academically not solid, and that our criteria are loose and fast, and there was also the charge, at the time, and I think it was true, but there was this Illinois State Scholarship policy, I don't quite remember exactly how it worked, but I think basically, anybody could go to school and the state would supply some scholarship money, and that the school survived on that. In fact, I think it did *(laughs)*. You know, I think that's something you have to do some research on, if you haven't already. Do you know about that?

**No. No.**

Well, there was some kind of, you know, Johnson liberal—it was a good thing, policy, by the way—where they gave scholarship money basically to almost anybody who had graduated from high school to

go to college. It was called the North Illinois State Scholarship, I think, and it was federally funded, I think. And that money came, you know, if you got your numbers, you got your money, you know. And the school used that money. So there were a lot of students in there who probably didn't belong there, you know, who couldn't hack it. And we carried them sometimes, we had to carry them, because they were trying *(laughs)*. And I actually believe in that, I believe we educated those people. Did we make brilliant scholars out of them? Did we make wonderful artists out of them? I don't know. I mean, the real piece of history would go back and look at the students and see where they're at, see what happened. But I think we helped a lot of students because of it, and we probably failed a good number as well. I think that was a real challenge, and that was a real challenge not—and there's two sides too, that's the challenge of education itself. Should education be so specialized and so arcane and so remote that it fails to be about educating the most needy? *(Laughs)* And in many cases, I think we did that, you know. I'm oversimplifying the big issue here, which really needs careful examination. Did those students succeed? What happened to some of those students? Can you identify them? I don't know. I know that I usually, from the willing ones, saw tremendous progress, because in my area, we taught them how to see. We taught them how to think. And once they saw that they could do something creative, they felt good, they felt confident, and they felt like learning. I saw that happen over and over again. But I think the challenge from the rest of the city was "Is this a serious place? Is this a real school? Is this a school that has criteria and demands excel-



lence and so on and so forth?" And I think we had to prove it. And the question is, at this—it's a 50 year junction, is that what it is?

**Excuse me?**

You're doing this for the 50th year?

**Um, I don't think that—no, not in particular. It's more, you know, Louis seeing that people were retiring, and some were dying, and, you know, people had left, and he thought that the history was lost. I think there's also some—that at Columbia today there's a feeling still, and this is my own personal observation, that it's at a bit of a crossroads. Is it, you know, aping other institutions too much? Is it losing its uniqueness? And I think that that's part of the interest in its origin.**

You personally feel it is?

**Well, some. You know, I knew very little about the history of the institution before I started this Oral History Project, and I certainly feel that now. (Laughs)**

**After doing these interviews.** Yeah. Well, don't let anybody romanticize it, you know?

**Yeah.**

I mean, it's easy to romanticize, you know, as a historian, to romanticize fact. It was very difficult. It was very fraught with factions. It was not a terribly cooperative place. We hated the Film Department, we hated—you know, I liked John Schultz a great deal, and he's a very lovely and talented man, and I think a visionary—but we hated what he did. We hated it. Because we didn't think it stood for anything of excellence. We didn't think it was training students the basic skills that, at that point, these inner city kids needed. And I have

to tell you, our best students, the ones that really shined, and became successes, largely—I can't say this unequivocally because I'd have to look at everybody who graduated and see where they are today—but ones that I know, were often very privileged kids. (Laughs) Don't think it isn't true. You know, they had something else. They either came from backgrounds—maybe they—they were often troubled kids who came in there, as the '60s produced so many who had dropped out of other places, and then they found their voice at Columbia—but the real question is, what we did, did the experiment really work? And I don't know. I don't know. My instinct is that it worked in a lot of cases and gave a better life to a number of people who might not have had that access in another institution. I can't say it for sure, but that's my instinct. You know, I mean, I'm sure the school talks about [Ojir] Mohammed, you know who he is? Have you heard of him?

**No.**

Well, he won the Pulitzer Prize. He was a photography student in our department at the time, and his brother. But, you know, he was a very successful African-American photographer. Well, he's Elijah Mohammed's grandson. He had everything in the world going for him, you know? (Laughs) You know, he's hardly a case of inner city kids, you know? And he's a very wonderful guy, he works for The New York Times now. But... I'd like to know what happened to some of those inner city kids. And some of the Vietnam vets, you know? Who we had a tremendous number of, and I loved them dearly, they were very sensitive guys, mostly guys, obviously, and some of them were really troubled, too.

**Mm-hmm.**

We had a lot of Vietnam vets, and they worked very hard, but they weren't necessarily cultured, if you will, enough. But they did it. And I'm sure someone else will say we were very elitist, the Photography Department. They may think we were very elitist, you know. Because we had a very high criteria. We didn't compromise that criteria just because we had this mixture of students. But I think the real challenge was to the rest of the city, particularly—we were—I think we beat, if you will, we knocked the Institute of Design out. We simply destroyed it, in a way, because of our accessibility. Our big competition was the Art Institute of Chicago, and they always looked down on us, and then they always wanted our jobs, and then they always mimicked everything we did, and they came to our lectures and they came—(laughs). They used us for everything they could, but they never returned it. (Laughs) And that would have been the robbery, if you will. We did some very successful programs, by the way, with people like Fred [Egg] from the University of Chicago. Fred was one of the most important anthropologists of the 20th century, actually. He's dead now. And his wife, Joan [Egg], who was a child psychologist. We did workshops for them. We did projects with other schools a lot, where we came in, taught things, or we did a project with students and ourselves with one of the Illinois Institutes for Psychoanalysis, where we were videoing casework. And that laid some foundations for some major work I just heard the other day that another woman did. We were experimental, we were doing things, not that other schools

weren't, but we were trying to bring the vision of photography and the media, if you will, to some other disciplines. I think we failed primarily because of the struggle for money. I think if... if the school had really had some endowment at that time, my God, no telling what we could have done. The other thing I wanted to mention that sticks to me—I remember going to Mike once about some projects and I said, "I think we can get some grants, we can get an Illinois State Council of the Arts, maybe an NEA or something," I don't remember what it was, and he said, "No, don't bother." He said, "If you can't support it on its own, it will fail. Because the grants will run out." And I think he was very skeptical of trying to go after money in that way, in terms of grants. And he was right. Because it's very iffy. It doesn't give longevity to things. They had a fundraiser at the time, a guy named Wilson, who I think was an absolute boob. He was a friend of Mike's. He was a crony. And he couldn't raise money for hell, you know. He was a socially offensive guy, as far as I'm concerned. And he had no idea how to raise money, you know. And I think that was a very big shortcoming on our part, and I think that was largely because Mike didn't want to be beholden to anybody. And I think, in some ways, that's quite admirable, that he made it work as far—But we did not have enough money to do things, to trim the rough edges, or to remediate, or to create, you know, those kinds of things, or to support a student while we held them back or whatever we might have needed to do.

**Did you look to anyone else besides, say—you've already mentioned Mike Alexandroff—that**

**was in the institution that were particular friends to the department? You know, the administration, or advocates of photography that could help get a program together? Or were you pretty much—**

No. I think we were fighting the institution, in some ways, all the time. I don't think we—everybody thought we were kind of precious and elitist, I think, and I think they probably felt that about some other departments. I think at base, everybody respected what we were doing. Lou Silverstein was always a good friend of mine, and is still a good friend of mine to this day, and, I think, a fair and sympathetic dean, at the time. He was the dean, most of that time. And I think he... I think he was fair, and I think he argued our points, you know, to the best of his knowledge and understanding of what we were doing. Also, there wasn't any knowledge of what photography was about at that time. *(Laughs)* I mean, from another generation, you know, this is, photography's about going to war and taking pictures, you know, and the idea that this was a pure art form, or that this was, you know, something else, was pretty alien to everybody, except those of us in the discipline. So, on the other hand, I think they couldn't question the success of the department. They could never question that, and, you know, when it came to fight—there was a fight for rooms, at one point, what we called the stage in the old building. And they built some offices for the Film Department there. And I remember the carpenter, what was his name, is he still—he's not alive, probably.

**Oh, I know—**

He was very close to Mike, he was a friend of Mike's. I think the carpenter ran the school, you know.

Because the one informant Mike had was the carpenter. He built these little rooms on the stage, which we shared with the Film Department. We went in one night and tore them all down! He went in there, I'll never forget it, he looked at us and said, "I know I built those rooms! Aye yi yi, where are they?" *(Laughs)* We tore 'em down! I mean, it was warfare. You know, we needed that space! And the chairpeople, you know... I hope I'm not characterized as such when I became chairperson. When I first came there, they were like little fiefdoms, you know? They didn't talk to each other, they all were fighting, and they were all, everybody, was always a respected person in the field, but there was not very much correspondence between them. I think everybody wanted it, but no one had the money or means or time to do it. One of the most interesting events, and I think probably the turning point in the school—and I don't know if anybody else has referenced this—because of that happening, and all this sort of—and it was a small place, by the way. You know, it was not a big place.

**Mm-hmm.**

So, you know, when it came to being who the executives were, there weren't so many. And I think Mike very carefully had to be ginger, and, you know, balance this against that. If he gave somebody one thing, could he give it to the other, you know. I mean, I wouldn't want to have been in his shoes at that time, but one of the really interesting events, which I think I carried forth to this day, and which I advocate people to do, is they—and I think Lou will tell you more about this.

**Mm-hmm.**

They rented a conference center somewhere up, you know, on the Wisconsin border, I think. Very lovely place. They took all the chairs and I think maybe just a few other administrators, and we had some agenda, and we went up there to talk about the school and where it could go. I would say that was about 1975, '76. And I remember they had hot tubs and all that stuff, and I remember we were being—oh, you know—it was the first time certain people came together and really talked on a one-to one basis. Or as a group. Now, I can't tell you what the agenda was to this day, you know, at this time, in terms of specifics, but I remember that our respect for each other really grew. Our friendships grew out of it, a sense of community, a sense of vision for the school. And I think also, it represented Mike turning over more and opening himself up to—not only to positive criticism and sharing of this ideology with the people that actually worked there.

**Mm-hmm.**

And these were the full-time. And I think it was a very successful thing. I mean, I was very proud to be a part of it. And I think there were supposed to be follow-ups, and there may have been, I don't know, in subsequent years. But it was very successful, as far as I'm concerned. And I remember feeling that that gave us cohesion that we hadn't had before.

**Hmm. Unfortunately, I am very strictly limited to an hour, but—Yeah.**

**I wanted to ask you one last question. When you left Columbia, um... what did you take with you, if anything? You know, what did you bring that you**

**developed or acquired here through your experience at this institution as you left and went on in your work?**

Well, many things. Obviously, I left Columbia in a terrific position. I was young, I was a chairperson, I went on to a very prestigious job in New York. Because of having, in fact, started the gallery, I went to become the director of the most important photography gallery in the world, and because of my experience as an educator and also as having started that gallery, what is now the Museum there. And that formulated the rest of my career. And I subsequently went into—from being an artist—I was always an artist, but I mean, doing my own artwork and—I quit the gallery and I had to do a lot of editorial work, and in addition to my own artwork, to live, and then eventually, I came back to education, and now I'm chairperson again of a major photo department. So, certainly, it gave me administrative skills, it gave me a vision. And it gave me the vision, the central vision that I discussed earlier. I believe in the kind of holistic view, not only in the medium of photography, but in education of it, being a non-elitist thing. I think I learned the need that we had to remediate, by the way, that you can't just do this and say it's OK, without filling in the gaps. And I think a lot of schools still suffer from that. In other words, that you have to do both, and you can do both, and that experiments in education are what we must do. We must break—this is very important to my philosophy, I'm writing a book, actually, about some of these things, presently—we simply have to re-invent education all the time.

**Mm-hmm.**

The 19th century model that sticks to most universities is really awful. It doesn't work, and it only feeds the elitists, and only feeds, basically, the interests of the tenured professors, actually. It doesn't really feed the populace that needs the work. But the extreme is also the true case. You can't give up excellence of vision, you can't give up excellence within the field in order just to sort of, you know, make it a very simplistic way of getting at somebody. I mean, you have to give both—use both criteria. And I think that's the challenge to education, still today. Can we open the doors, can we educate people, without being elitist in the process? And challenging the old elite notions of what education's about. Do I believe in throwing the canon out the door? No, I do not, you know?

**Mm-hmm.**

I think the canon has to be re-adapted all the time, but there has to be criteria that establishes what is a masterwork from not a masterwork. And you have to teach people to appreciate those criteria, but you have to do it in new ways all the time. I also believe that teaching is important, particularly in a school like Columbia or where I am presently, or most liberal arts schools. It's much more important than doing research, and I think that the failure is, you know, that our research institutions are something very different, and should not be teaching institutions. And I think that, you know, certainly Columbia does not do that kind of research. On the other hand, you can't re-invent things without research. But I think that my vision of trying to re-think what education could be, and how it could be, is an imperfect experiment, but a



noble one, that we constantly- that I carry with me all the time. And I would not have gotten that, because I would have believed in the older authoritarian traditional education had I not been at Columbia, and I have never practiced that kind of administration, nor that kind of teaching myself. I do believe in criteria, I do believe in excellence, and I do believe in a vision which is based on the history of the medium or the history of the subject, and its relationship to culture and humanities in general. And I think I got that from Columbia.

**I want to thank you a lot for this—  
Yeah.**

**—because you really gave just some extraordinary insights into, you know, not only your own experience but the institution, ones that—**