

STORM KING ART CENTER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

JOHN STERN

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Interviewed by Sarah Dziedzic
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Interview with John Stern
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic
January 25, 2018

Storm King Art Center Museum Building
1 audio file
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Audio file 1

Dziedzic: Today is January 25, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing John Stern for the Storm King Oral History Program. So, I mentioned that I wanted to start with *The View from Here: Storm King at Fifty* (2010–11), the fiftieth anniversary, as a point for us to maybe look back from there, and look ahead. And I just wanted to ask you about that time for you in terms of it being a transitional time for your role here, and maybe also within your family, as well. What were you coming to Storm King with? When did you know that this would be something that you would be involved with?

Stern: I had been involved with Storm King starting in [00:01:00] I think 1993, I joined the Board. Of course, along with my sisters Lisa and Bea Stern, we had enjoyed and were very aware of Storm King Art Center and its development. But being a Trustee gave a different insight and to see how to get to know the Board members, some of whom we knew as family friends. [00:02:00] In 2008, I was asked by Peter Bienstock, the Chair of executive committee, to consider succeeding my dad as President, as a volunteer President, which my father had served in that capacity since the founding of Storm King in 1960.

Just for a moment to go back, when my grandfather, Ted Ogden—we called him Opa, which is sort of funny because he was my mother's father—but we took Opa from the German. [00:03:00] My father grew up in Hamburg, or was born in Hamburg, with German roots. Ted Ogden bought the property here, the [Vermont] Hatch property, and I think that by that time he had recruited my father into the family business, Star Expansion Company. I think my dad was recruited when he was in his late twenties, I guess 28. At that time, my grandfather was in the process of moving the entire company, Star Expansion, from Bayonne, New Jersey to Mountainville.

My grandfather's idea was, hey, this was a great opportunity to start an art center. [00:04:00] He really loved Mountainville and the surrounding town of Cornwall, had been philanthropic. But the idea from the beginning was, my grandfather was going to have fun doing this. He was not going to be burdened by the day-to-day of Star Expansion. That's what my father was going to do.

My father, in his journals and in other oral histories, was always amused that when he was asked to come to the first Board meeting of the Storm King Art Center that my grandfather and one other Trustee, I think Walter Orr, were sort of giggling before the meeting, and they were giggling because [00:05:00] I think they had come with the idea that my father would take care of all the paperwork and the administration,

and my grandfather would start the collection and just do the fun things. So, my dad didn't know apparently before going to that meeting that he was going to be asked to be President and Chair of the Board.

When my dad was diagnosed with a form of dementia in the early stages, I think he along with Peter Bienstock had a discussion and then my dad—it made sense to step out of that role. I recall coming up [00:06:00] and coming into this office where we are now, which was my father's office, and it was on the one hand very exciting and also a little bit daunting, both because my grandfather and my father had really great vision and had done remarkable work. My father, particularly. I knew my grandfather very well, but he died when I was 14. Storm King was one of many major projects in Mountainville that I would, in summers daily, tour with my grandfather all morning, but it was really about seeing the projects, the earthmoving projects. It could have been the dairy farm [00:07:00] and farms that my grandfather ran as a part of the business. He just loved seeing land developed, not in a commercial way in terms of the landscape of Storm King.

When I came in February 2008, I was still a fulltime lawyer, and was in New York part of the time and in Washington, DC. It was very challenging the first almost two years of my presidency because I soon realized that it was very difficult to do what my father had done for many years, which was to [00:08:00] be a very active and thoughtful President while still having a fulltime career. Now, I think my father really stepped back from the family business after my grandfather died, and he had a wonderful Vice President and executives that ran the company. By the time I came in in 2008, the company had been sold in the 1990s, so my father could get more time, almost really fulltime as a volunteer President. For me, that was harder, because I was coming to the reality that by 2009, and we were starting to plan for the fiftieth anniversary at Storm King in 2010, [00:09:00] that there was so much that needed my input and leadership that it was very frustrating, because I wasn't doing justice to my fulltime job or to being a volunteer President.

Fortunately, the Board and Peter Bienstock, who was the representative of the Board in this sense, were thinking about the opportunity for me to come on fulltime. We started having discussions about that in 2009, in the latter part of 2009, and at the December Board meeting this was proposed [00:10:00] and approved by the Board for me to come on fulltime. I have to say that that was a moment—and I left my law job, which I had enjoyed. I practiced as a lawyer for 20 years in government and also in the private sector. People have asked me since, "Do you miss the law?" I don't miss the law, because I think this is one of the greatest jobs in the world. I'm incredibly lucky and privileged to be able to continue this family-led art legacy and to bring it into [00:11:00] now and to the 21st century.

For me personally, it's just been a dream. A dream to have daily the experience of being at Storm King. I have amazing staff that we have grown and the opportunity to create relationships with artists and to work with them and to work with some of the other incredibly talented and thoughtful people; our Board, our council, our donors. I've had tours where people have said, "Let me get this straight. They pay you to do this?" Because it's so much fun, [00:12:00] and it's so rewarding and gratifying. Long answer here.

Going back to 2009, we were planning our first Gala. I realized that we really need to diversify our sources of support and build that up, and it seemed like a great idea. I have to say that, at that time, I had not hired the senior staff that I have now. I didn't have a Director of Development, and I leaned heavily on the experience of our Trustees and particularly, Cynthia Hazen Polsky was just a godsend in that first Gala, in planning it. Very successful, and it became an annual event that [00:13:00] is a very important event for Storm King. I was thinking about that. I was thinking the fiftieth anniversary and the exhibition, *The View from Here*, about the history of Storm King, but during 2009 we put together a sort of informal committee to help David Collens on this indoor exhibition about the history of Storm King. My sisters, Lisa and Bea, were very, very involved as was Jerry L. Thompson, our long-time photographer.

Again, at that time we didn't have a curator under David. [00:14:00] We'd had freelance curators for different exhibitions, and at the same time, I'd been talking with David about an outdoor sculpture exhibition, which is typically what our exhibitions are. We talked about the idea of having new artists and artists in our collection doing new work or bringing a great work back to Storm King. For me, I was more involved in that exhibition. Both of those exhibitions, we decided to make them two years and really link them to the fiftieth anniversary, and really milk it. That was eye-opening for me, and I did have an [00:15:00] opportunity to work with David and to review and suggest some new artists for Storm King.

One of them was Alyson Shotz, who I met at an event at Socrates Sculpture Park, their annual event. Alyson had been one of the fellows at Socrates and had shown this work, *Mirror Fence* (2003, refabricated 2014), in 2003 in an exhibition called *Yard*. We took that piece, part of that piece, as one of the five new artists. I also was very involved with another artist who I had gotten to know and seen his work, [00:16:00] Stephen Talasnik and his bamboo work (*Stream: A Folded Drawing*, 2009–10) was really quite remarkable. Then we also had other great artists (John Bisbee, Maria Elena González, and Darrell Petit). And then the artists who we chose from the collection, Mark di Suvero, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Alice Aycock, Chakaia Booker, Andy Goldworthy. It was just a great group.

That was a very exciting time. I also felt that until I had had time—I became a fulltime President and joined the staff in March of 2010. I also was thinking about changes, but I didn't think it was fair to make major changes until I'd had some [00:17:00] time doing the job right and sort of fulltime. I should also say that in that same period, we had a wonderful opportunity for 2011, the second year of the two-year

exhibition, to do an off-site exhibition at Governors Island. David and I were very excited about the prospect of doing a show of Mark di Suvero's large-scale sculptures, which we're very well-known for at Storm King, [00:18:00] at Governors Island, which had been transferred from the federal government at an army base. The Coast Guard island off of Manhattan. It was being decommissioned, so it went originally to the State of New York. Renee Mitchell, whose husband Richard was on our Board for many years—Renee was the Chair of the Trust for Governors Island, the nonprofit that would run and program Governors Island. She offered this opportunity to do a show, and [00:19:00] we went to the Board, and we needed to raise quite a lot of money in a short time.

I think there was certainly some wariness about doing this, because we'd never done an off-site show. It was a short, compressed time, and I think there was some real concern about, can we raise the money? Can we pull this off? Again, this was before the kind of staff that we have now. David and I really felt we could do it, and we did, and we raised a significant amount of money, around a million dollars I think, to have what became a two-year exhibition. I think that was just one of the projects that I feel very [00:20:00] proud about, that we were able to accomplish that.

During the time that we were setting that up, we started to build the senior staff. We recruited, and Rachel Coker joined in March 2010. She was onboard and then Nora Lawrence, as I recall, started in the curatorial department as an associate curator. She started just a few weeks before the Governors Island show opened in May 2011. I remember telling her, one of the things I asked her to do is see if she could develop an app in six weeks, and she found someone, and she did it, and that was really [00:21:00] quite striking. She really helped us with the indoor part of that exhibition.

But I think what it did was, it really increased awareness of Storm King, because during those two years more than 800,000 people visited over two summers—it was only open in the summer—to New Yorkers and people from all over the world. You couldn't go to Governors Island on the free ferry from Manhattan or Brooklyn and not see Mark's work. It was up everywhere, and it was just a great moment, because it was before Governors Island started its terrific landscaping and designing of a park, but it was more the raw beauty of [00:22:00] the views from Picnic Point. You could see Mark's works against the Statue of Liberty. It also was a great tool to bring people in, future supporters for Storm King. It was a very exciting time.

Dziedzic: That's exactly when I learned about Storm King, too, going to Governors Island just to go to it, and then seeing Mark di Suvero's work. So, I want to go back a little bit I guess to deciding that you were going to take over as the President. At this particularly notable moment of the fiftieth anniversary, [00:23:00] as you said, there was a smaller staff, and also this very large planning, beginning with the fiftieth anniversary exhibitions. I'm wondering about hitting your stride, figuring out how you wanted to go

about making changes, but how you also wanted to bring the past back—and in fact present it, in a sense—in these exhibitions. What kind of changes did you have in mind that you were careful about implementing?

Stern: That's a very good question. I also should say that I was talking to our Board at this time, [00:24:00] including my sisters who are very interested, and at the same time, there was a generational transition—I would say a very quick transition—because this was all set. I mean, this all was in the context of my father needing to step down, also, in terms of his leadership of the family foundation that my grandfather started in the 1940s, 1947. The Ralph E. Ogden Foundation. Like the leadership at Storm King, it was patriarchal. It was my grandfather, the founder of the Foundation, and my father had succeeded him because they were very close. They were partners in Star Expansion, and my grandfather, his intent was that he [00:25:00] wanted Peter, his son-in-law, to—he hoped that my father would really want to have a role and continue to lead the Storm King that he had started.

Anyway, I was in conversation with people and really trying to understand, but I did what was needed, but I felt, and I think there was certainly consensus around this that Storm King, if you ask people you know about it, I would say probably nine out of 10 people you just would run into would say, “I’ve never heard of it.” The people who did would say, “Oh, yes. Yes, [00:26:00] I’ve seen that. It’s an amazing place. Amazing.” I think that the perception was that it was a beautiful site and collection, very unusual, but if you’ve seen it once, that’s all you need. It’s a bucket list type of destination. It’s very unlike anything you’ve seen.

I think that the other thing that I knew is that there was a great opportunity to have more people know about Storm King and have this experience that all of our Trustees have had, all of our docents have had, all of our staff and [00:27:00] the people who have come, that this is a place unlike any other in the world in terms of the acreage; the 500 acres, the landscape brilliantly designed by Bill Rutherford, Sr., and an incredible collection of large-scale outdoor sculpture that only really began to be produced in the 1960s. Storm King was started in 1960, not as a sculpture park, not as outside museum, but as a gift to this community in Cornwall, in the Hudson Valley.

I felt more people should be able to enjoy this. This should not be [00:28:00] a place that everyone knows as an elite, private collection, and I think many people thought it was a private collection and not a public museum, which it has been really since the beginning. To get practical, one of the first things, even before I became a fulltime President, we started a café. When you come to Storm King, it’s really not worth coming for 45 minutes. You need to be here for at least two plus hours, because it’s large and it’s so enticing, and you want to be here, [00:29:00] but you get hungry, so we needed a place for good food on the site. We needed a place for coffee and tea. So, I think looking at making the amenities a little bit

more—bringing it up to what it should be was something that was important to me.

I also think that, I felt that we could do more programming, and so I think that's really been something that I was thinking about in adding to our staff and putting together a really good team with some [00:30:00] museum experience. Really make it a more professional experience with new staffers. I should say that we had some really terrific colleagues when I joined, some of whom had worked for the family company, but had done an amazing job in transitioning to Storm King, and we have some of those staff today. But we just needed more people, and we needed a development department to diversify our funding. We created a position of a fulltime Director of Educational Programs. [00:31:00] Victoria Lichtendorf took that position and has done an amazing job. Rachel Coker, our first Director of Development fulltime, now a Deputy Director for External Affairs; Anthony Davidowitz, the Deputy Director now of Administration Operations; Nora Lawrence, now our Senior Curator. They all had a huge impact in our growth. Hiring Mike Seaman, our Director of Facilities and our Conservation Specialist. Dwayne Jarvis, our Director of Finance. Putting together that whole team really allowed for at least my vision to have really dynamic programming, so that Storm King can be a kind of place that's not just, you go, and you check it off for the bucket list. You want to come back.

Along with that, I wanted to have a better perception of this community that we're in. Again, that it's not a sort of town and gown, Ivy League place. It's a place where you go now do yoga on Saturday mornings. You can go birding. You can have moonlit walks, all of which we have now, but also just that people are excited about and feel like it's their Storm King, and they're proud of it, and they want to bring more people to experience it.

That was really what I felt I could help to do. I did not, and I wish I had now, taken more art classes in college. [00:33:00] I was trained as a lawyer, but I was fortunate to go to Yale Law School, and I think they were more about leadership and civic life than about learning about law. I had some background in terms of managing and leadership, so that's what I can bring to the table. I'm very proud that we have now certainly increased our amenities here, and since my first year as President in 2008, we've more than quadrupled the visitation, which I'm very proud of, because it just means more people can enjoy it.

I also think that there's, [00:34:00] especially in our world that is dominated by our phones, dominated by electronic communications—which is great and also a little bit addictive—that I'm really glad when people come and I'm walking around on a beautiful weekend here, people are looking at each other. They're looking at the sculpture. They're looking at the sky. They're looking at the native grasses and our landscape, and they may take out their phone and take a photo and post it on Instagram, and that's great, but they're not the kind of zombies of Manhattan who are walking across the street looking at their phone; on the subway looking at their phone. And I think that's important. I think it's important to be in the

moment, [00:35:00] and I'm one of those people who get distracted and is checking my phone often, but this is an antidote to that.

The level of, I really would say love and personal engagement with this place, with this site, with the artists, the people, the sculpture, the landscape, for many people it is an extraordinary and memorable experience. We have now started weddings and private events, and there are people who say, we always come every Father's Day. People have [00:36:00] had their engagement here. They have had now a wedding. They've had their anniversary. It's wonderful to have that response. Those were some of the early objectives, and that led to just more thinking about really what a great collection and landscape, and how to animate the space and the opportunities here. We've always had music from 1960 on, but now we have a much more diverse set of programming. We have classical Indian concerts. We have indie concerts. We have really creative programming, and we're experimenting. [00:37:00] We've had, last year we had dance on the grounds and it's amazing, and Heather Hart's piece, *The Oracle of Lacuna* (2017).

And now we have the artists in residence program that Nora Lawrence and Victoria Lichtendorf researched for a few years, and we are now hosting Shandaken: Storm King, which has been a great collaboration which brings more artists. It allows us to support more artists. Those kinds of projects, and particularly collaborating with other nonprofits, has also been just really gratifying and has helped us tremendously.

Dziedzic: It [00:38:00] sounds like the activities really diversified once you arrived and staff was hired to carry them out. In the meantime, there were still educational programs. There was still funds being raised, shows being curated, and operations being managed. I'm wondering, who was taking care of those kinds of things before you arrived? Was it more, I guess, everything coming through your father, or was it divided among a lot of other staff? Was it David?

Stern: I think before I came on, David has played a huge role as Director. I think he began in his youth in 1978 as Director, and he came on [00:39:00] to Storm King I believe just right around the time that my grandfather died. My grandfather died on September 11, 1974. So, he coincided with my father becoming a real engaged President after my grandfather's death, so he really established the annual exhibition here in 1976 with *David Smith*, and that idea of just doing an exhibition each year from May until November. We're seasonal. We are still open in April—we extended the season out to December. David was really in charge of the exhibitions, but he worked very closely with my father [00:40:00] and with Bill Rutherford. I think that it was a very lean staff for many years, but I think very influenced by my father also thinking about bringing in expertise in the Board.

Cynthia Hazen Polsky and J. Carter Brown, the late legendary director of the National Gallery in Washington, they were the first two independent Trustees elected to the Board in 1977. Then the Board started to expand going forward, and then in the 1980s, Peter Bienstock joined the Board and has had a huge impact. [00:41:00] Jim Ottaway, Jr., now our Board Chair and actually the first non-family Chair of the Board. He was elected in 2012 and has done an amazing job. Anne Sidamon-Eristoff, Alice Cary Brown. These Trustees have made huge impacts. Richard Menschel, Nick Ohnell. The list goes on.

I think my father did not have a background in contemporary or modern art, so Cynthia Polsky as Chair of the Collection and Acquisitions Committee, she was very influential in thinking about [00:42:00] the collection; thinking about really getting the best work we could. She was involved in a number of site-specific commissions and had just a huge role. But I also think, over time too, there were some people who worked part-time or as consultants; Herb Shultz, who had been Vice President at Vassar. My father had been on the Board of Vassar College and when Herb Shultz retired and went on to consult for several decades in terms of development—and just a fantastic person—he introduced us to a number of people, some of who became Trustees. Jim Kautz, the late. Just passed away a few weeks ago. Just tremendous [00:43:00] supporter and Trustee.

I think it was a range of people, and I think that it's amazing what that team did, because it was a much smaller staff, and I think Cynthia also helped with PR and getting really good consultants to help us be out there in the world and be more prominent in the art world.

One other person I should call out, Georgene Zlock, who started as my father's assistant—as I recall, “secretary” was the title then at Star Expansion. [00:44:00] When Star Expansion was sold in the mid-1990s, Georgene was hired at the Art Center and eventually became the administrator, and she also made significant progress at Storm King. A lot of things came through to my dad and through her. We had, I would also say, a really great group of docents. A docent program was started in the 1990s, so there was a lot of volunteer contributions, as well.

Dziedzic: Did Star employ a lot of people locally?

Stern: Oh, yes. [00:45:00] It was a major employer. I don't remember the numbers, but it was in the hundreds in terms of the factories, so it was a big, for this town and area. I know in the 1960s my father also made a point of having good relationships in Newburgh, which is nearby, and which is for many years, largely a minority-based population, but a fair amount of poverty, as well. I think he made some inroads into relationships there so that people could work at Star Expansion, as well, from a broader area. [00:46:00]

Dziedzic: Then as you were saying, there were some people who were then hired here when Star Expansion closed.

Stern: Some people came from Star Expansion. Helen Hydros, as well. Mary Ann Carter was David's executive assistant, but also has been critical to everything that happens in the curatorial department. I think she came on in the 1990s, but not through Star Expansion. So, we've had a number of people who have made major contributions and long tenures here.

Dziedzic: Were there people then who left when you brought on the senior staff? [00:47:00] Was there a shuffling, or growth?

Stern: There was some transition, certainly in leadership roles. I think that happens in institutions. I think that it was really largely expanding, though. We didn't have a development department, really. There had been some good projects. We had members. We had the Storm King Council, but we kind of re-visioned it as a really high-end supporters' group that has several great events, insider art events, through the year, [00:48:00] and that's been a terrific program. Yes. There was certainly a transition, but I think it was really more additive. Really, it's only in the last few years that we've really established departments, because in the past, you had individual people filling multiple roles.

Yes, so it's been exciting in that way, and it's allowed us to become the engine of growth, and you have to grow your staff if you're growing as fast as we have been to allow more people to enjoy Storm King. [00:49:00] It's now more known and not so much the secret gem that I always heard; I hear that less now than when I started. I get less responses like, "have you been to Storm King?" "Do you know about Storm King?" There are fewer people who say, "Oh, the place is amazing. I was there in 1987. Fantastic. Love that place." But they haven't been back since 1987. Now much more it's like, "Wow. Storm King's cooking. I can't wait to see what's—wow. What a great program you have on Instagram. I follow you."

That's another topic, but, [00:50:00] Anthony Davidowitz and Rachel and Sam Wiley and Amy Brown have really done an amazing job on social media, and that's been tremendous for us. Then I think also just with the programming, with the private events, it's led to a lot more exposure, as well.

Dziedzic: I want to ask a little bit about maybe what you might think of as Storm King's origin story. What I've been hearing is, on the one hand, there's the vision of your grandfather. But then also a sense that your father and grandfather were co-founders doing this with a balance between Star (as a corporation), and Storm King as a museum, but family-run [00:51:00]. The third part, in a sense, is the David Smith part, and your grandfather going to Bolton Landing through the recommendation of another family member by marriage, Lewis Cabot. I'm wondering how these stories may be circulated in your family as

opposed to in the institution. Of course, this is what I'm hearing, doing the history of Storm King, but how does it circulate in the institution, and how does it circulate within your family? How do you even tell that story?

Stern: Oh, it's a really good question. I think as you point out, these narratives of origin and how this came about, [00:52:00] I have a pretty good sense of that, but I will say that before becoming a fulltime President, I didn't know as much then as I do now. There's, I think, one thing that we most agree that my grandfather had an amazing vision. That vision evolved. There was vision in terms of something that I'm quite confident about which was that my grandfather, and knowing him in my youth—I think he died when I was 14. [00:53:00] It's very clear that my grandfather really enjoyed owning, acquiring, and making best use of land.

What we celebrate at Storm King is this idea and this experience of being in a place that is very grand; is very surprising, and I say surprising because in the Northeast, where we are, you don't often [00:54:00] see a place within less than 60 miles from Manhattan where you can be for the day and see stunning view after stunning view after stunning view in all directions in which you're looking at large-scale art, fields, forests, streams, mountains, and you very, very, very seldom see houses, industrial buildings. So, that was a vision of my grandfather's of, [00:55:00] what can we do with this beautiful land? His friend, Monty Hatch, a notable New York lawyer, a partner at White and Case, who came up here to Mountainville because another White and Case partner, Walter Orr, invited him. He and his wife fell in love with, not just Mountainville, but this land adjacent to Walter Orr's home, and they bought a farm with this beautiful hill, which we're sitting on now [00:56:00] and bought. They built this fabulous residence here that we're in, and it's now our Museum Building.

My grandfather knew when—he was always thinking ahead: "What's going to happen when Monty Hatch dies? Gee, Walter Orr and I, we should work together and not have this developed. Let's do something." At that time my grandfather was—and here's my narrative and what I've learned partly from the family. I think this was known, and I've gotten more detail when I've come into the institution—is that my grandfather, and really this is something coming from my parents, so oral history, in a way, within the family. [00:57:00] Opa, my grandfather, he was just all about work. He was doing two hours each way commuting from Mountainville starting in 1929 to Bayonne, New Jersey where the factory was or New York City where the office was. He did that for a good 25 years, and then in the '50s he said, "My, God. Why I don't just bring the whole company up here? I don't have to have that commute."

He was a Type A guy. He was an engineer. He was continuing and building on his father's company which started in 1893. The John Ogden Company was originally the name. [00:58:00] My grandfather made that company a hugely successful business, so he had that vision. He had the vision of starting an

Art Center. He didn't know a lot about art. He didn't have a collection. His wife, my mother's mother, died in the 1930s from pneumonia. Very tragic. My mother was 10 years old. My grandfather married a second time to Peggy Hovenden, and Peggy had been a Broadway actress and very interested in the arts. I think that was a real influence on my grandfather. [00:59:00] And you mentioned Lewis Cabot had married Judy Thompson. Judy now is known as Lady Judy Thompson. Judy had come from Australia and was a niece of my grandfather. She was determined to come to the U.S. She went to Radcliffe. Was a very ambitious and very talented person, still is. She and Lewis Cabot I think were part of, if you will, the unofficial advisors for this new Art Center.

I should say, when my grandfather started Storm King, [01:00:00] one of the things that just amazes me is, you're just going to start an Art Center. Don't really know what it's about, but let's just start. Let's do it. It reminds me a little bit of my sister, Lisa, because Bea and I are more, let's think about this. Let's plan and let's take it step by step. I think my sister, Lisa, in a very positive way is more like my grandfather. Let's do it, and we'll figure it out as we go.

Opened the doors in 1960. There are going to be concerts in the former living room. There's still a very formal garden, lots of trees, and let's get an interim curator. They had several exhibitions, borrowed works [01:01:00] from the Metropolitan Museum. There was a show on animals. There was this thought—very logical thought—that maybe this should be about Hudson Valley school painters. We were right in the Hudson Valley. It's exactly where Winslow Homer spent two summers in Mountainville making these amazing paintings. Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, the whole thing. Absolutely makes sense, but I think in the back of my grandfather's mind, and I'm just really here supposing, but there is some evidence that he was thinking, [01:02:00] what does he really love? He really loves the land.

It's nice to have this building. It's nice to have galleries. That's great. Let's try it. Let's have chamber music. That's wonderful, and not to denigrate that at all, but he started in Europe collecting sculpture. He went to a quarry, a very famous quarry in Austria, bought the first five works from that visit from artists who were working in that quarry and were associated with it. Fritz Wotruba, Karl Pfann, and others. He gave them to Storm King. They were shown, I think, some of them outdoors, some indoors. [01:03:00] I think that was one strand of experimenting.

I do think, though, getting to this narrative of, when did the light go on about the idea of outdoor art, outdoor sculpture? Clearly, a major moment was his visits to Bolton Landing in the fall, October I believe, of 1966. First visit, and then in the early spring—actually, it was probably even late winter in 1967, and we did some research on this for the 2010 fiftieth anniversary [01:04:00] show. We just celebrated that fiftieth anniversary of what came from those visits, which was my grandfather, very boldly and really based on his passion, acquired 13 David Smith sculptures from the Estate of David Smith. David Smith had died

suddenly in a car crash in 1965. He was 59 years old. My grandfather, I don't think he knew about David Smith before that. I think there was this suggestion from Judy and Lewis Cabot, his niece and her husband, [01:05:00] and my mother went up to Bolton Landing with him. It's clear that he was smitten, and I think there were multiple things he loved about David Smith's work.

I think first it was seeing an 80-acre or so, beautiful site looking over Lake George in the Adirondacks and seeing what David Smith described as a sculpture farm. There were rows of sculpture in these fields, and I can imagine a kind of like, "This is amazing. Oh, my God. [01:06:00] What do we have? We have farm fields." At that time, he'd already acquired the entire Vermont Hatch Estate which took about three years to settle, so between him and Walter Orr, they'd gotten over 200 acres, including the Museum Building. He knew that there was also land, including that his own family had, that could be ultimately acquired that is adjacent to the Hatch property. He bought these 13 David Smith's. I don't recall this—I was seven at the time. I don't remember seeing the article in the *New York Times* about this, and it remains the largest acquisition of David Smith's sculpture ever, [01:07:01] and so we're very closely linked to David Smith, and he certainly is considered one of the greatest artists and sculptors of our modern era.

It was extremely moving to me, and I think certainly to David Collens and Nora and to my family, to have had our exhibition in 2017, *David Smith: The White Sculptures*, because it marked that fiftieth anniversary, but also in the indoor exhibition thanks to David. David has this sort of sixth sense of amazing things [01:08:00] that he wants to get to Storm King. One of them was this home movie by another artist in our collection, Bob Murray, who had been asked by Anna Greenberg to come and take photos of Bolton Landing in August of 1965. We showed that for the first time ever in Gallery 3 and it was mesmerizing, because we could see essentially what my grandfather saw, and we saw it in fog. We saw it in sun. We saw it in this very short, 15-minute silent film and it was just really exhilarating to see that, because it was almost like you're [01:09:00] back in time and seeing what David Smith—the entire exhibition—and I give great credit to David and to Nora and the help that we got from Peter Stevens and the Estate of David Smith, and David Smith's wonderful daughters, Rebecca and Candida, who lived with that and had been great friends to Storm King.

That was just so fascinating to me. It's so tied to the origin narrative that you talk about. Again, when I was growing up, I didn't know about that. It wasn't a big thing that we talked about, [01:10:00] so I really learned more about this by having the opportunity to do these exhibitions, both, in 2010, in 2017, and as I've gotten to know the full story of David Smith; not just his work in sculpture, but his drawings and jewelry and photography. That's what the show also talked about, or really showed to people. We had 42 photographs taken by David Smith, taken by Alexander Liberman, and Dan Budnick. It gave me such a sense of living with these sculptures.

We always talk about the dialog between art and nature here, and you can see that dialog in those photographs at Bolton Landing. David Smith was [01:11:00] just so dedicated to his work. He was there alone most of the time. He loved when his daughters came up in the summers and the vacations, but it was that kind of exhilaration that David Smith had that I think, in a way, kind of transformed my grandfather's vision.

That has been really, the narrative—and I'll tell you, these things are not static. I learned things by doing research for a presentation to our Board about the history of land acquisition. Steve Trevor, one of our Trustees, asked to get a briefing on that, so I did some research. It's not exhaustive, but I found things I didn't know: [01:12:00] the history of the columns, the fact that my grandfather lit the columns for the first 14 years of Storm King's life. I thought, that's amazing. He really wanted people to know about Storm King. You can see it from the New York State Thruway. There are many narratives about the origin, and also the history of the remarkable landscape design by Rutherford. It's a slightly moving target, and I've probably given the longest answer to a question you've ever posed, but I hope it's helpful.

Dziedzic: Of course. I don't think, not the longest. I want to talk about your father's leadership, too, which was a very long portion [01:13:00] of Storm King's history, especially since we have this sense of your grandfather's direction and his vision, so well-described. We do have your father's oral history that he did in the late 1990s, but I guess I just want to ask, when we talk about your grandfather's passion for developing land, is there something comparable for your father in terms of what his vision was when he took over?

Stern: Absolutely. I do want to say from the beginning that my dad, I've had a very, very long and close relationship with my dad, really as friends. Starting when I was a teenager, we joked [01:14:00] about this because we really, really enjoyed spending time together, but my father has an incredible legacy here and not only here, but also in his choices of philanthropy. For four decades he served as Vice Chair of the World Monuments Fund preserving great monuments around the world and sites. He's been a huge supporter of the International Rescue Committee. He was a refugee, as well, from the Nazis in World War II, but my father had a much longer tenure as [01:15:00] President and Chairman here. Really, after my grandfather died, he was in charge.

He really continued the expansion of Storm King with significant acquisitions of adjacent land, continuing really what's part of our mission of conserving land. I should say, my grandfather also in the 1960s purchased 2,300 acres on the east side of Schunnemunk Mountain, which is really largely our western viewshed looking south and southwest. [01:16:00] It was held in the business, but it was my father that expanded the Board and oversaw and initiated creative ways to preserve our viewsheds. I should also say, my sister Bea has had a huge part of that, as well as Peter Bienstock.

My father is probably the most cultured and intellectual member of our family, I would say. He, I think, considered being an academic. He was a voracious reader over the span of his life and has a great appreciation for music [01:17:00] and the arts and history. So he expanded the Board. He, as I said, solicited terrific top-level people to be on our Board and to guide him in terms of the collection. My father loved, as I have loved, the opportunity to get to know Isamu Noguchi. That was his first site specific commission (*Momo Taro*, 1977–78). My grandfather had initiated large-scale, site-specific commissions with David von Schlegell in 1972, the untitled work in our meadows, [01:18:00] and then Robert Grosvenor (Untitled, 1970), and it went on and on. My grandfather died in '74, the same year that Grosvenor installed his work. Patricia Johanson did her work (*Nostoc II*) in 1975, which is a great work, but it's lesser known.

My father's first site-specific commission was the Noguchi, and that was finished in 1978, but the discussions started earlier, and my father has described the dialogue. In another life I think my father would have loved to have done performance art. [01:19:00] After my grandfather died, and during a mid-life review, he started taking mime lessons, cooking lessons. I think he took some ballet lessons, and he's always been a ham, so he would often talk to me about his discussions with—and I think this is on some of the oral history that we have—he would sort of imitate the artist for the conversation.

I think he really was keen on continuing site-specific works. There was *Momo Taro* 1978 by Noguchi. A fantastic [01:20:00] commission and iconic here. That word is used a lot; probably too much, but I think also the discussion and solicitation of Richard Serra. *Schunnemunk Fork* (1990–91) which was installed in 1991. Andy Goldsworthy (*Storm King Wall*, 1997–98). And often there were introductions here. I think Sherry and Joel Mallin introduced us to Andy Goldsworthy, but my father just relished working with these artists and along with David and Bill Rutherford.

I think he also realized that we needed better PR awareness. My father had [01:21:00] an amazing charisma, and he would meet people and it was just like, he had a kind of magnetism to him, and still does. I say that only because he has retired now and it's extremely sad, but he has dementia. He, I think for me and, I don't want to speak for my sisters, but for me, he was a model in terms of getting the most out of every minute of your life. He was organized. He loved to travel. He wanted to cram in the most that he possibly could. [01:22:00]

After my parents separated and he married Margaret, they had a wonderful 18-year marriage, but Margaret was the opposite of his personality. There are these great stories. They were going on a trip to Europe. He would suggest that she go two or three days before, because she always just preferred no schedule and just be spontaneous. My father wanted to plan every minute of that trip, so they could see

everything they could wherever they were going. Finally, when—it's a great story [01:23:00]—they were in a garden in Europe. I think it was in Switzerland, and Margaret said, "Peter, we're going to stay here for two hours, and you're going to practice being in the moment and not worrying about the next destination." He really loved to tell that story.

To go back to his legacy, I really think it's the continuation which has been so remarkable for these really large-scale site-specific commissions, the most recent being Maya Lin's *Storm King Wavefield* (2007–08). I think expanding the Board, expanding awareness, and thinking very thoughtfully about [01:24:00] developing it, but developing it in a way that sustains the experience of having a sense of discovery. I think my father did also start to diversify funding. I think that he has a really huge legacy. Also, that he did the very important work. My grandfather wanted to have the fun and build the collection, but my father also did from the very beginning bring in very good people; Leslie Jacobson, who he had [01:25:00] worked for, and one of the founding partners of Fried Frank who became a Board member and gave legal advice to Storm King and was just a very, very smart and absolutely peach of a person. He made great contributions. He brought in other people like that who could share their expertise.

He was always learning, my dad, but always someone who would solicit people so easily because he was so much fun to be with. He was so interesting, and his depth of knowledge and depth of [01:26:01] his love of other cultures really had a huge impact, to me, and I think to my sisters. Hard shoes to follow.

Dziedzic: There's two things that I want to ask to make sure that I'm understanding correctly. I read and watched some of the oral history that your father did that I mentioned before. He tells these stories about working with the artists and the negotiations that are involved in the sense of—well, part of me thought, that's maybe how somebody who's been trained in business would tell a story: you make a deal, both parties are happy at the end. It's a story of success. But it sounds like from what you're saying [01:27:00] that there's maybe a lot more creativity that's feeding into that story. That it's more about the energy of another person, the creative energy of another person, because he has so much of that creative energy. It's less of a professional negotiation and more of a—

Stern: Just repeat that again. Sorry. The first part of that question.

Dziedzic: Yes. My takeaway from reading about some of his accounts of the site-specific commissions or getting certain sculptures here was to read it as a business negotiation or a professional relationship. We bring our terms to the table. We make negotiations. Certainly, Storm King has always given artists an incredible amount of space to make the work that they feel is appropriate for this place, but in a sense it still [01:28:00] read and sounded—and of course, knowing his background coming from Star, I wondered—is he speaking as a business person? But I think from what you've said, it's really more about

the fact that there's a lot more energy coming into that exchange. It's not just a business negotiation that he's proud of.

Stern: Yes. I would say, what I've taken away from those stories, and I think what stands out as setting a tone to discussions with potential, site-specific works: talk to artists about the opportunity. What I took from that was [01:29:00] in his discussion with Isamu Noguchi—and I think the point of that exchange was that my father was saying to Isamu Noguchi that it was refreshing—for him, and I think for other artists, that my father, and I think this is probably also true of my grandfather too—but my father really brought this up that it was liberating, he felt, for Isamu Noguchi, when asking about the practicalities of doing a commission, that there was no deadline. [01:30:00] We don't have to have it by X time. No. You do what you need to do. As I'm recalling my father's narrative of this, Noguchi asked what plans or what committees do I have to go to? Again, that was really up to him, in essence. Really giving as much freedom to the artist as possible. I think you're right in the sense that he wanted to be clear and the transactional part was, this is how much we can give for this, and we can budget.

I think the clarity of that, [01:31:00] and the fact that Isamu Noguchi was pleased not to have to go through four committees, as he had often done for public commissions or proposed public commissions in New York City and other places around the world. That was a plus for him. I'm sure that part of it was knowing from negotiations in his background in Star, but I think my father liked that we could give him that freedom. I think it's been true for all the artists when we've had site-specific missions over the years. [01:32:00]

Dziedzic: Yes. It's so helpful to hear your account and your interpretation of that. I think it helps color his own accounts, too, a little bit.

Stern: Sure. I think that it's also true that it was interesting for me when we honored Andy Goldsworthy in 2015, I had the opportunity to interview him, and we did a small video with him about that experience. It was really interesting, because then I got his version of the discussion with David and my father, and so I heard some things that I didn't know from this [01:33:00] institutional narrative. I really enjoyed that. Yes.

Dziedzic: The other thing that I wanted to ask: given your father's work with the World Monuments Fund, and the focus during the '80s and '90s and up until now, in a way, is monumental sculpture; large-scale sculpture, outdoor sculpture. I guess what I wanted to ask was, do you think that he thought about these larger, monumental sculptures in a way that's parallel to monuments that he's working to preserve? In the sense that they were really cultural representatives or important cultural manifestations? When people think about [01:34:00] how you would define art, there's many different ways that you can. I'm wondering

if that's an accurate read on some of his understanding of sculptures as being cultural representatives or representatives of some sort of important part of a culture that he admired.

Stern: That's a really interesting and thoughtful question. The short answer is, I don't know, but I do think that my father really had a wish to have preservation of artworks, and I think it does come in part from his own personal history. They're in some ways tied together, [01:35:00] his support of refugees and support of culture, and history of culture.

On one hand, I think that his own personal passions in terms of art—he did collect textiles from Asia, Mughal tents, Indian miniature paintings. It was a very different era. He acknowledged that he didn't have experience; he wasn't a collector of modern and contemporary art. But I do think there's a strand there of understanding that conservation of the [01:36:00] collection here, and preservation of land, and the elements that come together at Storm King to make it such an extraordinary place and extraordinary experience. I think that theme is there.

I don't know how he thought about some of the great monuments of the world as works of art, architecture, how it translated or how it inspired or moved modern and contemporary artists. It's a very interesting question, and I don't know. [01:37:00] It's something to think about, and think about my dad's history. There might be more than I know now about that connection that he was thinking about, because my dad did have copious journals, still to be reviewed, if possible.

Dziedzic: It's interesting, too, to think about the ways in which culture is thought about and how that changes over time, too, and generationally. You can kind of have a capital C "Culture" up until a certain point, and then you start to think about cultural diversity or local culture. It gets more specific, in a sense. I see a little bit of that in terms of where both Storm King and also the REO Foundation has gone [01:38:00] since you and your sisters have been at the helm.

I'm mindful of the time. It's about five minutes to 1:00. That's just a thought there. I don't know if you want to respond, or if you can end on that and pick it up and refine it maybe next time.

Stern: That was a question?

Dziedzic: It wasn't, just an observation.

Stern: I think the only thing I would say just on that topic and really going back to the question before, there's at least one example of a connection between, for example, the work with the World Monuments Fund, and that is the acquisition of the [01:39:00] anonymous Easter Island head replica which originally

was an exhibition copy, I guess you'd say. The World Monuments Fund did to help fundraise for the project of restoring the Easter Island heads that my father was very involved in with the World Monuments Fund, so he did purchase one for Storm King. I think he was realizing that it was slightly out of place in terms of our collection, which we describe as from post-War to the present. I guess you could say the copy was made then, [01:40:00] but the original work was done well before that.

This was highlighted a little bit this past year in *Outlooks: Heather Hart* (2017), because she chose to make her installation facing the sculpture, and she loved that for a number of reasons, but it's always seemed to me to be an anomaly in the collection. I think my father realized that, as well, but it's also one of the quirks of Storm King. There's [01:41:00] people, whether they understand it or not—I think it's something to have some quirks in the collection.

Dziedzic: Yes. I think that's useful in trying to grasp it as a whole, and also acknowledging how it can change; how your perception of it can change or your interpretation of it can change.

Stern: Yes. I'd say one other thing which is, where I'm not sure, but I think that I differ slightly from my father in terms of Storm King. I think toward the end of my father's Presidency and as Chair, I think he was rightly concerned about conserving what we have [01:42:00] and making sure that that core—we call it "the collection"—and that all makes sense. I think that he was rightfully thinking about, let's not go in too different a direction. When do we stop acquiring, because we don't want it to be too crowded in terms of our display?

I think my father and David—and this is very important. I should have added this. They together, working together and with Bill Rutherford, they really established this aesthetic that you see at Storm King which is, you look at a piece. You look at *Suspended* (1977) by [Menashe] Kadishman and you look at *Pyramidian* (1987/1998) by Mark di Suvero, and you can see it in many ways [01:43:00] and many perspectives, but you can see it against the mountains, the trees. No one would say, oh, my gosh. This is really crowded. This collection, it's jam-packed. No. It has to fit in our landscape. It has to have its own space.

That's a really interesting idea, and I think we're also struggling with it because we want to keep that, but we also want to make the programming dynamic. In that sense, there was this dialog and it continues, but I think my father also just wanted to make sure that, in essence, the next generation doesn't screw it up in that way of trying to do too much, or getting outside of what we're known for. [01:44:00] And that is a challenge, but I think there are ways to do it and still make the space and the activities that people can do that really can build on what we have without ever becoming a place that is in any way overrun or too

crowded in terms of the art. That's just something I wanted to make sure we touched on, because that's an important part of his and David Collens' legacy, as well.

Dziedzic: Right.

Stern: Great.

Dziedzic: Thanks, John.

Stern: Good.

End of session

Interview with John Stern
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic
August 6, 2018

Storm King Art Center Museum Building
1 audio file
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Audio file 1

Dziedzic: All right, today is August 6, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing John Stern for the Storm King Oral History Program. This is our second session.

So I mentioned that I wanted to ask some follow-up questions from the last session that we did, and I want to start with the exhibitions that were organized around the fiftieth anniversary. So I'm just going to read a couple sentences that you said, and then ask some follow-up questions. You said, "During 2009 we put together an informal committee to help David Collens, on the indoor exhibition, about the history of Storm King. My sisters, Lisa and Bea, were very, very involved, as was Jerry L. Thompson, our longtime photographer. Again, at that time, we didn't have a curator under David. At the same time, I'd been talking with David about an outdoor sculpture exhibition, which is typically what our exhibitions are. We talked about the idea of having new artists and artists in our collection doing new work, [00:01:00] or bringing a great work back to Storm King. For me, I was more involved in that exhibition. In both of those exhibitions, we decided to make them two years and really link them to the fiftieth anniversary... That was eye-opening for me, and I did have an opportunity to work with David and to review and suggest some new artists for Storm King."

So first, I wanted to ask: how involved were you in the indoor exhibition?

Stern: That was a time when we were preparing for those exhibitions that would open in May, I believe, or June, 2010. But for most of the planning for those exhibitions, I was certainly involved. [00:02:00] Most of the time that we were planning, I was a volunteer. I had not come on full-time. I came on as a full-time, paid President, an opportunity that I was given by the Board, and I started in March of 2010, as I recall. So I was not onsite as much when I was a volunteer, because I still had my professional work as a lawyer. Having said that, I had a lot of discussions with David Collens about the outdoor exhibition, [00:03:00] 5+5: *New Perspectives* (2010–11).

David was choosing—initially, I think he was focused on having artists in our permanent collection to do new works, if possible, or bring a great work back. And that led to the commission of Ursula von Rydingsvard's *Luba* (2010), which is now in our collection, and was one of the great works that came out of that exhibition. Alice Aycock reinstalled *Low Building with Dirt Roof* [00:04:00] (*for Mary*) (1973/2010). And that has also become, as a result of how fabulous it was in the site that David put it in—we had it on

loan for several years, and recently it came into our permanent collection. So I think David had a good idea of the artists that we were asking to come to participate, and that was Mark di Suvero; Ursula, who I mentioned; Alice Aycock; Chakaia Booker, who did an amazing work that also stayed in [00:05:00] after the two-year exhibition, and was 30 feet high, really amazing piece. The work to create and install that work is really hard, working with the rubber of the tires, steel-belted in some cases. So that was also a great work. (Andy Goldsworthy was the fifth artist with work in the collection who was asked to participate.)

But I think the five new artists was something that I was very excited about, and just personally I really enjoyed getting to know some of those artists. And I had met Alyson Shotz [00:06:00] at an event at Socrates, and she had been one of the Socrates fellows, and had shown her work in 2003, *Mirror Fence*, and so she brought back *Mirror Fence* to Storm King, and that was the start of a really great relationship between Storm King and Alyson. I remember her saying that when we installed her work, *Mirror Fence*, which had been part of an exhibition called *Yard* at Socrates in 2003—it's 130 feet—but she said, you know, in Storm King's landscape it could be [00:07:00] triple that, could go on for [laughs] a lot longer. And as a result of the popularity of that work—she also then had two works in our 2012 exhibition, *Light & Landscape*, that our now senior curator, Nora Lawrence, curated, a group show—now *Mirror Fence* was refabricated in sturdy glass, and that was a wonderful project, and that came into the permanent collection.

I think it's a wonderful sort of transition for an artist like Alyson, who—low budget for an exhibition, with a deadline, [00:08:00] in an urban space. *Mirror Fence*, she didn't make it thinking it will be installed permanently outdoors, because that wasn't the deal with Socrates, and most places. I think it was wonderful for us and for Alyson to have the opportunity to then rebuild, refabricate the work with the idea that it will be shown and displayed outdoors in perpetuity.

I also had gotten to know Stephen Talasnik, who did a wonderful work, *Stream: A Folded Drawing* (2009–10), in bamboo, and 300 poles of [00:09:00] bamboo, and he made a stunning architectural work that he and David placed between the Noguchi hill and Ursula von Rydingsvard's work *For Paul* (1990–92/2001). So it's on a fairly steep slope, but it was one that people could get into. And that led to an experiment in our programming in the summer of 2010, in which we commissioned a couple of contemporary dancers. And in 2010, [00:10:00] I was not working with the more robust senior staff that I have today of eight colleagues and myself, and so we didn't have a Director of Education and Public Programs. And so it was a great thing to have that dance program, but it was more the start of experimenting with different kinds of programs, and I think that's what Victoria Lichtendorf, our Director of Education and Public Programs, who joined us in 2012, has been doing for the last few years, and then that's led to a programming and education vision, which is articulated as part of our long-term planning. [00:11:00] There were several

other new artists who had not shown here before. So I think that that element of the 5+5—five stellar artists who had been in our collection, people knew their work, and five wonderful emerging artists who were artists who were new to Storm King and its audience. I thought that was just a really nice balance, both celebrating the artists in our collection and also a new generation of artists who we've now developed relationships with.

Dziedzic: [00:12:00] What was it like to start off your tenure as President with these kind of historical exhibitions?

Stern: Yes. I think it was great. I think David, as I mentioned, and my sisters, Lisa Stern and Bea Stern, and Jerry L. Thompson, because all of those four people had decades of experience of what Storm King was, and a very close relationship. And I think one thing that I was promoting [00:13:00] and supporting was the idea of having a consultant who could help us with exhibition design. And so we engaged 2x4 and Susan Sellers, who more recently had a stint as the Met Museum's Head of Exhibitions. And she's a very talented person, and they helped us a lot with some ideas, particularly for *The View From Here: Storm King at Fifty* exhibition indoors about Storm King's history.

One idea [00:14:00] that came out of a collaboration and discussion with 2x4 was in Gallery 1 we commissioned a topographical map, or model, of Storm King's landscape. The purpose of that was to have a loop video that displayed on that model how Storm King grew from my grandfather, Ted Ogden's acquisition of the Museum Building, which had been a residence built by Vermont Hatch. He built it. It was completed in 1935. [00:15:00] Then, beyond that, the aggregation of more land, as the vision for Storm King really came in the late 1960s, after my grandfather went to see David Smith's home and studio at Bolton Landing in the Adirondacks. That was a wonderful piece that people could look at in Gallery 1 and get a sense of how this all came together—land, art, and what Storm King has become. It also included some of the environmental initiatives, like purchasing and preserving [00:16:00] open space and viewsheds from Storm King, and some of the tremendous landscaping that was done by Bill Rutherford. So that was exciting.

Dziedzic: It strikes me as potentially a comprehensive way to start your term as President with this sort of looking back, and then also looking ahead. New perspectives, as you said.

Stern: Yes, I think that [00:17:00] I should say that it's unusual to have a committee of non-staff, which we had for this exhibition, but I think it worked really well, and I'm really grateful to Bea Stern and Lisa Stern and Jerry L. Thompson, because they really spent a lot of time helping. And David. I think it also made clear to me that for better and more programming, we needed more resources. And so in 2011 I was able to hire Nora Lawrence, another curator to work with David, which was a great thing for Storm

King. [00:18:00] In 2011 I felt that now I'd come on full-time that I was able to make changes and to expand our staff, thinking about more programming, and, importantly, more amenities that were really needed at Storm King. Some of those projects involving more amenities really started, I think, in 2009. We were able to start the café, and the bikes. But we really needed more help in the staff to manage all that. So yes, [00:19:00] looking back and looking forward certainly made sense for the fiftieth anniversary, and then also the idea of a two-year exhibition, because you want to milk your anniversary, and we did that. We also did a visual identity project with 2x4, for the fiftieth anniversary, and that was also I think, a good thing to do.

Dziedzic: Then, the following year—I want to ask about Governor's Island. So this is what you'd said about that, that I want to ask you more about. You said, "I think there was certainly some wariness about doing this, because we'd never done an offsite show. It was a short, compressed time, and there was some real concern about can we raise the money, can we pull this off. [00:20:00] Again, this was before the kind of staff that we have now. David and I really felt we could do it, and we did. We raised a significant amount of money—around \$1 million, I think—to have what became a two-year exhibition. I think that was just one of the projects that I feel very proud about, that we were able to accomplish that." And so what I wanted to ask was, what sort of factors provided you with, I guess, confidence around taking on this challenge?

Stern: It's a good question. I want to first set the record straight in that in the fall of 2010, David got a call from Ronay Menschel, who [00:21:00] has been a very important person in the history of civic life in New York City. She has been on our Board, also at the MTA, and had worked for different mayors. In the Koch era, she had been Deputy Mayor, as I recall. But David and I knew Ronay, and also her husband Richard, who had been on our Board for many years, and had stepped down in 2007, just before I became a volunteer President in 2008. So Ronay was the Chair of the [00:22:00] Trust for Governors Island, a nonprofit that had been formed to manage the island. And so initially, Governors Island was basically purchased for a dollar by the State of New York and New York City, but I think by this time, when Ronay was Chair of the Trust for Governors Island, [00:23:00] it was really a New York City project.

I had never heard of Governors Island. I'm sort of embarrassed because I grew up in New York City. [laughter] And, you know, she basically said, "Hey, what about having an exhibition, helping to organize it? It's a great spot. The only problem is we don't have any money. I mean, you know, you'd have to raise money to do this, but it could be a great thing for Storm King." And thinking also about our relationship with Mark di Suvero—we're sort of the premier place to see his work outdoors. So it was very attractive, and from my perspective. I just saw a great opportunity, [00:24:00] once I got to know about Governors Island. People were catching on to it, because free ferries, five minutes from the southern end of Manhattan at the ferry station, and five minutes or less from the emerging Brooklyn Bridge Park, right

where Atlantic Avenue hits the harbor. And I thought, this could be a great thing for Storm King to have our debut with public art, and just get the word out more about Storm King, because I felt that there was a huge opportunity to have more people have this extraordinary experience. At that point Storm King was [00:25:00] still largely a secret gem, this amazing place that people had never heard of—and, oh, if they've heard of it, "Oh, yes, that's—" But they hadn't been.

I guess the confidence I had was that it was a risk, but we did discuss it with the Board. I remember the Board meeting in December of 2010, I understood that the Board—this is my first year doing this—and they were concerned, because this is a huge project to organize, because of the large-scale sculptures we were going to [00:26:00] bring over there. This was a project that was probably going to be about a million dollars, and just the logistics of getting them from different parts of the U.S. or abroad, and then bringing the steel eyebeams by truck, but then we would go on to find out that, you know, there was a seawall around Governors Island, and so there was a lot that went into getting them there. There's an 11-minute video that Mark and his studio commissioned about the exhibition, which is really wonderful, because you see how these things get done.

It was [00:27:00] challenging in many ways. But I felt like, well, let's try. Let's see what we can do. I did say to the Board that, you know, if we can't raise the money, we'll have a smaller show, or we won't have a show at all, but let's try it. And I think because of the relationship we had with Mark and his wonderful team—Ivana Mestrovic—and his amazing studio, that we knew that we could overcome all the technical challenges of installation. And really, it was just rallying people around this great opportunity. And, you know, it was hugely popular. I just remember [00:28:00] one of the great things about it was that Mayor Bloomberg was really interested in this, and very supportive, and he offered to help support a reception to celebrate the exhibition. And it took some time to schedule that. We opened the exhibition in May of 2011, and I think we had the reception in July, but it was worth waiting for that reception, because we had over 700 people come to the reception, and one of the great memories I have [00:29:00] was going around with a cart to tour with Mayor Bloomberg, and a friend of his, and Mark. That was just really tremendous.

I think it brought so much joy to not only Mark and us, but literally, it was several hundred thousand people who saw that exhibition. You couldn't go to Governors Island and not see the works, because there were 11 largescale sculptures all around the island, and four were in Picnic Point, which has this beautiful view to [00:30:00] the Statue of Liberty, and the New York Harbor. And you can see in my office here there's a photograph—and I believe that's Jerry L. Thompson—there's *Mahatma* (1978–79), that is in our collection at Storm King. We brought two pieces from Storm King, and then there's *Will* (1994), which was generously loaned by Doris Fisher, and the work *Figolu* (2005–11), which was a debut of that work from Mark's studio. And then *She* (1978–78), which had been loaned, as well, by Kate Levin.

So that was a great success, and [00:31:00] it did line up with the start of our growth in visitation. When I started in 2008, as a volunteer President, we had 43,000 people at Storm King, and the next year, 2009—and I credit Maya Lin, because we opened her *Storm King Wavefield* (2007–08), and it was such an extraordinary response. There's a great review from Holland Cotter in the *New York Times*. And I remember I was in Washington at the time, dropping off my daughter, Sophie, to school. I was still splitting my time between Washington and New York. And I, at that time, we weren't looking online for the *New York Times* [laughter]—and I went to [00:32:00] Starbucks and opened it up, and there was, in the Friday Arts Section, was this extraordinary photograph of *Wavefield* that was taking up half of the page, and this just thoughtful and really beautiful, stellar review. And Maya Lin had said, “Why don't we open earlier?” We had been opening in late May or early June with our exhibitions. She said, “Why don't we open the second week of May?” We did that, and it was such a celebration. I think we had hundreds of people on *Wavefield*.

And I remember, also that day because Adam Weinberg, who's on our Board, and the Director of the Whitney Museum of Art, [00:33:00] also introduced me to Sarah Sze, who we're now working with on a commission. So it was a very exciting time.

But, going back to Governors Island, I think that was a big boost for awareness of Storm King. We took one of the houses where the governors used to live, the admirals, and we had a visitors center. And it wasn't that well-known, but a lot of people came in there, and so we had wall text about the outdoor works, and then also [00:34:00] lots of information about Storm King. And I remember Nora Lawrence came on six weeks before we opened, and she was terrific in helping us get everything installed, but also I asked her if she could help to put together an app for people, which she found someone and worked with and got our initial app. We'd never had an app for an exhibition, as I recall. So yes, it turned out to be a great success. And right behind you [indicating award hanging on wall], I'm very proud for Storm King that we got the Municipal Art Society of New York's Livable City Award. [00:35:00]

I think that also reminds me of so many people who were so helpful in this process, because it was new to us for Storm King doing public art. And one of the people, along with Ronay Menschel, who I sought out and had great help and support and advice from is Susan Freedman, who's the President of the Public Art Fund. Her mother founded the Public Art Fund, which is such a great organization, and they do amazing exhibitions in public art. But I think that really reinforced another theme of [00:36:00] my time here, which is let's get out there in the world, and let's have strategic partnerships with other organizations. And that has also led to us starting a partnership now in our fourth year of artists-in-residence with the Shandaken Project, that Nick Weist founded, and is still the director of, and it's now called Shandaken Projects: Storm King, because now he has other places, including Governors Island, to help artists move on in their career, and to think through what their next steps are.

Dziedzic: Well, that kind of gets at my next question, actually, which was: how did the success of that exhibition affect, I guess, [00:37:00] the scope of what you thought was possible here?

Stern: Yes. I think that I felt that we had such an opportunity to have more people enjoy what Storm King offers, and so *Mark di Suvero at Governors Island Presented by Storm King Art Center* (2012) was the title. I wanted “Storm King” to be in the title [laughs] partly to maximize the awareness of Storm King. I think that [00:38:00] in many ways it was helpful. And first of all, Governors Island was really developing, and more and more people were finding out about it. And we were working on improving the amenities at Storm King, so I think it gave confidence to the Board for some of the initiatives that would come at Storm King.

At the same time, we were just beginning to start thinking about planning for the future, planning for more growth in terms of visitation, and what we need to do [00:39:00] to attract people, and to make sure they have a great experience. We already knew that we had a great experience in terms of what you do at Storm King—discovering art on your own time, on your own initiative—but we also wanted to make sure that there were options for people to get more interpretive opportunities when they’re here, and better food, places to hang out, and the like. So it was all of a piece, in a way.

From that point on we did look at other opportunities in New York City, I guess during the first [00:40:00] year of Governors Island in 2011, that led to also helping to install a work of Mark’s, *Yoga* (1991), in Brooklyn Bridge Park, which also led us to a new group of people who were working on the development of that park, because it was not finished yet. I think it gave us more experience, as a team, and also because more than 50% of our visitors are from the New York City area, so what were millennials interested in, and that sort of thing. And I think that [00:41:00] all of this was connected to a strategy of being smart on social media, word of mouth. We had a very, and still do have a very small budget for marketing ourselves, and I think we’ve done really well by social media and by word of mouth, and I think people get so excited, our visitors coming for the first time. You know, I hear from so many people, “I just couldn’t believe that this place [00:42:00] existed and I didn’t know about it.” They want to tell their family. They want to tell their friends. And so I think we benefit from that.

Dziedzic: So I think these are connected, but I want to ask you about how you started to grow the Board, using these new connections.

Stern: Yes, I think that I did want to grow the Board, in terms of expanding it. We had a great Board, and I really credit my father, Peter Stern. He did a lot to develop Storm King after my grandfather died in 1974. In 1974, Storm King was not yet a [00:43:00] full 501(c)(3). It was an operating foundation, because the

revenue was largely from one source, from the Ralph E. Ogden Foundation. And so my father and David Collens worked on getting Storm King diversified in terms of the income and revenue, and so admissions were started in 1976. And I think that pre-internet, pre-online, pre-cellphones, there were more traditional ways of getting the word out there. [00:44:00] I think for many years both my father and I and others here realized that it's hard to get New Yorkers, for many New Yorkers, to get out of Manhattan. And, in fact, people who lived in Manhattan, it was difficult to get them to the outer boroughs. The Noguchi Museum is a wonderful museum in Long Island City, in Queens. They had some of the same problems, and still do, of getting people out. Like, you've got to have a bus for them, or it's too difficult to figure out which trains to take. I think all of that has become much easier in some ways, because everyone can just tap on their phone and get Google Maps, and see how can I get there by public transit. It's just so much easier. So [00:45:00] remind me of the question [laughs] because I've gone down a rabbit hole.

Dziedzic: Just your thoughts about growing the Board.

Stern: Growing the Board, yes. So I wanted to have a slightly different relationship with the Board. I think my father built a great Board. I don't think he engaged them—or specifically did not want to engage them too much, because it had been a family project, and he was concerned, I think, of getting too many ideas and losing control, which is really [00:46:00] understandable. I had a different view, because I knew that going forward we had to grow, and we needed to have more expectations of what we were going to ask our Trustees, and we wanted them to support Storm King more, but really to do that you also need to have them be really engaged. Not only listen to their ideas but consider them and work with them to leverage their ideas, their networks, their visions. That came to me sort of naturally, because [00:47:00] I believe in collaborating, and I didn't fear being at the mercy of major donors. So a lot of this was finding really good people to help me navigate all this, and so I'm very grateful for the help of so many people.

A wonderful person and consultant, Susan Courtemanche, been recommended to me by Adam Weinberg, and she came on to help facilitate a discussion retreat with our Board in, I think it was November, [00:48:00] actually. I remember this because we got this date, and then I had a terrible conflict, which turned out to be the only weekend I could go with my daughter to Harry Potter World. [laughter] I really regret that I couldn't go, and her friend's father took her. So I feel very guilty about that. But we did a wonderful Friday/Saturday overnight retreat with the Board, and to get some sort of guidelines of what's most important to them going forward. And then what we did is in 2011 [00:49:00] I started to build my senior staff, so in 2011 I hired Nora Lawrence. I think she was Associate Curator at that time. Rachel Coker joined us on March 21, 2011. I remember this. She lives in New York, and I can remember she came up through the Palisades Parkway in a small snowstorm, and it was quite traumatic for her, but it was something to deal with going forward. And Anthony Davidowitz, now our Deputy Director for Administration, Operations, and Legal Affairs. And then Mike Seaman is our Director of

Facilities and [00:50:00] Conservation Specialist. He was brought on full-time. He had been a contractor, really, working closely with David on a number of projects. So building the senior staff, then catching them up on a strategic plan, which was ultimately ratified by the Board in December 2012. So this is a two-year process. With Susan's help, and my staff, my team's help, and the Board, we had a financial plan, and a plan to expand the Board by having at least one new member each year.

The first year was Roberta Denning, who is someone I had gotten to know in 2009, and [00:51:00] got to know her and her husband, Steve. Just fantastic people. And they hosted an event for the Glass House that I'd been invited to, and I am grateful for Cynthia Polsky, longtime Trustee and very close friend of my father's. Cynthia had introduced me to Dee Dunn, who had been the Head of Visitor Experience at the Glass House. We met for lunch, had a really nice discussion, and then Dee asked me to be one of ten participants in a salon-style discussion at the Glass House. The night before, the Dennings had that group to their house because they were supportive of the Glass House, and [00:52:00] we just hit it off. And they went around the room—and it's indicative of Roberta's leadership style, to go around the room and say a little bit about who you are, what your story is. I told in brief the story of Storm King—which is hard for me to do. And then Roberta started coming to Storm King, with Steve, and we just started a great relationship. So she became a new Trustee in 2012, and then each year we have had pretty much one new Trustee.

A change that we made that really was initiated by Rachel Coker was to revamp what had been a Storm King [00:53:00] Council. It started out as a regional advisory committee that would leverage leaders in our area, in Orange County and the Hudson Valley. And during my father's time, he got some great people to help build that: Pat Ohnell, Jim Ottaway. Jim Ottaway being our longtime Trustee. Pat O'Neill and Nick O'Neill, her wonderful husband, a wonderful Trustee for many years, has been a leader in developing Storm King. And the late Jim Kautz, who really started to think about the Council as a place for [00:54:00] really growing supporters and possible Board prospects. So in 2012, I believe, we revamped the Council by making it a high-end membership, and having great insider art events. For example, a trip to the Calder Foundation where no more than 15 people can go, because at any one time in the Calder Foundation, it's where they work. It was started by Sandy Rower, Calder's grandson. They have amazing works that they're conserving, they're getting more information about, and scholarship around. We went once to the Starn Brothers' amazing studio in Beacon, [00:55:00] great, great events. People got really excited. And as a result of that, it really has become a place where prospective Trustees get to know Storm King, and we get to know them better. And that has grown tremendously under Rachel's leadership, and, most recently, other colleagues—Miranda Kozak. So all those went into thinking about expanding the Board.

Now, we've had some people, certainly, over time become honorary Trustees, but we also have had very active honorary Trustees, and still do today. Going forward, we're continuing to do that as we grow, because we need the resources, we need the [00:56:00] wisdom, we need the help, and, to have a bigger and better team. We've also created a culture at the Board which is one of our factors in terms of identifying prospects for the Board, who are people who really get what we're doing here with art and nature. They have experience or leadership, and are supporters of environmental and land preservation, art, and education. But also in terms of our culture, our culture is not one of [00:57:00] I alone can do X. No, it's about what we can do together. That's really important. I tried to really set the stage for that, both for the culture in our staff and our Board. We're not likely to bring or ask someone to join us who is someone who just feels like they're doing it for prestige, or they're doing it for their own egos. It's really about a greater goal of what we're doing together.

Dziedzic: I see that. How have the conversations in the last [00:58:00] ten years changed around the sense of what the region is, and around the idea of community?

Stern: Yes, it's a good question. So another important point—things I wanted to do better—is to change the reputation of Storm King in Cornwall, where we are, and New Windsor. I felt in general that there were so many people who had never been to Storm King, who lived within [00:59:00] a couple miles of here. And I think this was reinforced by some of our docents and staff—that there was a more broader feeling that Storm King is this elite place; it's not really for them. The programming's not really for them; it's for people from New York City who are in the art world. I think that I really wanted to have an understanding, a better understanding, and to show that with our expanding programming that, let's try some different genres [01:00:00] of music for concerts. Let's think about creative ways to be open beyond 5:30 p.m. when we'd been closed—except for we had longstanding extended hours on Saturdays that my sisters and I initiated even before we were on the Board, funded with the Ralph Ogden Foundation, so people could see the beautiful light in the summer.

I think we have had some success with that. I would say a lot of success. I get this from our docents, who really said that there has been a change. [01:01:00] There's more awareness of the fun things that can be done. There's yoga. We started yoga every Saturday from May until September. We started moonlit walks. This was something I had been thinking about long before I became President, but I remember going, sort of sneaking in—or maybe I told my dad—with my wife, Sarah, and just walking around on a full moon to see how that might look. And that's been hugely popular. But I think also beyond that, I think what Victoria Lichtendorf and her terrific education team has done to model—to start [01:02:00] I think a great partnership with a school in Newburgh focusing on fourth and fifth graders, Horizons on the Hudson—was a great start. Now we have three, with the success of that partnership, and it's a two-year program for the fourth and fifth graders. And it's really in-depth. It's really teaching about art and some of

the issues at Storm King, some of the opportunities in the classroom, with field trips to artists' studios, and experiential learning. [01:03:00] It's a way that gets people, gets students, into our landscape, as well. It's led to a wonderful family day every year where the students guide the family, especially new students and families. Again, these are people who are not wealthy people, are very diverse, and from most families—not all—it's their first introduction to Storm King, and no idea, necessarily. To see it through their children's eyes, that's been a great initiative. [01:04:00]

We've also started partnerships and relationships with businesses in the area, and it's good for them and good for us. So I think that has changed. You know, most of our visitors are from the New York City area. But also what's happened in the Hudson Valley is that there's a huge migration of people. Many of those people are younger and creative, and are partly, I think, moving up here because it's easier to live here, [01:05:00] less costly, on both the east side of the river, and now more on the west side, as well, in Newburgh. And that's very exciting. We've done some studies for our long-term planning that showed that this is a trend that is significant for the Hudson Valley, which is a great thing. There are more cultural destinations coming on, as well. We've got, obviously, Dia across the Hudson; Magazzino was launched in 2017, which is starting to really build a neighborhood of terrific cultural destinations for people. [01:06:00]

We've gotten to engage some of our politicians, and many great nonprofit organizations that are promoting Orange County, and the region, and so we often host them for receptions and events. As we've started to do private events, it's very important to have those contacts and to share challenges of the area, transportation, and issues that nonprofits have, and what they need to succeed. I think the convening—we talk about this in our [01:07:00] family foundation too. It's been very important, and had a lot of impact. At the same time, my sisters, who are running the Ralph Ogden Foundation, have done an amazing job of expanding the number of grants that are done, but more importantly, focusing on really important projects in this area. But also we've talked a lot about the importance of convening with other groups doing great work. And so you see that at Storm King now.

One example I wanted to mention that was another great opportunity that fell into our lap, in [01:08:00] 2012 got a call from Jamie Bennett, who was then the Chief of Staff for the Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, Rocco Landesman. I did not know Rocco, and Jamie called and said, "You know, Rocco's big theme in his term as Chair of the NEA"—this was in the first term of Barack Obama's presidency—"was creative placemaking, which meant how the arts could be measured and shown to have a really positive effect on the economic and culture and [01:09:00] happiness in neighborhoods and communities." And so as a result of that call Rocco Landesman said, "I'd love to come to Storm King, and we could do some kind of program around this." So we put together, with Jamie Bennett and Rocco, a

terrific panel for a symposium, called “Creative Placemaking.” We had, I think, around 250 people, and we had three artists who had started remarkable projects, and a very diverse group.

It was Mark di Suvero, and the Socrates Sculpture Park that he started [01:10:00] in the 1980s to reclaim an old illegal dump on the East River, which is now a public park, and a nonprofit that helps emerging artists, and shows their work in that park. There was Lily Yeh, who's done amazing work in Philadelphia, in North Philadelphia specifically, and now internationally, to bring art as a way to revitalize and help communities who are struggling. And Eve Biddle, who started the Wassaic Project. They were on the panel, and some amazing presentations. I mean, just [01:11:00] very moving, and so many good questions. A lot of the audience were other nonprofit leaders, or staff. So that was terrific, and I think we've then since been thinking about ways we could do more to really help the city of Newburgh, in the case of our educational initiatives, and really to be a resource with our 500 acres, with our history of environmental protection, and supporting artists.

Dziedzic: What's the role of the Board and the staff in building these kinds of community relationships?

Stern: I think the Board and staff are critical [01:12:00] to this project. I mentioned the work that Victoria Lichtendorf, Anthony Davidowitz, David Collens, Rachel Coker and her team—they all have been working on really building relationships in the community. Anthony, who moved up here from Washington, has built relationships and been involved with other organizations that are like organizations that want to promote tourism to the area, and just sort of [01:13:00] furthering the mission of both Storm King and other like organizations. In many ways the staff has been critical to these projects that we've launched. And certainly the Board has been critical. Debbie Landesman is a new Trustee. We got to know her because of the creative placemaking event. That's when I first met her and Rocco, and she's a fantastic, very dynamic new Trustee, and has had a whole career in philanthropy and foundations. [01:14:00]

Our Trustees are also really important in terms of supporting not only Storm King but like organizations, and also their ideas and support for new initiatives. We get a lot of great ideas from them, from some of their own collaborations. We have also on our Board Kim Elliman, who's the President and CEO of the Open Space Institute. He's been enormously helpful. We have Peter Bienstock, who's a longtime Trustee, who has so many contacts and involvements in other initiatives in the area. R.J. Smith, who has been helpful [01:15:00] in so many ways, again, involved in several civic projects in the area. Jim Ottaway has been so helpful for educational universities—Bard, SUNY New Paltz—in multiple ways, and just someone who lives in the Hudson Valley and has been a proponent of it for years. Our Board and staff have been leaders in this area.

Dziedzic: And really work together, it sounds like.

Stern: Yes, yes, definitely.

Dziedzic: So you talked a little bit last time about how you had had some experience in [01:16:00] leadership and management, and also civic engagement, through Yale Law, actually. And today you talked a little bit about how your style of leadership is collaborative. And so I want to ask about how your time at Storm King has either tested that, or tried it, and how it allowed your sense of leadership to develop, to flourish.

Stern: I think in terms of management style, I'm certainly not a micromanager, which I think is a good thing. [01:17:00] I've learned a lot from my Board, from my staff. I'm really blessed to have such an experienced and smart Board. I learned a lot working with Jim Ottaway, who ran his family's newspaper business, and then Dow Jones and the *Wall Street Journal* for many years, and from many other Trustees. I would just emphasize that when you're running an organization, or whatever level of staff you are, if [01:18:00] there are people reporting to you, your management is important. But a lot of people—and I learned this, too, and I'm a believer of this, is you manage up and you manage down. You try and manage your boss, to have a good working relationship, and have it be a two-way street. I think it's something that is never perfect, and you have to be open, and to work on. All of us can do better. I think professional development is then really important. As we've been growing, [01:19:00] I have tried to promote that idea with my senior staff, who have been very eager to have that kind of managerial education, or coaching.

I think as we grew, too, one of the important things was to make sure that we do our best to communicate. That's something that can be really toxic if there's a lot of information and just a small group. I've learned and been the recipient of some really great ideas from [01:20:00] different departments about how they work. I think it was an initiative of the Education Department, for example. We started this a couple of years ago, to just have a weekly 30-minute all-staff meeting, which is run by different people. It has been run by the Education Department, but different people being the emcee of the meetings. And basically, it's going around to all the different departments, and tell us what we need to know in the next week, a heads-up, what you're doing, what's the impact for other people, [01:21:00] etc. It's a great idea—it's not all from the top, which, previously was just going around to senior staff. So this involves everyone, and different departments will have announcements or reports in those meetings. It's just been, I think, very helpful to people, because that's one of the real problems in a lot of organizations, where people don't have enough information, or they don't feel like they're heard.

When I was a lawyer in government, I really appreciated it where there were real opportunities to grow in an organization, to have some [01:22:00] agency. I think also just making sure that you get to know well

the people that you're working with, listen to their concerns, listen to their ideas, and also to be fair and transparent as we go forward, because I think that's critical. So those are the things I've been focusing on. We had a retreat for the senior staff earlier this year, and some really good things came out in that, [01:23:00] and part of it is just spending some time together in a fun way, and a lot of departments do that, as well, which I think is great. But one of the things that came out of our retreat was how important it is as a manager, to also be vulnerable, and say, "You know what? I'm not the greatest at X." Because all of us have weaknesses and to share that is very powerful. And historically I think most people don't do that, because that makes them weak, or that's the perception.

And so it's similar, to me, for the Board culture that we talked about, that I really wanted to have a culture here that [01:24:00] is one of appreciation for our fellow staff. I've shared with my team, "Here are some of my vulnerabilities, things that I have to work out more." I remember one time in a senior staff meeting I said something very directly to I think it was Rachel, "Please do not do this," and she said, "That's the best moment I've had with you." [laughter] She's tell it like it is, boom. So those are some of the things that have been focused on. [01:25:00] Really, we're in the business of creativity, but we also have limited resources. We have to have budgets and all sorts of things. But having said that, I've got 40 or so colleagues year-round. It's important to make sure that they're feeling free, that they can have an idea and ask a question. You've got to know from the ground up what's happening with visitors, what do they need, what do we need to do to keep our sculptures in great shape, and to share, and get different opinions about new ideas, new projects. [01:26:00] So listening, having different views of something, having everyone have an opportunity to speak their mind, ask good questions, all of that, is really important. Being the President here, I don't want people just agreeing with me—and the same thing with the Board. It shouldn't be a rubber stamp. And there are, certainly, organizations that have that, which I think is toxic.

Dziedzic: [01:27:00] Well, I want to share this quote, which I think is from your father. I see a relationship between what you were just saying and this. And he was commenting about the way that he and David and Bill Rutherford worked together. I guess you'll probably recognize it too. He said, "It's amazing as I look back over the years that the process was so harmonious. I don't think either Bill or David or I ever had any harsh words for each other. We did often have strong disagreements, but that was always in the initial phase. Then somehow a conclusion emerged, and none of us seemed wedded to our own ideas. The final way, the resolution, was always by unanimous agreement. We all had the same philosophy, the same outlook, the same purpose in mind, and we always made our best decisions and got our best ideas when out in the landscape, rather than [01:28:00] in the office."

Stern: It's a very nice quote. I love to hear that. Yes, that certainly rings in my mind. I don't know how much I've succeeded, but I certainly have promoted to my staff to have walks, and meetings while we

walk. Just this last week—and this happens a lot informally with David and me—“We need to catch up.” And usually at the end of the day I’ll say, “Do you you have time? We’ll take a walk.” And, you know, his eyes light up, and he’s like, [01:29:00] “Great,” you know, because so much of his work is spending time walking, driving around Storm King, looking at all the views, and thinking about, where to install this sculpture, maybe move it. He’s a real perfectionist in that way. Now that we are in several buildings, because we’ve grown—I guess it was last week—I went down for a meeting at the George House, and then walked up with Victoria, [01:30:00] and it’s great. I mean, I said to my staff you should never have a bad day. If you’re having a bad day, just go outside. You know, remember why it’s so wonderful to work here. It’s just a great way to take a moment, and inevitably people feel better. We started these longer staff meetings, where, for example, Mike Seaman last year did a program of “Let’s go look at the conservation on Alexander Liberman’s *Iliad* (1974–76) and what some of the issues are in front of *Iliad*, down the road, and then to Magdalena Abakanowicz’s [01:31:00] *Sarcophagi in Glass Houses* (1989). There was (conservation) work that needed to be done, and then David wanted to move it. And those are something that people love.

To my dad’s quote about how he worked with David and Bill Rutherford, I think that was really wonderful. That was the team, really, after from my grandfather’s death in 1974, when my dad really stepped in to a much more comprehensive leadership. He had been the Board Chair and the President, but when the Board was five people, him and Ted Ogden [01:32:00] and Walter Orr, and it was really a family Board. And so there were fewer meetings, formal meetings, and it was just more a flow, every day planning, and calls with David, calls with Bill. It was just fluid. That was my sense of it. And one thing I regret is that I didn’t have the opportunity to really have more discussions with my dad about his way of managing, because we never really worked together, except for a [01:33:00] short period of time. My sisters and I joined the Board in the 1990s, but we weren’t really involved in the day-to-day. And when my father had to step down as President, after he’d been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s—terrible disease, and he was struggling a little bit with that, the early years—we just didn’t have as much of a transition as I would have liked. I did still have the great support and resource of David Collens, who’s worked here since the 1970s. I guess what I was going to say is just that my inner team is a little bit bigger, and it’s a little bit more [01:34:00] formal, in the sense that—as you need to be—with a senior staff that is now nine people. We work together quite well, but it’s just harder with that many people, and a larger staff.

But I think there are many things in that quote that ring true. [01:35:00] He was born in Germany, and his father was a really talented businessman, Otto Stern. I never knew him because he died in a plane crash when my father was 18. But in German culture, and growing up, my father said, “I’ll never be in business, because it’s so serious, and it’s so—” It just wasn’t something he wanted to do. When my grandfather started to recruit him to come into the family business, my father tells it that my grandfather said, “Pete, have you ever thought of the Expansion game?” Expansion being the [01:36:00] hardware that they made

that expanded in the wall. And that really stuck with my father, because, like, what are you talking about? How could work be fun? [laughter] It's deadly serious, you know, for this German family and his father. And so that was a completely out-of-the-left-field idea. And it was so compelling, because he was 28 years old when my grandfather basically said, "Come into the business and I'll groom you for taking it over."

I guess what I was saying is my father really realized that also when he focused his energies on Storm King, after my grandfather died, it was really fun, and it is really fun to be involved in the leadership of a great [01:37:00] place like this, a great vision. And so I really feel like a steward here, but I also feel like I had an opportunity to bring in more great people to really build this for the future. Every day I feel I'm so lucky to have this opportunity. It's so much fun to do this. And I remember giving a tour—we give lots of tours, and I really enjoy it. And just as in this interview, I talk too much [laughter] but it's because there's so much to say, and it's so much fun. And I know this from my law career: I had jobs that were not that fun. [01:38:00] And, anyway, I was taking around these two people, and at the end of the tour we're getting off the cart, they said, "And they pay you? They pay you to do this?" Because it's just such a great opportunity. So I'm very cognizant of that, and very grateful to the Board and to my staff who I work with, because it really is a joyful thing to have this opportunity, and to work with such great people.

Dziedzic: Well, I think that's all I have to ask for now, so—

Stern: Okay.

Dziedzic: All right.

End of session

Interview with John Stern
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic
August 22, 2018

Storm King Art Center grounds
Audio and video files
Open for research use

Video file 1 – View from the columns looking west

[Side conversation]

Stern: So I love this view, and I start most of my tours here because I think looking out into the South Fields and the northern part of Schunnemunk Mountain encapsulates the elements of the experience people have at Storm King of long views, green viewsheds, a little bit of history of this land that was farmed, largely, and then also some of the landscape design by Bill Rutherford, and more recently our project of planting native grasses [00:05:00] that started in the late 1990s. One of the things that really, I think, separates Storm King from other outdoor art museums or sites is the sense of long views and big sky and the types of things that I think of more in the western part of the U.S., as opposed to the northeast.

A few years after Storm King was founded in 1960—maybe the mid- or early '60s—my grandfather was with a friend of his, and the friend started, I think seeding the idea, of [00:06:00] conserving land and that beautiful view of Schunnemunk. It wasn't so much about what Storm King was then, but I think it was the idea that that land could easily be developed. And really my grandfather was, with his dairy farm and then bringing the business up here, the family business, he really wanted this sort of enclave of green and of open space. And so it's very interesting to me and to my sisters—my family—that really my grandfather became interested in conservation of land. What's interesting is that maybe—and we don't know—that he already had this idea of Storm King being really an outdoor Art Center. [00:07:00] It didn't start that way, and he was experimenting with what kind of art should be shown here. And in the early days it was really all inside.

But it's just interesting because we're looking at over 2000 acres of this beautiful mountain that is now a state park. The quick history is that my grandfather did purchase it—and it was an asset in his business. And then after his death in 1974, my father—Ted Ogden's son-in-law, Peter Stern—took over. And he started the next phase of conservation, which led to Storm King owning [00:08:00] those acres of the east, the northeast side of Schunnemunk Mountain. That land became a conservancy, a nature conservancy, and we changed our charter to allow that. And then further on with the partnership with the Open Space Institute, another nonprofit that's dedicated to preserving open land. It's now become a state park, one of the most recent state parks just for passive recreation, hiking and the like. But that idea of preservation was well before we even started at Storm King putting large-scale sculptures out, like the

Mark di Suveros that we see in these fields, [00:09:00] which really started in the 1976 when the first five di Suveros came on loan.

You're also looking at farm fields. We still have a farmer coming in and haying about three times a year, which is lovely. More recently you're seeing native grasses that we planted. This was a project that David Collens initiated with the help of a great landscape designer, Darrell Morrison, who David met in Texas at a conference. You also see Bill Rutherford's—what he called “creative farming” in the 1980s, [00:10:00] of mowing. Initially Storm King was mowed as you would a golf course. So then he really saw the advantage of having farm fields and then native grasses. But then mowing wide paths for people so they can enjoy the native grasses and the long grasses, but not having to be going through them. When you're standing here you're taking all of that in, and then you're also seeing the other magical thing at Storm King, which is every minute, every hour, every day, and your visit changes constantly. So we talk about the kinetic works, and you can see [00:11:00] some in Mark di Suvero's *Pyramidian*, and the furthest that we see, this huge I-beam, which is just sort of floating and moving as we speak from the wind. You know, it's just a great sort of coming together of art, powered by nature.

Dziedzic: Let me ask you one question while we're here. So when you used to tour around with your grandfather when you were young—now, these columns were already here, the ones that we're standing between. And so I'm just wondering if you remember what this view looked like when you were younger.

Stern: You know, I have to say I don't have an early [00:12:00] remembrance of this particular view. I'm quite sure that the columns were—I remember the columns from my childhood. What I didn't know until really last year, when I did some research for a presentation for our Board of Trustees, about how did all this land become acquired by Storm King and my grandfather and my father. The columns have a really funny story, which is they were originally built for a mansion north of here on the Hudson Valley, called Danskammer. It was the Armstrong family, which is a big family in the Hudson River from the early nineteenth century. And Vermont Hatch, who built what is now the Museum Building but was a residence, [00:13:00] salvaged a lot of granite from the Danskammer Mansion, which was being torn down in the 1930s. And so I like that because Vermont Hatch and the house—he was already thinking about recycling materials, which has been a theme of the collection at Storm King from a number of artists.

Vermont Hatch also, beside granite slabs that he reused for building the building, he also brought the columns here. He brought them here, but he didn't erect them. I don't know why. I think it might have been that he just didn't think it worked with the landscaping that he wanted to do, which was a more formal landscape than you see today. So my grandfather and Bill Rutherford, the landscape architect, found [00:14:00] these columns in the woods and behind the house. And so this discovery was made, and my grandfather said, “Well, why don't we put them up again here?” And I think he positioned them so

that they would be seen from the New York State Thruway, which is our western border. You can hear the trucks from here. You don't see it from here, which is part of the magic of the landscape. What I found out also was that my grandfather lit these at night. Now, we're not open at night, but he wanted people to see this beacon of this new Art Center, whatever it's going to be.

I like that he was thinking already about promoting this Art Center, even though [00:15:00] no one had heard of it. And he wasn't really focused on necessarily having lots of visitors; he just wanted to do something great for the community. And that has now blossomed into us being an international destination for people who love art and landscape and nature.

Dziedzic: I didn't know all those pieces of history about the columns.

Stern: Yes. I think a lot of people think they're quirky and sort of a folly, in a way. And because we're not the Getty; we're not about Classical art, per se. But it sort of fits.

Dziedzic: I think hearing that [00:16:00] gives them a little bit more historical context. I don't think I knew that it was Vermont Hatch that collected the columns—

Stern: It was part of the salvage. [00:16:27] Should we go over to the next site?

[Side conversation]

Video file 2 – View towards allée looking south

Stern: I thought [00:17:00] we could stop here and look down the allée. Or what was—half the allée.

Dziedzic: Evolving. The evolving allée.

Stern: So I've been telling people this season that this is a little hard to interpret, partly because of Mary Mattingly's piece for *Indicators: Artists on Climate Change* (2018). Her piece is about displacement of trees, palm trees from Florida that she brought up here to see how they grow. Because eventually the idea is that at the end of this century we're going to have, [00:18:00] where we are now in Mountainville, the same temperature and climate that Florida has now. So how they would react here, sort of getting ahead of climate change. That's part of it.

My grandfather planted this maple allée, which has become iconic here, in 1968, I believe. And I remember my cousin—Peter Lamb remembers Ted Ogden saying, "I'm planting a great allée. I'm not

going to see it in its adulthood, but you will.” He was always thinking ahead. He had been touring Europe a lot, and that’s where the first [00:19:00] sculptures were acquired for Storm King, in 1961 in Austria. I think he was very enamored of the idea of the allée. The allée that visitors enter on, that you see on Museum Road was planted by Vermont Hatch. So that also was probably an influence, and it was in keeping with the Hatch Estate, which was 200 acres.

What we see here to the south was land that my grandfather acquired over time. The reason you see now new trees that are planted has to do with the failing health of the maples after 50 years. And with the help of a landscape architect, Gary Hilderbrand at Reed-Hilderbrand, [00:20:00] we went through a process, which ended up with us deciding—and with our Landscape Committee and our Board—that we were replacing the allée, the maples, and we have planted 33 black gum trees, which are native here and will do better at this interesting topography. So part of the problems we had with the maples was there were wet areas, and there were higher, dry areas. And the native black gum trees can do better, we think. So I think I’m going to go through that stage of probably telling my children and maybe my grandchildren [laughs] that I may not make it to see them all at their height. They’re going to be growing [00:21:00] a foot a year, apparently, if everything goes well.

Also when you look out here though too, and really from any views up here, I think people quickly get the idea that at Storm King we really care about the maintenance of the land. It is a human-designed landscape, but it’s really meant to feel like it’s just a natural landscape and view. I think what is a great part of the visitor experience here is really taking time. And so just now we’ve seen two people coming down the South Fields, and you get a great sense of scale. [00:22:00] I love to see people in the landscape and—they’re just walking away from *Pyramidian*, which is 60 feet high. The scale has already changed from just a few feet where we were seeing it from the columns. So every view needs its—you need time to look out. So let’s go over to this view.

Dziedzic: All right. [00:22:38] (pause) [00:23:12]

Stern: So now we’re—it’s a fortunate day, because we’re seeing—on the east side of the allée, we’re seeing the farmer with some of his machinery to hay. And then to the left you see a few of the elements of Richard Serra’s *Schunnemunk Fork* (1990–91) in that South Field that he claimed. The first artist to go that far in the south. And this also reminds me of the project that was started in the 1980s after my grandfather died with a [00:24:00] grant from the Wallace Foundation. We were able to work in sort of a partnership with the Wallace Foundation, and then later specifically with the Open Space Institute, to preserve our viewshed. And unlike Schunnemunk here, there are multiple properties. So we sort of strategically and quietly acquired land and then would put easements on them and resell them. And that’s worked quite well. You still see a few houses from here, but you don’t see a lot. And particularly at this

time of year when everything is quite green and the leaves are all on, it's really a fantastic experience and enclave.

Then as you go from south to east toward the Hudson [00:25:00] Valley, then you also get a great view here, and from other points around our 500 acres, of Storm King Mountain. Usually about this time in my tour people ask about the name "Storm King." And that was a creative idea of a writer from the mid-nineteenth century, Nathaniel Willis. And he lived in Cornwall. He felt that more people should be experiencing the natural beauty of the Hudson Highlands, and so he wrote something very poetic with the idea of Storm King. To really understand the name, you have to see the mountain from the Hudson River. And it is—it really is a fjord. It's really just rising so dramatically. And so my grandfather said rather than naming it after part of the mountain, which was called Butter Hill, how about Storm King? And so that stuck. And my grandfather knew of the Storm King School—opened in 1867, one of the oldest boarding schools in NY state - and knew of the mountain.

The Art Center, for a short time, was called the Idlewild Art Center and then changed really quickly, because it was by 1960 when we were chartered, at least provisionally, [00:27:00] it was Storm King Art Center.

Dziedzic: But it maybe could have been Butter Hill Art Center. [laughs]

Stern: I don't think so. I think it would have stayed with Idlewild. [laughter] Which was also a small hamlet near Fort Montgomery, and I think also had a lot of artists and the like.

Dziedzic: [laughs] And I think Bea had kind of raised the question of whether Claes Oldenburg knew about this—the Butter Hill connection when he proposed the pats of butter artwork.

Stern: Yes. I think we could have a good exhibition of great ideas for commissions that were maybe never executed. There'd be a lot of interest, I think.

Dziedzic: I agree.

Stern: Yes. During the time I've been here as president, it's been interesting to see [00:28:00] where artists, both for *Outlooks*, which we started in 2013 with emerging artists, and also for artists who are thinking about other projects, commissions, that there is interest in areas that were never thought of as places for art. And there's actually a very good example this year, in 2018, with the *Indicators* exhibition, with 17 artists addressing climate change. And David Brooks's work, where it's all along the Moodna Creek Trail, which you don't see here, because it's in that forest sloping down to Moodna Creek. I would

say rarely have we had art on that trail. It's a relatively new trail. [00:29:00]. And he found 30 natural objects near that trail and created bronze casts of those and then put them back next to the original element. And it's just a brilliant, brilliant work that also gets people into a new part of the grounds—for most people, they've not ever been on that trail. It's really more like a hiking trail. Now it's really a massive scavenger hunt for people who know of his work.

Dziedzic: You know, I was kind of thinking about that when we were looking at the maple allée, because it seems like there were a lot of artists who wanted their work to be framed by the maple allée, who were—

Stern: Yes.

Dziedzic: —placing work here for their exhibition [00:30:00] in this area close to the Museum Building. What do you think is making artists get interested in these spaces that are maybe a little bit less well known, or less traditionally designed for viewing sculpture, with no clear sight-line?

Stern: You know, I think—I think in many ways a lot of artists, understandably, I think, would love to do a project here. And so whether it's *Outlooks*, which is just for the year, a site-specific piece, or a piece that might come into the collection, they're thinking too just about not interfering with the aesthetic that David Collens—and to some extent my father, Peter Stern—established in the 1970s after my grandfather [00:31:00] died. And so—for example, I remember Virginia Overton was the second *Outlooks* artist in 2014. And so she did this fabulous line, 500 feet of brass tubing. And it was this gesture—it was almost complementing Richard Serra's work, but not messing the view that we see from here. Last year, Heather Hart did one of her fabulous rooftop structures, installed that in the North Woods. We'd never had anyone from *Outlooks* choose that area, and partly it meshed with her interest of talking about lesser-known histories in this [00:32:00] area and specifically about African Americans in this area. And it was so powerful because so many people gravitated to the roof. We opened with Chagaux, this wonderful two-person string group. And we had dance. And we had so much programming. So I love that we have that opportunity, both in our exhibitions and *Outlooks*. It goes on and on, in terms of the *Outlooks* artists. So each year it's very exciting, and it brings people back to see what's going on.

The other [00:33:00] thing I would say about this view is looking at the Calder Hillside, which was created and designed by Bill Rutherford. This was probably one of the largest earth-moving projects during his reign of 1960, when Storm King opened. Bill Rutherford worked on this property and the design until his death in 2005. So that's a lesser-known story, which I hope that we have publications going forward that really tell in more depth. But this mid-level platform is doing a couple things. I mean, it's become a great [00:34:00] outdoor gallery space, for the Calders, that we have on loan from the Calder Foundation since

the late 1980s. But it's also this sort of gentle and beautiful way to get—that people can come from this hill and down into the south, which is the area where we've expanded our collection and our art space.

To understand how big a project this was—over there we have three trees that when this—so it was all graded. Because it was a very steep slope. And so not easy to navigate. And so to preserve these beautiful trees, [00:35:00] Bill Rutherford said we've got to have a tree well. When we go to those three, you really look how far down that tree was originally. And in order to save it, they went to this plan for the tree wells. I feel like a lot of people would have just cut down the tree. But I think that's more the aesthetic of Storm King, of preserving great trees. And we do have an amazing collection of trees. And I'm not the expert on landscape, but [laughter] there are others who can talk more about that.

Dziedzic: All right. [00:36:00] Where to next?

Stern: This is more about landscape, but I think another great shot is from on the Noguchi Hill and looking to the north. Because you really get a sense of the impact of the native grasses. And then also it's interesting how the land was thought of over time. Because I think about my grandfather actually was thinking about having a house on the top of that hill. And I'm not sure what the decision was to just leave it for art. I'm glad that they did. But it's also an extraordinary view from there. [00:37:00] So we'll look at it there, and if we have time we could go up there.

Dziedzic: Okay.

[Side conversation]

Video file 3 – David Smith area

Stern: Did you—with David, did you go through the David Smiths?

Dziedzic: No, we didn't do that today, actually.

Stern: Okay. There is another great view here, and this goes to [00:38:00] trying to replicate in some way the vision of David Smith, of his work, and Bolton Landing being a sculpture farm—and that being a sort of seminal moment for my grandfather, for what Storm King could become. So we could take a look at that.

[Side conversation]

Stern: So I love this—now you see eight David Smiths. This was a critical [00:39:00] moment in our history, where my grandfather went up to see David Smith's estate and home in Bolton Landing in the Adirondacks, the southern part of Lake George. And, sadly, David Smith had died in a car crash the year prior. My grandfather went there in October of 1966. What he saw was stunning, because he saw what were 89 sculptures, including these that you see here, that were out in the fields. And David Smith called the place a sculpture farm. And he had them in rows in some instances, and then [00:40:00] on this slope from his house down to Lake George, they were just dotted around, and he would move them around. My grandfather was, I think, stunned also by how amazing these sculptures were, and he appreciated David Smith's welding—my grandfather was an engineer. His business was expansion bolts. So he really understood what it means to weld well.

He also liked that he was using found objects, and you can see this here, with the top of a stool and—over there, on *Sitting Printer* (1954–55)—and *Personage of May* (1957) and the shovel as the head—[00:41:00] all of that I think he really enjoyed. But the bigger picture is he bought these 13 David Smiths. Five are now indoors. That alone was a big deal. It's the largest acquisition ever at one time, of David Smith sculptures. But we're talking about landscape and art in the landscape. He wanted to kind of replicate the feel of Bolton Landing. And over time we've done some really great shows that David Collens and, more recently, Nora Lawrence, our senior curator, have done. And showing David Smith's work in the way that one would see sculptures at his studio. So you're looking toward the Hudson River here. [00:42:00] But you can also then, as we walk over here, you're getting beautiful views to the Calder Hill, and as we walk around *Study in Arcs* (1957), we're enjoying that.

But then we can sort of—I guess you can see it better here. You know, this is quite steep. And then you're seeing our east road, the ridges. You can see the grandeur of these large trees. And if we keep going this way—I also just like to give credit to David Collens for his amazing vision for siting [00:43:00] sculptures like this. So this is Ursula von Rydingsvard's *For Paul* (1990–92/2001) [indicating sculpture sited downhill from David Smith area]. I love that originally it was up here on top, so no one actually saw the view that we're having now. And when it became part of our permanent collection David put it here so that you could have this view and understand that the sculpture is connected bowls. And in the winter we'll put a big plank on the top of it (for conservation reasons). But you can also see it up close; you're seeing all the detail. And then from the East Road, you're looking up at it.

So that's the fabulous part of this experience, because everything looks different depending on where you are. And I think people generally also find their way and can follow their eye to what they want to see here. [00:44:00] This is all about discovery. I just love this area, because you can see so many things from so many different perspectives. And that's what we're all about. So we'll go to—we'll go up here to get the view of the north.

[Side conversation]

Video file 4 – Noguchi Hill

Stern: [00:45:57] This is looking to the north, [00:46:00] and here you've got four fields of native grasses. Their color is starting to come out. It will change over the fall. You can see the Bill Rutherford curve. We have to fix it a little bit. It was really meant to be quite curvy. And then you've got these great views of Menashe Kadishman, *Suspended*; Alexander Liberman's *Adam* (1970) on the left; and then the tree is sort of in front of Alice Aycock's *Three-Fold Manifestation II* (1987, refabricated 2006); and then also her *Low Building with Dirt Roof (For Mary)*. First [00:47:00] sculpture, I believe, that she made, in 1973. So it's interesting, though, and I think you've been up there and seen that beautiful view—again, in my research—and it may have also come from David—but I know my grandfather thought of having a building or home up there. And I think at that time it was really sort of preservation. But I think in the end it became part of the artscape, if you will. And I think that's absolutely the right priority.

I don't know if you've heard this story, but there's a great story about [00:48:00] *Adam*, by Alexander Liberman. Now, that work was shown, I believe first, in the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, right across from the White House. And this was—we had a lot of articles about this in our fiftieth anniversary here in 2010. President Nixon hated the work. And he hated it to the point that he ordered that it be moved so he could not see it from the White House lawn. And so the head of the National Endowment for the Arts at the time had this delicate challenge to go to the artist and say, "Hey, I know this is your exhibition at the Corcoran, but we found an even better place to move this work," and moved it to Hains Point, which is on [00:49:00] the Potomac River. A few years later, we acquired the work. And so I'm very happy always to say that we are very proud to be a place of asylum for persecuted sculpture, like *Adam*. And people don't really believe that that happened, so we do have the articles and press on that. But it shows, I guess—oh, the kicker, the punch line of this is *Adam* is the only non-person on the enemies list that Nixon created. And so that's also quite extraordinary.

Dziedzic: Wow. But there are a lot of sculptures here that wouldn't [00:50:00] really be built anywhere if they hadn't been given a kind of asylum here. I mean, both of Alice Aycock's sculptures, in a way, would have been—didn't have a home, really, after their original construction.

Stern: Yeah, I mean, it's very typical that most artists for large-scale sculpture are either having it in public spaces in cities like New York, Philadelphia, Boston, or in corporate sites. And there are some great works there. But I think the opportunity for artists to have their work sited and displayed in such an expansive natural setting is unusual. And now I think it's become much more popular and more and more during my tenure. I've met [00:51:00] so many people who are so grateful for Storm King for being a sort

of inspiration for their own art center or own collection. I'm delighted by that, and I think going forward too—and really with our history, you know, we seek to continue to be sort of a leader in this field of art and nature and landscape.

Dziedzic: And I think something David pointed out earlier was just how his own understanding of landscape changed over time.

Stern: Yes.

Dziedzic: Can you talk maybe about how you've seen that change here? The understanding of landscape?

Stern: Yes, obviously it's been an evolution from the 1960s. And it's interesting, because Storm King was founded in 1960, and as I mentioned [00:52:00] originally, it was all mowed lawn. And my grandfather had a water system where we had sprinklers all over. And it did keep everything green, but I think for economic reasons and for sustainability, that was—I don't know, maybe 20 years ago—just stopped. And now we don't water, generally. We will water newly seeded trees or plants to get them going. So it has moved, and I think it's with the help of Bill Rutherford, with Darrell Morrison, Gary Hilderbrand now, we aspire to be great stewards of not only our [00:53:00] landscape but also of nature, of our wildlife that we have. And with the native grasses, we're seeing much more habitat for birds, for butterflies and insects. That's important to us.

We've worked with other organizations like Open Space Institute to preserve land off our site, as I mentioned, but also thinking about wildlife corridors in the Hudson Valley. That's something that my sister, Bea Stern, has been very involved with. And some of our trustees: Peter Bienstock, Kim Elliman, Hume R. Steyer, and others. Jim Ottaway. And then more and more programming, like *Indicators: Artists on Climate Change* gives great opportunities for artists who are already doing work [00:54:00] around the environment and nature. The timing is critical.

I should also say that there is a kind of connection between Storm King being started in 1960 and—many people credit the modern twentieth-century environmental movement was really started in large part with the Con Ed project to push up water from the Hudson River, right at Storm King Mountain—literally on the mountain—for energy. As a result of the concern about that, [00:55:00] starting, I think, with people who lived on Storm King and saw how beautiful it was, that Scenic Hudson came out of that fight against Con Ed. And it was the first time I think in federal courts that they basically stopped a project like this. I think that that is a nice confluence in terms of the way that Storm King has become more, over time, in its

mission, to steward land and our Hudson Highlands wildlife and the natural world. So we're really about art [00:56:00] in nature but also in environment, natural environment.

Dziedzic: If we went up to the grasses, would you be able to talk about them in a little more detail?

Stern: Yes, we can.

Dziedzic: So is Scenic Hudson one of the first kind of regional environmental watchdog orgs? [00:57:00]

Stern: Yes. It's—they've changed over time. Now they're really focusing on creating and maintaining parks in cities in the Hudson Valley. But I think for years they also were involved with the cleaning of the Hudson River. The Riverkeepers, with Pete Seeger. And, you know, in the early '70s was also when the EPA was created. And a lot of nonprofits—Audubon was earlier—but a number of new nonprofits came into being with the focus on air pollution and water pollution, and, a lot was changed.

Dziedzic: Yeah. [00:58:00] *Silent Spring* was in '59?

Stern: I think it was in 1962, I believe. Yes. I guess we can go this way.

[Side conversation]

Video file 5 – View from the Meadows north of Museum Road

Stern: I just want to say that this view to Alexander Calder's *The Arch* (1975) from here, I love, with the undulating grasses. There's an aesthetic to the native grasses as well as being good for the environment and so sustainable, because the only maintenance really is the burning that we try to do every year. We're limited to when we can do it, but if we can do it before March 15 every year, it's so good for the health of the native grasses. I love these foxtail grasses—right in front of us is Canada wild rye. And then looking ahead here and also in front of *The Arch* is the switchgrass. And that will grow—[01:05:00] I'm 5'8", and it will grow above me. I love the long views through it and then the color.

And you can see here—this is Bill Rutherford's sort of path, wide path. People have referred to it as like a river of grass. It's really a river of lawn, I guess, between the grasses.

Dziedzic: And the Rutherford curve that you were mentioning—

Stern: Yes. When my father told this story of Bill Rutherford coming into his office in early, mid-1980s, and he had this [01:06:00] idea of a path, mowed path. And my father imagined that this is a path that's maybe, you know, eight feet or six feet wide. And then he saw the plans and saw how wide [laughs] it is. And he was a little bit taken aback. But he was absolutely right, because also thinking about the future and the growth, so we're trying to maintain that. And thinking about other types of paths—I think one of the things has been communicating to people that we want the experience for people of discovery, but people also want orientation. I see that a lot of people don't know that they can walk in the grass, or they are just more comfortable on roads.

But a lot of people do get it, and I [01:07:00] always, when I come down here, I can't help myself but going through the path. Because there's something so calming and peaceful and really—you really feel like you're very, very close and in nature. And we're hearing the cicadas now at this time of year. It's also beautiful in the winter. And we do have winter walks for our members, and we're starting to have public weekends. I'd like to, in the future, see Storm King be open all year round. But one of the great things is that we have four seasons, and it's so different in all. I also love it when, after we've done the burning, it's more like a Minimalist work, especially from up high. [01:08:00] And then it's just black dirt. And it's profound, and you can get the complete contours of the field and—so it's amazing just thinking about the native grasses because the aesthetic is just—putting aside the sculpture, there's an incredible aesthetic based on time, weather, season. And I think also—this is now my tenth year as fulltime president—being in this landscape and seeing it change and evolve, it also feels like a conversation about time, seasons of your life.

I remember at the end of a long day [01:09:00] with Lynda Benglis in 2015, and she was I think probably in her seventies and just fantastic artist. And we basically were looking at one more last sculpture site. And we were coming around this area. And it was about 4:30 in the afternoon. And she said, “You know, I just love Storm King. I think it's so fantastic, this landscape. And I want to be buried here.” [laughs] And we all sort of laughed. And I thought, “You know, that's great. I share that.” And I think that speaks to the kind of enthusiasm that artists have, and the opportunity to be here and know that it's a very special place. It also goes to [01:10:00] long relationships that we have with artists. You know, place in general is really powerful. And I think this is why people really love Storm King and come back, because it is an extraordinary experience—there is this place. And there are people that come back for Father's Day, for special anniversaries. Their kids grow up, they want a photo at *Momo Taro*. And that's also lovely. We become part of family's life together.

[Side conversation]

Video file 6 – Driving up Museum Road to Museum Building

Stern: I'll just point out as we're coming up the drive here, as [01:12:00] part of the allée revitalization project, this is actually a really nice view of Museum Road, and you've seen where we have interplanted new maples. And here we decided to keep the maples because they were in pretty good shape, but just to interplant. And so I'm really pleased—these were planted in the spring. And I think they're doing quite well. And it's great to have them, because we lost a lot of trees due to storms, and in this project we also learned more. We have a great maintenance team. But they learned more about best practices. And also we're starting composting for soil. So we have this soil tea that is specifically from the leaves, and [01:13:00] it's going to help the health of our trees going forward.

Dziedzic: Is the composting incorporating food scraps from—

Stern: No, it's using the leaves that fall, and then sort of tailored to the needs of the soil for particular trees. And so we sent Mike Seaman and Mike Odyński—Mike Seaman's our Director of Facilities and Conservation Specialist, and he had a tree firm before he came to Storm King. [01:14:00] So he knows a lot about trees. But this was a sort of seminar about composting for soil. I think it's important to have professional development for all of us.

Barbara Hepworth there, nice views. And then looking up at Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Wayside Drainpipe* (1979). What I love about this piece is so many people—I started asking people on tours, "Do you know who the artist is?" And only two people in, I would say, the last eight years since it was installed have gotten the right answer. And one of the people who didn't get the right answer was the artist's brother, who continued to feel that this was not a work by his brother. [01:15:00] So the artist is Claes Oldenburg. So when people get it, I really am very impressed. Because it's just—it's just a series of works that he did in the '70s but that are just not as known.

Dziedzic: Yes.

Stern: He was going to do a huge—I think it was 35-foot—*Wayside Drainpipe* in Toronto, but it never got executed for whatever reasons.

End of interview