A TEI Project

Interview of

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. Session 1 (December 12, 2008)

Collings
: Good morning, Jan. Today is December 12, 2008. This is Jane Collings interviewing Jan Williamson in her office in Santa Monica. Hello.

Williamson
: Good morning.

Collings
: Why don't we just start off at the very beginning of the story and tell me where and when you were born.

Williamson
: Oh, that story.

Collings
: Yes.

Williamson
: [laughter] I was born in Hemet, California.

Collings
: Okay, a native Californian.

Williamson
: Yes, a native Californian, fourth generation.

Collings
: Oh, my gosh.

Williamson
: Both of my parents [Willie Nelson Williamson, Jr. and Anita Joan Wright] were born and raised in the Upland-Pomona area, and on my mom's side, her parents both were born in the Pomona area. My mom and dad are horse people and so my dad had a job managing a small thoroughbred farm called Shamel

Ranch in Murietta, so that's where they were living and working when me and my twin brother Jay were born.

Collings

Oh, a twin.

Williamson

So I have an older sister, Lisa, and then a younger sister, Karin, but Jay and I are in the middle.

Collings

Oh, it must have been wonderful growing up on a horse ranch.

Williamson

Yes, actually it was.

Collings

It's like a dream come true.

Williamson

Really, it's probably the most defining aspect of my life, my personality in some way, only in that, like, I'm the child that has not done anything agricultural-related with my life, although I guess I'm cultivating arts and culture.

Collings

Exactly, yes. And the EWALA [Earth Water Air Los Angeles], which, of course, we'll get to, is very much about--

Williamson

The environment.

Collings

--the environment, yes.

Williamson

Definitely, yes. And so we--I mean, do you want this kind of like little--

Collings

Yes, go ahead. Tell me about that.

Williamson

So they managed that ranch for a number of years, and then when I was about three or four, we moved to the San Joaquin Valley to a place called Tipton, California, where there's a lot of fog.

Collings

A lot of fog, really?

Williamson

Oh, yes. It's like the tulle fog in central California is infamous. Lots of people die every year--

Collings

Are you serious?

Williamson

--in it, because the driving and car accidents. So, yes, it's not like some fog that comes over you.

Collings

Not like the killer fog that invades your lungs? [laughter]

Williamson

But so they were managing a horse ranch there called Gem State Stables, and we were there for several years. Then my dad got another job at a new ranch called Los Cerritos, back in Murietta, and the owner of that ranch, Mr. Pascoe, he founded Pascoe Steel, which later became Amcor. It's like a big steel and cement--major steel and cement company, and so I guess the thoroughbred industry or business was a way that a lot of wealthy people got major tax write-offs, up until the late eighties.

Collings

I see.

Williamson

I mean, it was definitely a passion of his, too, but--so the thoroughbred industry in California, horse racing was a pretty big deal. It's not so much now, because that whole tax thing went away.

Collings

Oh, interesting.

Williamson

I don't know enough about it, because kind of that piece of it, I was still really young, like a teenager. But my parents managed that ranch for twenty-five years and that's where I grew up, in Murietta on this ranch called Los Cerritos. Actually, when the owner decided to retire, he decided to sell the ranch, and my parents were in their mid-sixties, and so they retired as well and moved up to the Central Coast in the Atascadero area, and they have a little farm up there now.

Williamson

But one of the interesting things that happened to me when I was in my early thirties, I was working here in Los Angeles for this artist, Tom Van Sant, and he made the first satellite composite map of the Earth free of clouds. It's a totally famous image map. It's probably the most reproduced, it is the most reproduced image of the Earth in the world. He finished it in 1990, and I went to work for him right after he finished it, and while I was working for him we had this really funny thing happen that ties back to my origins in Murietta. This was in the early nineties, and I guess theme parks were a big deal then, and so there was this group of people who were trying to put together a theme park based around "Star Trek."

Collings

Oh, really?

Williamson

And they came to us, because their idea for the theme park was that it was going to be like the constellation. There were all the different planets in our constellation, and they wanted us to be the provider of all the Earth-related images and so forth. They had [Edward Eugene] "Buzz" Aldrin [Jr.], the astronaut, as their spokesperson and all this stuff, and so they came and were doing this presentation to us to convince us to sort of join on and be part of the team. And Buzz and his wife came, and as they're giving us their whole spiel, they have these placards that they're showing, and they said that the location--they had found this fantastic location in southern California at a place called Temecula, which is immediately adjacent to Murietta, and I said, "Oh, that's right where I grew up."

Williamson

Murietta is in Riverside County, and so it is a very fast-growing county, with a lot of people moving into the area, etc. So anyway, they were talking about the numbers of people that they could draw from, etc., to come to it. They're going through their visuals, and they get to the visual of the piece of land that it's going to be on, and it's the ranch that I grew up on.

Collings

My gosh.

Williamson

The exact piece of property--which my parents had retired by then. Well, it had only been like three or four years actually, and so it was just the weirdest feeling, because it was big. It was a square mile, and it had--you know, I've seen aerial photographs of it all my life. There's a mile-long racetrack on it, so it was totally recognizable to me.

Collings

Right, right.

Williamson

And it was just so strange, because the chances that--first of all, that piece of land probably in the history of the planet, there's probably only been fifty people who've ever actually lived on that land. Perhaps there was an Indian site on there, because we did find lots of grinding stones and arrowheads and stuff, but that doesn't necessarily mean that there was an encampment there. So in the history of the planet you could think, you know, so what are the chances that they would be doing a presentation and they would actually meet somebody who had actually lived there and grown up? And they were like freaked out, because I was freaked out, because it really upset me, because I had this idea--I mean, and this ties back to my whole thing with the environment and stuff. It's just that the Earth and my connection to nature really comes specifically from growing up there. It's like my first teacher, my first spiritual teacher, the Earth,

I mean, there's just so much--if you just observe what's there, there's so much to learn from it, deep philosophical questions about life and everything, and so it was a very weird moment, to be in that particular setting with this astronaut who had landed on the Moon, and they were talking about putting a theme park--

Collings

A "Star Trek" theme park.

Williamson

--on my home.

Collings

That's a very California, southern California story, isn't it?

Williamson

Yes, that's true. It is. I hadn't even thought about that from that point of view, because it was like the space industry or the aerospace industry is such a part of California history as well.

Collings

And also the entertainment culture--

Williamson

Right, right.

Collings

--and the accelerated pace of urban development, from ranch to theme park in the space of a year it sounds like.

Williamson

Yes, yes. The land now--it never has been developed, interesting. It's been twenty years or so and what has happened--even though like all the plots of land around it have big industrial parks, because it's zoned industrial now, and so there are these big warehousey-type buildings around it, but it doesn't have anything on it other than it has some settling ponds, big water settling ponds, so it's still undeveloped, knock on wood.

Collings

Knock on wood, yes. So your siblings all went into some kind of like agriculturally related area, is that right?

Williamson

Pretty much. My little sister [Karin Ford] married into a cattle-ranching family [Ford] in the Fresno area, and then my older sister [Lisa Conklin], she and her husband moved with my parents up to the Atascadero-San Luis Obispo area, so they help my parents manage that piece of property. Plus she became a zookeeper and a dog trainer, so she has her whole animal thing. Then my brother [Jay Williamson], when we were growing up, he worked on all the maintenance equipment and did all the tractors and all of that stuff, and so now

he is an airplane mechanic, and he runs one of U.S. Customs' airplane hangars on the Canadian-U.S. border in Washington.

Collings

Oh, it must be very beautiful up there.

Williamson

Yes, yes.

Collings

So now, did you go to the local public school?

Williamson

Yes. It's very small. In fact, my mom was on the school board. It was a tiny school--Murietta School District. There were like three buildings, 250 kids, kindergarten through eighth grade, which was a feeder school then into Elsinore High School, which was a larger--there were probably about 1500 kids that came from all over the whole area.

Collings

What kinds of subjects did you enjoy when you were at school?

Williamson

Well, definitely the art. Right from the very beginning, that was--which was--I mean, it was no context for me in my family necessarily. I mean, both of my parents are very educated and totally supportive, but it wasn't like art was a--it just wasn't sort of a--like the idea of a career in art or something like that was not something that we saw around us.

Collings

Did you have anything hanging up in the house, any books with illustrations and that kind of--

Williamson

Oh, yes, tons of that stuff. I mean, we had lots and lots and lots of books and lots of Western art, lots of Native American art, so that was my big thing that I used to draw, is horses. Oh, and I was totally into architecture, too. We had Legos and so often I would take like a whole weekend to build like a whole house. My goal would be to build a house using every single piece of Lego that we had, and it had to be like artistic and beautiful. It couldn't be like just thrown together. It had to, like, have a purpose for it.

Collings

Yes, well, that sounds like a relaxing weekend.

Williamson

Yes. Oh, and I was a total fort builder, too, because we had all these--there was like a riverbed that ran through the ranch and all these trees and just different places all over, and so I built forts all over the ranch all the time that would be--especially during the summer. And then I would live in them in the summer.

Collings

Oh, really.

Williamson

So I would just like go and like sleep out there and have my sleeping bag and everything.

Collings

Oh, that's wonderful. Did your brother and sisters camp out there?

Williamson

Not really. I mean, I would try to convince them to, but they weren't as into it as I was.

Collings

Oh, that's sounds like really a lot of fun. Did your family have any kind of religious background or training?

Williamson

Not really. I mean, my mom was Presbyterian, and there was a church that she went to. I mean, we all went to it. My dad never went to it, but we went to it sometimes. I think about sometime like when I was around eight or ten, my mom basically said, "If you don't want to go anymore, you don't have to go." And so I was like, "Great. I don't want to go." I didn't go anymore after that. I think I was more like I always just felt like nature was more of my connection to spirit. Although now I'm very involved in a Buddhist practice and part of a small Buddhist temple and Tibetan temple, and that came after a long involvement in Native American practices and going to sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies and all of that, but I ended up in the Tibetan Buddhist thing.

Collings

Oh, okay. Well, maybe we can talk more about that. So when you were going to high school, did your parents talk at all about going to college and what you were going to be when you grew up? And what kinds of things were your friends talking about?

Williamson

My parents always assumed that we would all go to college, and so that was definitely part of the environment. I don't think they had a particular agenda for what we would be or do, although for me, when I was in high school, I always had art teachers actually who really totally supported me. Actually, in elementary school, in seventh and eighth grade, the seventh-and-eighth-grade English teacher [Mr. Satch LaValley] was really into drama and did these totally over-the-top, theatrical-performance things for our school that were beyond anything that you would imagine coming out of a little country school.

Williamson

He was gay, and that was highly unusual. I mean, I'm sure that he and his partner were the only out gay people in our whole community of a thousand people. But because he was so totally fabulous, nobody cared, because I mean,

he did these amazing--he would come into L.A. all the time and buy costumes from the studios, so, I mean, he would produce these amazing things. One of the things that was like an outstanding moment for me artistically with him when I got in his class was he did this thing where he had a book of all these folk costumes from around the world, and so he described them all to us. We had to draw them as he was describing them. So everybody in the whole class was drawing from his verbal description, and so there were all these completely different images of the same thing. And then he would make these big murals out of them and stuff.

Williamson

And then we did all these puppet shows, and so he [Mr. LaValley] gave each of us sets of plays that we would pick from that were folk tales, and then we would have to make puppets for each of the characters from the folk tales, and then we would perform those puppet shows for the whole school, that kind of thing. But then he'd also do these big musical-type things that were--he got people to do things that you wouldn't imagine that they could do.

Collings

Yes. I mean, between the thoroughbred ranch and this amazing teacher, I mean, it's like some sort of charmed upbringing, really.

Williamson

Right, right. But then in high school, my high school art teacher [Sandy Peterson], she really took a liking to me, and Art Center up here in Pasadena had a high school program, and she hauled me and another one of her favorite art students up here every weekend for like twelve weeks, so that we could go into that art school thing. It was like a weekend program for high school students. So that was really significant. Oh, and then the other significant point, too, was that a woman came to work for my parents at the ranch who was an artist, and she just had this thing for horses, and so she decided she wanted to learn about horses, and so she came and worked on the ranch. But her training--she had a degree in art, and she was in her late twenties or something. That was when I was a teenager, so she became like my best friend, and she totally had a major influence on me as well.

Williamson

So those kinds of things all--oh, and then when I was going to Art Center, my teacher at Art Center asked me if I wanted to work on this mural that she--she got a gig working--Cher. Cher owned this--

Collings

Of Sonny and Cher?

Williamson

Of Sonny and Cher--had bought this building on the corner of La Cienega and Santa Monica, and they were making a roller disco out of it. Flippers was the

name of it. So roller skating was the thing then, and so my art teacher had gotten this gig to paint these big murals inside Flippers, and they were all based on Henri Rousseau's paintings. So they had these kind of like jungle themes and stuff, and so she asked me if I wanted to work on it. She didn't know that I lived four hours away, not really four, but three.

Collings

Yes, a long way.

Williamson

A long ways away. Anyway, so I totally begged my parents to let me do it. It was going to be like a three-week job, and I would have had to get out of school to do it. But I had an aunt and uncle [Kay and Don Wright] who lived up here that I could stay with, and my parents, once I got their permission, then my schoolteachers all gave me permission. I don't know how, but somehow it worked. So I got to, like for three weeks, come live up here in L.A. and work on this mural in the heart of Hollywood. It was a really totally weird experience for me, growing up. I mean, when my mom drove me up here to drop me off, we were driving on Santa Monica Boulevard, and I saw these two guys sitting on a bench kissing. I'm like, "Mom!" It was like very--

Collings

And what year was this now?

Williamson

I was a junior in high school, so that would have been like 1979. So, yes, the height of disco.

Collings

Right, right, right. Yes. So were your parents enthusiastic about your direction as an artist?

Williamson

They were supportive but concerned.

Collings

If your brother had been going into the arts, would that have been more of a problem for them?

Williamson

Maybe. What happened is my brother and I both moved into an apartment together and went to Chaffey Community College, which is out in the Upland area. So we went to the community college together for a couple of years, and then I went on to UC Santa Cruz, and then he went straight into work. He got his A.A. in mechanics, whatever that is. So I think that they--the way that I kind of tried to bridge the gap in my mind, too, because I didn't really have a reference point for how a person would make a living as an artist, other than my schoolteachers, so there was that option, to be a teacher. But what happened when I was going to the community college is I started working in the gallery

on campus, and so I started learning about curating and doing the installation of the exhibitions and the whole arts-management thing, and so that's kind of where I was positioning myself. And, of course, now I run an art center and so in a way--

Collings

Right. I mean, I think you were really lucky, because it was in the seventies that public participation in the arts was really exploding, and there was a lot of arts education and more of these kinds of opportunities, like at a community college, for example, to have a gallery and to, as you say, learn about--

Williamson

The arts administration.

Collings

Yes, arts administration, right.

Williamson

Yes, because even then it was a totally emerging field at that point. I remember looking into if there were any college programs to learn arts administration, and there was one graduate-level program that UCLA had just started up, the [UCLA] Anderson School [of Management]. But there were no undergraduate things. Basically, the trajectory was that you'd become a curator or you'd do art history, and then from there you might jump into arts administration in some way.

Collings

Right. And there was public money available for these kinds of programs at that time as well, which is not so much the case today.

Williamson

Especially not today-today.

Collings

Yes, that's right. So I guess you were at the community college and you decided you needed to go on, so that's why you headed up to UC Santa Cruz?

Williamson

Yes.

Collings

And you pursued a major in?

Williamson

Art history. Actually, I started out as art history, and then I actually shifted over to the fine arts department.

Collings

I'm just noticing, like, such a disparity between what you were doing and what your siblings and the rest of your family were doing. All of that support was coming from outside the family, it sounds like.

Williamson

Yes, definitely. Not that--I wouldn't say that my parents were obstructive. They weren't. But definitely, my path was not in the same vein as the rest of my family by a long shot.

Collings

Yes. Maybe I'm making too much of it, but I really see that kind of support beyond, you know, within the public realm for a career in art and arts education to be something that was particularly a product of that time period.

Williamson

That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that. You know, Suzanne Lacy, which we were talking about earlier, she was born and raised in the Central Valley as well, in the Fresno area.

Collings

Well, yes. I mean, just look at the opportunities for Judy Chicago to start her program at Fresno, for example.

Williamson

Right.

Collings

You know, there at a Cal State [California State University]. It was a time when the arts were considered to be almost an important part of--

Williamson

More populist.

Collings

Yes. Yes, it was more populist and so much more widespread involvement in the arts and more of a sense that it was important among a larger strata of society. I think that you still find that sense in the school systems now, like K through 12, or maybe even K through 5.

Williamson

Five, right.

Collings

But that used to exist beyond that at that time. That's my memory of it.

Williamson

Yes. In fact, we here at 18th Street [Arts Complex] have had an arts education program for a number of years. We don't have one going right now, but my involvement in building that program and then just sort of being involved in the overall, sort of the policy issues around arts education in California. As a result of building that program, one of the things that we always talk about is how California had this very rich funding for the arts at lower-grade levels until Prop[osition] 13 came in, and that now there are two and three generations of kids who have gone through public school without much in the way of arts at all. And the concern--so, like, I would have been on the--because Prop 13 I think passed in '78 or '79, and so I was on the tail end of that era. But the

dialogue in the arts community around that is that we have teachers in the classroom now who grew up without arts education and without that mindset, and so what does that mean for future generations and so forth.

Williamson

So it's sort of--I don't know if you're familiar with--Los Angeles County has developed a whole arts education plan to reinstitute arts education in the classroom, K through 12 in all the disciplines, and that was an initiation of the arts community, not the schools. I mean, the schools care about that, but it really was the arts community who banded together and said, "We have to address this in a more systematic way, as opposed to a piecemeal way, you know, organizations doing their own little programs and trying to like chip at it in their neighborhood. We need to have a bigger approach to it." So the county took a leadership role in organizing all of us around that, and so we have a model program actually, that other places around the country are using as a way to get the arts back into schools.

Collings

That's great, because it really provides a lot of pollinization for future support of the arts. Okay, so what were you planning to do after you graduated from your UC Santa Cruz degree program?

Williamson

Oh, I was confused. My biggest plan was to travel.

Collings

Oh, really?

Williamson

So I really wanted to get out of the country. I'd never been out of the country before.

Collings

Okay. You just wanted to get out of the country for the heck of it?

Williamson

Kind of for the heck of it. Just to see the world and see--yes. Yes, to see the world.

Collings

I mean, had you met people from like other countries that had made you curious?

Williamson

Yes. Well, when you study art history, there's a lot out there, and I was totally curious, totally curious about architecture, archeology, ancient civilization and all of that. I didn't have any money to do that, so I decided the way to get money to do that was to go up to Alaska and work in the fisheries. That was what a lot of my friends, or a few friends that I knew had done to make money.

Collings

Friends from back home?

Williamson

No, from Santa Cruz. So I bought a one-way ticket to Anchorage--

Collings

Oh, wow.

Williamson

--and bought a sleeping bag and a tent and flew up there right after I graduated, and found a job in a fishing cannery place, and I worked there all summer, and I made about, I don't know, $3,000 or something, which was a lot of money then. Then I used that money to go travel in Europe for a couple of months.

Collings

What kind of people did you meet when you were up at the cannery?

Williamson

I met a lot of other college students from all over the United States. Oh, this is sort of funny, too. Actually, one of the people that I met, I recently re-met again here in L.A., like twenty-five years later or whatever it was. She was from Minnesota, Minneapolis, excuse me, and she all these years has been working with this other arts company--what is the name? It's the heart--there's a big bread--it's like a puppet-theater company. Is it the Heart of the Beast? It's not Bread and Puppet, but--

Collings

Maybe that's what I'm thinking of.

Williamson

It's like Bread and Puppet, but it's in Minnesota, it's famous. They've been doing giant puppetry work in the community for years and years and years.

Collings

I know there's one like Mummers or--

Williamson

It's not them. I think it's just called In the Heart of the Beast. That may be it. But anyway, so we were roommates in this fishery place, where I lost touch with her like twenty years later, and then I ran into her here in L.A. at this park where she was doing a giant puppet project and stuff, and we were like, "Is that you?" And it's just so funny that we both ended up doing arts things and stuff and giant puppetry, too, because when we get to the EWALA stuff, the giant puppets is something that I have a very big fondness for.

Williamson

So, yes, college students and then indigenous people are also like the core of a lot of the fishing industry there, because they live there year around, and they also are fishermen as well. That was actually very interesting to me, is how their culture has been impacted by modernization and then also by this very lucrative--it's not a lucrative industry any more, but for a long time the salmon-

fishing industry, they would like make literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in a summer.

Collings

Really?

Williamson

Yes.

Collings

Whoa. But you only made $3,000.

Williamson

Yes.

Collings

The fishermen would make hundreds--

Williamson

The fishermen, right, and their families, because if you're fishing, it's the selling the fish where you really make the money. And the indigenous people didn't have to pay the hundreds of thousands of dollars that you have to pay to have a fishing license, because they had native rights.

Collings

I see.

Williamson

And so they sell their fish, and Japan is like a huge importer of salmon, and then, of course, so is the United States. But if it was a big run, a big season, they would really just make hundreds of thousands of dollars. But their lifestyle is based on a subsistence culture where you don't need money, and so there were these weird--just watching the effect that it was having on their communities was--because I went a couple of summers, and so that was something of interest to me.

Collings

So what kind of effect was it having?

Williamson

Not a good one. There was a tremendous amount of alcoholism and, well, people would just like blow thousands of dollars like just to fly in and out of Anchorage, because they would go into the city, gamble or whatever, spend lots and lots and lots of money on things and then go back to their tiny, tiny, tiny little communities where, I mean, the houses are made out of plywood and there's no road. I mean, everybody drove around on little ATVs, those little four-wheeler things.

Collings

Was there ever any, like, tribal effort to sort of organize this money for something for the town, or anything like that?

Williamson

I would imagine that there was. If I was there now, I would totally be asking those kinds of questions and digging around a lot more.

Collings

Yes, yes, but at the time--

Williamson

At the time, I was just kind of--

Collings

Just wondering what you observed.

Williamson

Yes. So I didn't have an awareness of that. But I knew that there was a lot of community strife over it. A lot of the indigenous towns were dry towns, so they had laws against having alcohol in them, and that affected where we were, because we were way out in this small town called Togiak, that you can't get to except by boat or plane.

Collings

Wow.

Williamson

So, you know, of course, the white people, they want to have their alcohol, and so there were all these people smuggling stuff in. But there's a reason why it was a dry town. It's because they really had a serious, serious problem with it.

Collings

Yes. Now, was this your first contact with Native American populations?

Williamson

In a really direct sense, yes. Definitely. Oh, and I didn't even tell you that when I graduated from high school, friends of my parents, Canadian friends, one of their daughters, who was in her thirties, had a bakery in the Yukon in this town called Dawson, which is right on the Canadian-Alaskan border, and it's like this tiny mining town. So she invited me to come up and work for her for the summer, and so I have this thing about going up to Alaska, it seems like. So that was when I was seventeen, and then after I graduated, then I went up again to Alaska for a couple of summers in a row.

Collings

You were really drawn by the--

Williamson

I don't know. Part of it was making money, but then the landscape was certainly very powerful for me.[End of interview]

1.2. Session 2 (December 19, 2008)

Collings

Good morning, Jan. Jane Collings interviewing Jan Williamson on December 19, 2008 in her office.

Williamson

Good morning.

Collings

Good morning. Last time we had you graduating and heading off to Europe to see art, I presume.

Williamson

Yes. That was a big deal actually, going to see old buildings and old paintings and all kinds of old things.

Collings

Did you go by yourself?

Williamson

I did.

Collings

Oh, my gosh.

Williamson

I did the backpacking thing. I would backpack and all that. So I started in Brussels or landed there and then went through Paris, and I had plans to go to Spain, but ended up going instead to Italy and Greece. I mean, I was always going to go to Greece, but I kind of swapped Spain for Italy.

Collings

Okay. How long were you in Europe?

Williamson

Two months.

Collings

Oh, that sounds like a nice trip. What were the things that really captivated you?

Williamson

Well, everything. I mean, just the way people dress, being in cities that are shaped completely different than anything that I've ever been in. Obviously, born and raised in California and the only other big city was New York, so the cities in Europe have a completely different feeling to them all the way around.

Collings

Yes. What year was this?

Williamson

1986.

Collings

All right. And the whole two months you were just traveling around on your own?

Williamson

Yes. I did have one friend over there, who was living in Venice--

Collings

Oh, how nice.

Williamson

--another art student, and so I think that was the reason I decided to go to Venice and then ended up doing the whole Italian thing.

Collings

Right. So how were you traveling? Were you by train?

Williamson

Yes, entirely by train, except--

Collings

And where did you stay, typically?

Williamson

Hostels. Oh, I had this very--the first place was definitely a hostel in Brussels, and then I was taking the train to Paris, and I met this woman on the train who it turns out had an apartment in Paris--

Collings

Oh, great.

Williamson

--that she and her husband--but they lived out in the country, so she invited me to spend the night at her place the first night, and then she was on her way out to their home in the country, and she left me the keys to her apartment.

Collings

Oh, my gosh. [laughs]

Williamson

So it was like, wow, I was so lucky. I mean, it wasn't like they had this whole elaborately furnished thing. It was more like I think she had owned it before they got married, and after they got married they kept it, because it was a place to stay when they were in Paris.

Collings

And which arrondissement was it in? [laughs]

Williamson

That's a good question. It was near Les Halles, the big shopping-mall thing there. I'm not sure. I didn't understand the arrondissement thing at that point. But I know it was in the area where there's a lot of hookers. What was the name of that street? I don't know if I can remember the name of the street.[Interruption, not transcribed.]

Collings

All right. We're back and you're in Paris.

Williamson

We're back in Paris. I have gold in my butt. That's what my French friends told me whenever I tell them that story. There's some French expression that says, "You have gold in your butt," if you're really super lucky.

Collings

Were there other times when you were lucky on that trip?

Williamson

Not that lucky, but that was pretty lucky. [laughs]

Collings

That was pretty lucky.

Williamson

I mean, because I ended up staying like for a whole week in Paris at my own apartment, so it was like, wow.

Collings

I'm surprised they got rid of you.

Williamson

[laughs] She was very trusting, it's true. And then I took a train out to their house in the country at the end of my week. Her husband was half American, half French, and so he spoke fluent--they all spoke fluent English, and they had American friends visiting them at the same time. So they took us on like a trek through the French Alps or something, like those mountains between Switzerland and--

Collings

Oh, how nice.

Williamson

--right in the middle of fall. It was fantastic. And so we like drove up into this like little mountain town, and then there's this like the hike that you take through all these cow pastures and stuff, to this other little tiny, tiny, like ski town or something. Then we had this massive French feast, and then we walked back, and then drove back down the hill to their house. Oh, and then there was a hornet infestation in their farmhouse, and the hornet came into my room where I was sleeping at their house, and so that was very--

Collings

Wow, sounds kind of frightening.

Williamson

It was very exciting.

Collings

So actually it almost sounds like one of your most memorable experiences in Europe had to do with perhaps the French Alps?

Williamson

Yes, yes. That was definitely a high point. Well, Venice was pretty spectacular, too. I was staying with one of my college friends, who was going to art school there. Venice is a spectacular city, very fun and super cold in this time of year.

Collings

Yes, I'll bet, and it's quite flooded at the moment as well.

Williamson

Yes, yes. And just seeing art everywhere. Oh, actually I did get another very lucky--on my way back from Greece, on the ferry from Greece to Brindisi in Italy, there was an art dealer who had a bunch of Marc Chagall paintings that his gallery owned, and because they were so valuable, he didn't want to ship them or anything like that, and so he had driven down, picked them up from the museum where he had lent them and was driving them personally all the way back up to France. And so we struck up a conversation on the ferry, which we were on for hours. You know, it's a long, long ride. And so then he ended up giving me a ride from Brindisi all the way to Milan, so I got like this great, completely different view of Italy from the autobahn, as opposed to the train trip, so that was fun.

Collings

Right, yes. That sounds good. So what were you planning to do when you came back from your trip?

Williamson

That's a good question. I didn't really have a good plan at all. I was thinking about moving back--I wanted to go live in another country.

Collings

Oh, you did? Why is that?

Williamson

Probably some romantic idea about what artists are supposed to do, you know, live in another country and learn another language and that kind of thing, and make art.

Collings

What country were you thinking?

Williamson

Well, I did think seriously about Greece for a while, because I really liked it there, and it's very similar to California, the climate and the image, the color of everything. But I ultimately decided to move to Mexico instead, partly because I figured learning Spanish would be a little more useful to me than learning Greek, and that probably the culture shock would be a little less intense, and if there was a problem, it's a lot less of a distance.

Collings

Just drive home.

Williamson

Right.

Collings

"I'm going home."

Williamson

"I give up. I can't take it anymore."

Collings

Yes. So is that what you did when you came back from Europe?

Williamson

I worked for a while and saved up some more money, and I went back to Alaska and made some more money. That was a very intense year in Alaska, the second year. That was really--

Collings

This is when you came back from Europe?

Williamson

Right. So for like another nine months I did a bunch of work, saved up all my money, and then I moved to Mexico.

Collings

When you went back to Alaska, was it in the fishing industry again?

Williamson

Yes. I did that my second year up there, and I did a lot of hitchhiking and backpacking and stuff around there on that second trip, so that was very fun.

Collings

What were you visiting when you were backpacking around in Alaska?

Williamson

I went to Denali National Park, where Mt. McKinley is, went camping on the Kenai Peninsula, went with friends down to Kodiak Island and worked there for a little while as well, and then did a bunch of camping there, and yes, just checking out all the nature sites.

Collings

Yes, and it's so fantastically beautiful up there, just spectacular.

Williamson

Oh, it's amazing. Oh, I didn't tell you, the first year that I came down from Alaska, I drove with a friend of mine the entire length of the ALCAN Highway, and we picked up hitchhikers along the way. Like one of the hitchhikers that we picked up was a totally trippy guy, "The Hawk."

Collings

"The Hawk."

Williamson

He was like in his sixties, wearing this like ninety-pound backpack with a bullwhip and a giant machete. He was like an evangelical minister who had decided that he was going to walk the entire fifty states of the United States,

and he had just finished walking through Alaska, and the reason he was hitchhiking, because he shouldn't have been hitchhiking if he was walking everywhere--

Collings

True. Well, that's a point, yes.

Williamson

But he was hitchhiking down to the lower forty-eight so that he could do Hawaii. Hawaii was his last place. He had walked through all the other states.

Collings

My goodness.

Williamson

So he was a trippy guy.

Collings

Yes.

Williamson

Anyway, that was just one of our interesting hitchhiker adventure stories.

Collings

And so then you headed down to Mexico.

Williamson

Yes, and I lived--well, I traveled for about a month around different places and like checking it out, where I might want to live, and then I decided to move to Zacatecas, which is a very high desert. It's like 8,000 feet up in the middle of the country. It's an old silver and gold mining town, a colonial town. So I came back up to the United States, packed two giant boxes of stuff and bribed my way across the border, I mean, because there's like this whole thing about getting your stuff across the border.

Collings

Because it's like importing.

Williamson

Right. Even though it's just like two big suitcases of stuff. Then I flew to Zacatecas right at the--on December twelfth I arrived there, which is a big--oh, no, I guess it was the day before December twelfth, because December twelfth is the Virgin of Guadalupe's celebration, and one of the towns immediately adjacent to the town that I moved to, Zacatecas, is called Guadalupe, and so there was this big celebration there. Somehow, I got invited to be there. I'd have to remember. This is a long time ago. But somehow I got invited to the celebration, and I got to sit at the governor's table and meet all these, like, mucky-ups [muckety-mucks]. It was kind of funny.

Collings

Yes. Now, was there an arts community in Zacatecas? What attracted you to that town in particular?

Williamson

Again it was really more the vibe and not that there was a particular arts scene that I had found or anything. I wasn't there long enough to really suss that out. But there is definitely an arts community there. There's a print shop, you know, a fine artists' print shop and actually several museums, but one art museum. The rest were more like historical museums. But I liked it because it has a very strong connection to the ranching community. It's like the capital of the state, and Zacatecas is the main state where all like the beans and the beef--it's a big agricultural part of Mexico. A lot of the tequila is grown there. And so there's something about that that I resonated with.

Collings

Yes. Now, was there any kind of expat[riate] community there, or were you sort of--

Williamson

A teensy, tiny one. That was one of the reasons that I liked that town is that it really didn't have that. The other places that I had looked at that people suggested I go to, like San Miguel de Allende and stuff--

Collings

Right. That's what I was thinking of.

Williamson

It was such a strong American influence there, and I just thought I would get sucked into that. I would never learn Spanish, and I would never actually really make connections with the real community there, the Mexican community. So that was one of the reasons that--oh, and actually, the other thing about Zacatecas--I didn't actually know this when I went there, but I learned once I was there--they have major archeological sites there, and that's actually--my two closest American friends were--well, actually, one was American and one was Canadian--they headed up the archeological program for digging on--just managing all the sites, but there was one major dig that was going on at this one place called La Quemada. It's one of the major archeological, like a large-scale archeological site in Mexico, with big structures and so forth.

Collings

Yes. So what was your daily life like while you were there? I mean, what were you doing?

Williamson

I brought a lot of art supplies down with me, and it took me a really long time, it took me like six months to actually find a real, stable living situation. What I hadn't anticipated when I moved down there was that there's a major housing shortage there, and that people only rent to people they know. There's no, like, newspaper, no Craigslist, of course, then. I mean, people don't post signs in the window "house for rent." It's like total word of mouth, total family connections,

and so that's why it took me a while. So I was living in a hotel for about three months, and then the local language school had a place for rent, so I rented that place for a while, and then when I made friends with the archeologists, they gave me a room that I could have a studio in, so I had a studio in their building, which was really cool. It's built right abutting the church, so it was right in the heart of the oldest part of town. So I'm trying to remember, it was like built in the late 1500s.

Williamson

So I had a studio there, and I would work there like from about two o'clock in the afternoon till very late at night and then go to my little--I had this--besides the hotel, then the other place that I lived in, I called it the rat hole, because there really were rats. [laughs] It was also in a really old part of town, and the sewers in that town are just trenches underneath the buildings. So the place that I was living in was this tiny, tiny room that had been enclosed, like an old inner patio of a building had been enclosed and turned into a rental room, and so it had open holes down into the sewer.

Collings

Oh, gosh.

Williamson

And so I had covers on them, but every once in a while I'd hear the click-click, click-click, and it was a rat trying to like knock the cover off. I was like, oh, god, like just stomp on the floor and chase the rat away. Am I totally digressing?

Collings

No, no. Well, I wanted to ask you, what is it that attracted you to this--you've mentioned several times like this old architecture and how much you seemed to draw from it, in Venice and in this town in Mexico. I'm just wondering. It's certainly not like a sense of home, because you grew up in something that was quite new. Maybe that's part of it.

Williamson

Yes. I think part of what really attracted me specifically to Zacatecas was the architecture and the oldness of the town. And you know, the architecture is referencing Europe for sure. I think just in general, fascination with old history and ancient history, too, the archeological stuff that was going on there that I got to totally talk about with my archeologist friends, it was really interesting to me. And I took a lot of little side trips once I was there, with them to different indigenous ceremonies.

Collings

Oh, how interesting.

Williamson

With the--they're close relatives of the Huichol Indians, but it's not the Huichol [Cora Indians]. They're the Sierra Madre Occidental, but they also use the peyote ceremony and the--

Collings

The yarn paintings?

Williamson

Yes. So there's that interest again. And then also in that town of Zacatecas, there were a lot of--like there's this reenactment of--there's a big parade that happens every year, where they reenact the war between the Moors and the Spaniards? Actually now I can't even--

Collings

What, in Spain?

Williamson

It's a tradition in Spain. Yes, there was a war in Spain, but somehow it got transported to Mexico and is an annual festival that everybody in the town like makes costumes for and participates in, and then they reenact that thing.

Collings

And this is constructed as something where the Spaniards are the good guys and the Moors are the bad guys, to put it very simplistically?

Williamson

You know, I didn't know enough about the story at all at that time to--I wouldn't have been able to tell you that. Like I'd have to go back and research that.

Collings

Yes. I was just wondering if there was some sort of transformation of the story. I mean, from the Spanish point of view it would be that way, but I was wondering what happened once it was being reenacted in Mexico.

Williamson

In Mexico, yes, exactly. No, I mean, again, this is something, like I had never really seen festivals or parades or anything like that here in the United States. The closest thing would be the Rose Parade, and that was a completely different kind of feeling to it. In fact, I would say that witnessing those little sort of community parades and celebrations and ceremonies that we went to, really provoked my thinking about religion and about the difference between sort of carrying on tradition and the connection to tradition, versus dogma, and then how does change happen in a ceremony or a parade or a festival, which all have ceremonial qualities to them, which will tie back to the EWALA event for sure for me.

Collings

Exactly.

Williamson

So, you know, just very interested in, like every year it's new people are being brought into those ceremonies and are tweaking them a little bit or changing them a little bit, depending on what the moment requires. So that's just something that really interests me is how ceremonies are made new on a continual basis, but there's always this reference to tradition, and that tension between those two things really interests me.

Collings

Yes, that sounds very interesting. So what kind of art were you making while you were down there?

Williamson

I was painting and not having a very good painting experience.

Collings

Why was that?

Williamson

I mean, I was painting. I was lost. I was in a foreign place where I couldn't really speak the language well. I was learning the language. I was making all new friends. I didn't have any existing friends there, and it was hard to make friends there, too, because again, I didn't calculate any of this. I just threw myself into the situation to see what would happen. But particularly in the northern part of Mexico, one of the things I learned is that it's very Catholic and very sort of strict relationships, and so single women who aren't living with their parents, or aren't living with their husband, are totally suspect. Like everybody thinks you're loose and a bad person in some way, and so that definitely created a challenge for me to make friends on any level with anybody, I mean, other than the artists there. I definitely had a few artist friends.

Collings

Yes, I mean, that's why I was asking if there was like an expat community there, because I can imagine that it would be very difficult for anybody, let alone a single Anglo woman to just move into town. I mean, that's just unheard of in so many societies. [laughs]

Williamson

That's me.

Collings

Yes, so I mean, were you able to make--

Williamson

I did. I did make some friends. Like I made friends with divorced women, because they were considered outcasts, too, or college students and artists, and then, of course, my archeologist friends.

Collings

And then so many of these like very family rooted towns, I mean, there really isn't even a notion of friendship as we know it. I mean, everything is family relationships--

Williamson

Right.

Collings

--and all the relationships are almost like business relationships in a way, because it has to do with your capital within the family dynamic.

Williamson

Exactly. Right. Yes, it was very challenging to break into that system, except for the people who were curious about the outsider person, or wanted to learn English. I definitely had friends who wanted to practice their English with me.

Collings

Yes. And would they invite you like to their house to spend the evening?

Williamson

Yes. One of my friends is an amazing poet and musician-songwriter, but a dentist also. That was how he made his money, was doing dentistry. So he had his whole little clique of musician friends and so forth, and his mom was widowed and so he lived with her. Again, everybody lives in these sort of big family-compound-type houses, and so he would invite me and other people over, and we would have a big family meal together.

Collings

I see. And how long did you stay in the town?

Williamson

A whole year, basically to the day.

Collings

Wow. Why did you stay a year?

Williamson

That was my plan. I was going to stay for a whole year, one way or the other, unless I ran out of money first.

Collings

Were you in contact with your family or your friends back home during that period?

Williamson

Yes. Mostly it was with my parents. I had to come back across the border one time to renew my visa, so I went to Arizona to visit my aunt and uncle. But, yes, I would call my mom and dad like about once every couple of weeks or something like that.

Collings

Did they ever think of coming to visit you there?

Williamson

No. [laughs] Definitely not. Had no interest in that. The whole view of Mexico was like too scary to them, I'm sure, or something of that.

Collings

So when the year is up, you pack your bags.

Williamson

Yes, and my big question--as the year was coming to a close--well, also I made other artist friends in Mexico City, so I went to Mexico City a few times to hang out there. So I was thinking about either moving to Mexico City or moving back here to California, or back to the United States, and I wasn't sure--I was thinking about either New York or Los Angeles. I ultimately decided on Los Angeles, because I couldn't really find work in Mexico. I was making some money teaching English, but not enough to live on at all. And it was under the table, and it's complicated, so even though I would have really actually liked to have lived in Mexico City, there just wasn't a way for me to pay for it, unless I did something similar, like go and make a bunch of money and then come back.

Collings

Right, right. Was it considerably more expensive than Zacatecas?

Williamson

Not really. But, yes, there's a lot of inflation there. I mean, it wasn't particularly cheaper than living, I mean, living here in the United States even, really. In some ways it was, but not in other ways. Most durable goods cost the same there as they cost here, but you would pay less for food and less for rent. So I moved back to L.A., and I wanted to move to L.A. in particular. One of the things I realized when I was not having a good painting experience is that I really wasn't like a solo-studio artist.

Collings

Well, that's a very important realization.

Williamson

Yes, because I wanted to be--I mean, I had this whole year of a huge amount of alone time, and I'd realized that I was like hungry for connection with other people and being involved in different activities. I think that year, 1988, like there was the harmonic convergence. Do you remember that?

Collings

Right. I remember that, yes indeed.

Williamson

And so like I was really fascinated by that and just interested in this idea of this global event, which is like a global performance. I mean, for me, seen again through this context of like a global ceremony or participation really interested me, so I participated on my own from Mexico in it. But I was really interested in being in a location where I could actually be connected to people who were creating those kinds of events or doing those kinds of things, and I was also

really interested in science. I don't know why, I just am. I'm interested in astronomy and the universe and all of those kinds of things, and so I figured L.A. would be a good place, because Caltech is here, JPL Jet Propulsion Laboratory], there's the whole aerospace thing, and Spanish would be useful here probably more than in New York. I don't know, that's probably not true. And, you know, it's California, so L.A. it was. I came up to L.A.

Collings

Yes. So what were you planning to do with places like Caltech and JPL, just an interest in maybe their public programs and that kind of thing?

Williamson

I didn't really know, because I didn't know anything about what they might have. It was just like an instinct, that I would be--the possible proximity of meeting scientists or people would be greater if I was in this area than, say, San Francisco or something like that.

Collings

Right. And you did meet Buzz Aldrin, as you say.

Williamson

I did.

Collings

So there you go.

Williamson

Well, yes. I mean, that was--so when I moved here, I was doing all kinds of weird little odd-job things. I was working in a print shop, Angeles Press, making fine art prints for a lot of different artists, so I heard Tom Van Sant, who's this artist from California, being interviewed on the radio, KCRW one day, and he had just made the first satellite composite map of the Earth free of clouds, which was like a revolutionary image. So he was talking about it. It had just been published in the National Geographic, their atlas, and featured in their magazine, so he was getting all this media play around it. I heard him on the radio, and he said he lived in Santa Monica, and so I like looked him up in the phone book and I called him, and I went and saw him at his studio in Santa Monica, and he hired me that night to start working with him on--he was making a giant globe, using the image.

Collings

A three-dimensional globe.

Williamson

A three-dimensional--a six-foot-diameter, three-dimensional globe. So I still kept my job at the print shop, but at night I would go over and I was helping him manufacture that globe. He had the substrate made out of Fiberglas already done, but this was a very elaborate process of gluing the image onto that six-foot-diameter globe. And Tom was very, very close friends with Richard

Feynman. He's like a Nobel prize-winning physicist for something to do with string theory or something. Anyway, so they were like super-best friends and I can see why, because, I mean, Richard Feynman had already passed on. I never got to meet him. So Tom has all these friends that were part of JPL and Caltech, so that was my connection, ended up being my connection to that world.

Williamson

But Tom, like he had to invent all his own tools to make this thing. Like they had to be specialized tools, and he made them, so he's just a very amazing person. So I ended up going to work for him full-time after a while, and I worked for him for four years, doing all kinds of things.

Collings

Now, he was making these as an art project, or what is the--

Williamson

What's the art piece in it?

Collings

Well, what is the name of his company again?

Williamson

The Geosphere Project.

Collings

The Geosphere Project, right. And what is that?

Williamson

The Geosphere Project was envisioned as--well, Tom is in his seventies now, so at that point he was like in his early sixties, and he had been in the Air Force and gone through the military, but he was an artist. He's like on the same level of Millard Sheets, and who are some of the other California artists that he would have connected with? Well, anyway, so he, I think because of his relationships with his friends at Caltech and stuff, he was always talking about the universe and stuff and interested in that sort of thing. So this idea of creating this satellite-composite map came out of those conversations, so he conceived of a way to do it. It took two years, and it was all done through computer programming stuff, and he had to hire these specialized computer-programmer people to help him do that.

Williamson

So that was the original idea for the image, but as they were making the image--well, also, part of the thing for him was satellite--he had done these other art projects. What was that one called? "Ryan's Eye." So he did the very first zoom image from outer space using satellites all the way down into his son's eye, and so you first had the satellite image of the globe from outer space from the GOES satellite, and then he had low-orbiting images from smaller satellites. Then he had plane images. I'm trying to remember all the sequences--planes

and then is there anything else in there? Anyway, so he knitted together all of those images so that the video art piece that he made starts from looking at the image of the globe, and slowly you go zoom all the way down until you end up at the Pacific Design Center, where his three-year-old son was standing on the steps, and you go into his eye, the sparkle in his eye. It's like a really great image.

Williamson

And so part of what Tom wanted to do was create this digital map of the Earth that you could zoom into in that same way, and now you can do that on Google Earth. But at that time--

Collings

It was a very radical idea.

Williamson

Oh, totally radical idea. Computers could not--I mean, what we can do on Google totally trips me out. I love that.

Collings

But at that time, we had to be almost schooled to even think in that way, and that's what these pieces were part of doing.

Williamson

Yes, exactly. And it was, again, I mean, like it connects to the harmonic-convergence thing of--you know, I think there was a whole sort of Gaia consciousness thing happening at that time, where everybody was starting to think of the planet as a planet, and that we're--Bucky [Buckminster] Fuller's ideas were really starting to gain more broad-based realization or understanding or discussion in the general public. And so, where are we?

Collings

Did you know anybody who had participated in the harmonic convergence, or was that something that you had seen in the media?

Williamson

Through the media. I just heard about it through the media. So Tom's thing--oh, so when he was making that map, again referencing his military background, part of his vision was to create an Earth room. He called it the Earth Situation Room, so co-opting the war-room concept for the environment.

Collings

Right

Williamson

So the map, the satellite-composite map of the Earth was the first piece of doing that, so that you could have a real image of the Earth in real color. That was the other piece is that the satellite images were all--scientists were using them, but they hadn't--their coloring system that they used was just arbitrary. And so a regular person looking at a satellite map of the Earth, because of the

way they colored them, they couldn't relate to it. So that was a big part of what Tom did, was put real color to it that was accurately representing what the planet really looked like, in color the way that humans see it, as opposed to color the way that a satellite sees it, and thereby sort of stimulating a more emotional connection to the planet as a whole.

Collings

So was his concern to celebrate this image, or was it to point out environmental hazards?

Williamson

Both, both. Definitely both. And it's cold in here.

Collings

Yes, just a little bit. I'm getting used to it these days.

Williamson

I could turn the heater back on, but then it has a fan noise going. Do you want the heat on?

Collings

No, that's okay. I'm okay if you're okay.

Williamson

So, yes, both. I mean, part of what he wanted to do was gather data sets that included things like animal migration routes, or the ocean currents, or I don't know, there were so many different ones. I mean, those were ones that we did do, so we showed where all the different whales migrate, what their migration paths were, and then the ocean currents in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere, the different--and the idea is that if you overlay those images together, that they might tell you a new story in some way. Like, oh, here are the major shipping lanes and here are the major gray-whale migration paths, and clearly there's a problem there, or not, or something like that.

Collings

Right, right. So this data was interpreted visually and--

Williamson

And created as new map sets that would be overlaid on the globe. And the whole thing--he was making a ton of money off of licensing that image to television, for commercials, for print, that sort of thing.

Collings

Yes, it's a very famous image.

Williamson

So all that money he used to do all the research and development for making all these other maps. There was a big investment in technology that was used, computer technology, to be able to generate those kinds of--again, he wanted for people to be able to zoom in from anyplace from outer space into the planet, which now with Google Earth we can do.

Collings

Right. And how was he getting this and disseminating this information? I mean, was it through exhibits, or was he hooked into what was at that time a very nascent environmental science community?

Williamson

It was both. Primarily, we had a lot of connections with like science centers, like the Hayden Planetarium, the Smithsonian. We ended up making and selling like six of the giant globes to Tokyo and Stockholm and Spain and the Hayden Planetarium in New York, Chicago--what's the institution there? [Field Museum] Not the botanical garden. Anyway, there's a science center there that I can't think of now.

Collings

Yes, I can't think of the name, but it's a big one.

Williamson

So there was like the museum approach--

Collings

The museum world.

Williamson

Right, where it was turned into sort of exhibits with screens and so forth, so that was really the most elaborate way that it got realized. There really wasn't another kind of a venue, I don't think, or at least we couldn't--well, at the time--actually I take that back--there were a number of places in Europe that were talking about making these--what is Disneyland called? Or Disneyland is like a theme park. So there was a whole weird theme park thing going on in the early nineties, like everybody's into theme parks. So in Europe there were a couple of places that were thinking about doing theme parks, again based around the environment, and so we were in lengthy negotiations with them that never materialized into anything. And then I already told you that one story about the--

Collings

The "Star Trek" theme park.

Williamson

Yes, so theme parks, museums, that was about it. So it was kind of a narrow segment of the world interest, and that was actually a very interesting sort of tension or frustration with Tom is that his staff--the natural venue for a lot of what he was imagining at the time seemed to be CD-ROM. CD-ROMs were brand new then. I don't remember the whole thing of like instead of reading a book from front to back, you can view it--

Collings

Surf around.

Williamson

Right. And that was like, "Wow, this is so innovative." And that was before the worldwide web existed, and so CD-ROMs were the thing. Tom was interested, and we did projects, like different CD-ROM manufacturers did contact us and use our stuff to make content that they generated and then sold, and game companies and stuff like that used a lot. But that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted the Earth Situation Room, which was the real deal, you know, the real place where you could really go and see the big globe, and he was very attached to that thing, even though all the people that we talked to, the technology people--because we were always trying to figure out, how can you project these images onto the big globe and deal with the curvature of the globe and how that changes the shape of the thing that you're projecting, and oh, super complicated.

Williamson

And then we were trying to figure out, can you project from the inside out? And he was just--I mean, we poured a ton of money into trying to make new projectors that can project video things and not get too hot, so he was very invested in that, versus the virtual world that you can create in computers. He just wasn't interested in that, even though that was where everybody said, "Yeah, but you could use it--." Of course now everything is really concentrated. I mean, you can do pretty much all of the things that he had envisioned doing, on a computer now, on a desktop computer no less.

Collings

Well, like the revolutionary thing about that image of the Earth from space is that it precisely takes you away from your physical experience of the Earth, and it makes it a virtual Earth in your mind. That's how you're able to understand that it's a planet in space that perhaps you can see from another angle. But it sounds like at the same time, he was very wedded to this physical experience.

Williamson

The physical, yes, because I think he thought that people would have a physical relationship to it as well, to be able to walk around the globe and be up close to it and so forth, so, yes.

Collings

It sounds like there was a lot of sort of technical people on staff then as well, for some of this engineering.

Williamson

Mostly computer-engineering, technical people. All the other kind of technology stuff, I mean, we didn't have people on staff to do that. I spent countless hours working with lithographers, because we were trying to figure out how to print that image on a repeatable basis, to be able to cover those six-foot-diameter globes, on a particular kind of paper that would not tear--oh, just like super--

Collings

Now, is there much upkeep for these globes that are in these various museums, or are they--

Williamson

I have no idea now. [laughs]

Collings

I was just wondering, because sometimes you go to these exhibits and they're all kind of--

Williamson

Dodgy?

Collings

Yes, after a while. I just was wondering.

Williamson

Right. Probably. I mean, I haven't ever seen any of them since we installed them, so I have no idea, but probably.

Collings

Yes, just wondering, because that also becomes sort of part of the story of these exhibits, that they have their shelf life--

Williamson

Right, it's true.

Collings

--and the culture almost like absorbs the lesson of the exhibit and then moves on.

Williamson

Right. It's out in the back dumpster. "Oh, that old woolly mammoth." So, yes, I don't know. I'm sure that those globes are funky now, because they're, well, like fifteen or sixteen years old now.

Collings

Right, because I'm thinking of Tommorrowland at Disneyland, for example.

Williamson

Right, right.

Collings

Which is pretty run down.

Williamson

Very run down, because tomorrow has come and gone. I mean, Tommorrowland, I mean, they were like projecting 2000 or something, right, so--

Collings

It looks like the fifties. [laughter]

Williamson

Right. But it's so funny, so ironic.

Collings

All right. So did you leave the project because you thought it was finished?

Williamson

No, I didn't think it was finished, but I did leave after four years.

Collings

That's a long time.

Williamson

I was there a long time. I kind of thought about it as my own graduate-school experience, working for him, because he was a real taskmaster and a good one. I mean, I have realized that what I really wanted to do was learn how to do projects that engaged people, art projects that engaged the general public, and there wasn't a word for it back then. There was no name for that as an art form. I mean, now you could call it public practice or community-based art making, but--

Collings

And were you interested in performance art at all at that time?

Williamson

Well, at the same time that I was working for Tom, I was actually working for a performance artist, Barbara T. Smith. I lived in her house in Venice, and she was doing this other global art project as well, that was taking place over three years. Her boyfriend at the time was Roy [L.] Walford, who was one of the eight people who went and lived inside the BioSphere [2] in Arizona.

Collings

Oh, how interesting.

Williamson

And so he's a doctor and all his research had been focused on aging, and so he had been recruited for that project, because he was really interested in that kind of thinking. So while he was going out with Barbara, he was preparing to go into the Biosphere. There was like this three or four years of training and planning, and they were trying to figure out all of the different kinds of ecosystems that they were going to build in there and what plants needed to go in there, I mean, the whole thing. So he was a part of that. And so Barbara, as a performance artist, decided--she had also been thinking about doing a global performance piece for many years, and so this seemed like a perfect opportunity to enact it.

Williamson

So she did this partnership with Roy. He was going to be inside the Biosphere for three years, and so she was going to travel the planet during that time, and her project was to travel around the planet and go to different places where she would randomly meet and connect with people and do ceremonial performances related to whatever was coming up for her at that moment in

time. Those performances that she would do--I mean, she did some in like Japan and India and Norway and Australia and Thailand and France, so there's dozens of them around the planet, and she would broadcast them into the Biosphere while they were happening, using a videophone and audio and all of that, through this organization called Electronic Cafe International, which is here at 18th Street. So I was Barbara's like home station, so I was being her primary contact for her while she was doing this traveling and stuff. And so I facilitated all the hookups and stuff that she did here, that would then get projected into the Biosphere, like just bringing audiences and so forth to them. I mean, I didn't do any of the technology stuff really. That was all Electronic Cafe. Kit [Galloway] and Sherry [Rabinowitz] did that.

Collings

Now, I'm sort of thinking back to like the early days of film and how fascinating it was for the public to witness these technologies along with the spectacle. Were these technologies that you describe part of the performance?

Williamson

Absolutely, totally. Like she had one of the very early--it was a very high-powered audio-recording equipment that was super compact and like brand new technology, and I can't remember what it was even called now. And the videophone was, of course, very new. So there was a videophone in the Biosphere, and the videophone here at Electronic Cafe, and then Barbara had one. So as she was journeying around, like she had this massive amount of equipment that she was hauling everywhere, so it was just such an interesting thing. Like I was working for Tom on this global art project, and then I was also working for Barbara, who was also doing a global art project with this person who's been locked inside a re-creation of the Earth.

Williamson

Like the idea for the Biosphere, of course, was like, "How can we send a pod out into outer space and live? What do we need to have to do it?" And Barbara's performance piece was structured around Odysseus' journey--

Collings

I see.

Williamson

--and so she was Odysseus and then Roy was Penelope, so he's the one trapped at home waiting for her to return while she is traveling around, not knowing when Odysseus is going to return.

Collings

Right, right, weaving and re-weaving her cloak, Penelope.

Williamson

Her story, right, right.

Collings

Well, you said that she was doing ceremonial events. Ceremonial in what sense?

Williamson

Well, her performance work is based on a kind of idea of transformation, that transformation has a sort of alchemical experience. So they're not theater pieces, they're not structured in a performance way, with a division between the audience and the performer, but more like a traditional ceremony, where if you're there, you are participating in it in some fashion or other, whether you are a person actively doing something or not, you're still a part of it, and that there's a specific sequence of events, like an opening, the creation of a sacred space, the entering into that sacred space and then enacting the ceremony and then closing the sacred space, and then through that whole arc, there's some kind of transformation that has happened. So she used that structure for her performances, and they could be focused around some very contemporary thing, or if she made a connection with--like in India, she made a connection there with an ashram, and so it was done within that context, and she used different gourds or different--they're gourds when they're dry, but they're like pumpkins or whatever when they're fresh. So she used them as--they were sacred food there, and so she used them as part of her piece, because she actually had created a religion called The Holy Squash as another performance a long time ago, so there was this, "Oh, they have squash, too." And so she made that connection there. So those were the kinds of performance pieces that she was doing.

Collings

Yes. And would they change according to the venue? I mean, you mentioned India and other countries.

Williamson

Yes. Each one was totally unique and totally unique to the culture and the location. So she would be in a particular area for a while and make connections with people there and do research on it and come up with a project there.

Collings

And would the people who attended the performances be like arts people, or would they be more--

Williamson

Both. It just depended on what connection she made, so it wasn't just for art people necessarily, but there often were art people involved in them.

Collings

Yes, right. Okay.[End of interview]

1.3. Session 3 (January 23, 2009)

Collings

Good morning, Jan. This is Jane Collings interviewing Jan Williamson on January 23, 2009, in her office. Jan, you just came back from a trip.

Williamson

[laughs] The inauguration!

Collings

Yay.

Williamson

Oh, my god. It was so amazing. Ramla [Roussel] from here, she and I went together. It was like one sort of group ecstatic experience from the moment we got on the plane--

Collings

Interesting.

Williamson

--to the time we got back, because most of the people on the plane were going to D.C. for the same reason that we were going.

Collings

So even starting from L.A.--

Williamson

L.A., many, many, many of the people--it was just easy. You could strike up a conversation with anybody, and they all had their story about why they were going. We met--the plane from Dallas to D.C., because we changed in Dallas--the people behind us had won a trip, all expenses paid and everything, through--I can't remember if it was the Democratic Party or something, but they won the whole thing, to be in the ticketed section of the inauguration and everything. On another flight, on the return trip there was a whole group of high school kids that their history teachers had decided to take them. There was about twenty of them, and it was just totally amazing. I sat next to a guy on the last leg of the return flight who lives here in Los Angeles, but had worked on undecided voters in Loudon County, Virginia, the last three days prior to the election, trying to turn that county to a Democratic vote, because no Democrat has ever won Virginia, because they never win that county.

Collings

Oh, yes, that one county. Yes, I remember that.

Williamson

It's little details that I didn't know, and so he was telling me the whole story about that and how the Republicans were canvassing that same county, of course, as well, and they would come back a few hours later to see if somebody was home and all their stuff had been ripped up and thrown in the bushes, you know, just like interesting things, the canvassing wars between the Democrats and the Republicans.

Collings

Yes, I hadn't thought about it being, as you say, a group ecstatic experience from door to door.

Williamson

Me neither. I mean, I would have never even guessed that, but it just turned out that way, and it was like that the whole time we were there, because it was just such a massive infusion of people into the city. Like, we stayed in this bed and breakfast out kind of about a mile from downtown D.C., so not very far at all. But the first day--you know, we were trying to get our grounding with the public-transportation system and figure it all out, because we knew on the day of it was going to be particularly challenging. So like we were at Union Station the very first day. We took a bus down there and then we were riding the Metro around to different things, different events and stuff.

Williamson

It was just like everywhere we went, it was people who--most of them from out of town were there. So the first day we sat down for lunch, and the people next to us were from San Francisco and they were telling their whole story about why they were there. We just had many, many--all the people in the bed and breakfast that we stayed in, of course, were from out of town, and that part of it was really special. And then there was the big concert that they did on Sunday, which was really the free event for the local D.C. people, which later we realized it was actually their dry tech run, their dress rehearsal for "the" event, because it was using all the equipment and dealing with the crowd control and the street closures and all of that stuff. So smart on their part--

Collings

Yes, really.

Williamson

--to figure out, "Okay, well, we've got to do a dress rehearsal. How are we going to do it?" So they made this really amazing free event, and that was very instructive for us as well, because we were using that as our experience, in terms of navigating the buses and the Metros and stuff. I think there were only 400,000 people that came to that event, only. [laughter] And it was like shoulder to shoulder, you know, standing there on the Mall. We were as far back as you could possibly get. We were way back by the Washington Monument, and the event was at the Lincoln Memorial, so we couldn't even see the Lincoln Memorial from where we were standing. But we were in front of the Jumbotron.

Collings

Right.

Williamson

And there's like a whole thing about like how do you get positioned in front of the Jumbotron so you could actually see it and hear what was going on, blah, blah, blah. It was just crazy trying to figure out which lines to get into for security, to get in closer, or do you? It's like you might get closer, but you still can't see anything, so what's the point of going through the whole security-check deal? And then on the actual day of, it was just like this total excitement in there. I mean, we were up at five o'clock in the morning to get--we'd thought that if we were out of the house at six that it would take us about--

Collings

Which is three a.m. L.A. time.

Williamson

Right. That it would take us about an hour to go one mile through the public-transportation system to get down on the Mall, and that was a good estimate in terms of the timing of it. But what we hadn't even thought about was like when we got to the Metro station, you know,6:15 in the morning or something like that, is that the trains coming from out of town were totally packed. There was a ton of people on the platform waiting to get on the train, like us. There's no room. You couldn't get on, and it was just like that. So some miracle, we were able to get on like the second train that came. We just squoze in. Like the door stopped right in front of us, and the two of us were able to like get in, and so poor people who were trying to use transportation to get back and forth to work that day.

Williamson

And then when we got off at the Metro station that got us closest to the Mall, there were so many people in the Metro station they had to shut off the escalators, so people had to walk up three flights of stairs to get out. But what they were doing is holding everybody from off of the trains onto the platform, holding them on the platform until a big wave of people made it up the escalator and then another wave. So we were probably on the platform waiting to get out of the Metro station for about forty-five minutes, just to get out.

Collings

Oh, whoa.

Williamson

Totally shoulder to shoulder, I mean like packed. But what was so cool about it is everybody was totally happy, peaceful, like excited. Like somebody would like lead a chant or something, or sing a little song or something, and then everybody would join in.

Collings

That's amazing.

Williamson

And so it was just--the energy was so positive and so amazing. And then once we actually got out, then we were in like this is--from every direction, there were just like massive amounts of people walking to the Mall from all directions, because there were all the local people who were walking, or people who drove like a mile towards it and then just decided to walk the rest of the way. Ramla couldn't have walked that way. Otherwise I would have totally just walked from where we were, because it wasn't far at all, but she wasn't able to walk that much.

Williamson

So then when we got on the Mall, we were in front of the Smithsonian, so we were a long ways away from the Capitol, but we were well positioned in front of a Jumbotron, and then they were re-broadcasting. So we got there like about eight o'clock, I guess, and they were re-broadcasting the concert that they had done a couple of days before, which was very fun. But what was cool is just like it was like you had your own little community of people around you that you just sort of--it was a spontaneous grouping of people that you happened to have the karma to be with, and so we all were sharing where we were from, why we were there, how we got there. There were people from Brooklyn, from Dallas, from the Carolinas, from D.C. There were people who lived like literally a ten-minute walk away in our little shoulder-to-shoulder group, and so that was a whole interesting thing.

Williamson

And totally diverse, people in their eighties, tiny babies, all colors, races, it was a truly diverse crowd. And then when the actual inauguration really started going, what was really cool would be because we were in front of the Jumbotron, so we could see what was happening up there, and a lot of times they had the camera on the crowd. So like we could see--for example, when we saw some of the senators, like Kennedy or something like that, everybody would cheer who was watching a Jumbotron, and so it was like this weird feedback loop, and you could hear the cheer come from up front all the way back to us in real time, but also see it on the Jumbotron thing.

Collings

Oh, that's interesting.

Williamson

But also the booing.

Collings

There was some booing, yes.

Williamson

There was some really intense booing, for real, when Cheney was seen and when Bush was seen. That was really interesting, too. But then the flipside of that was the sort of ecstatic cheering and flag waving and clapping, when we

saw Barack or his wife or his kids or Hillary or Biden or--who are some of the other people that were like the big stars--Gore, so it was really wonderful. And then also just funny like, you could hear like groups of people had their own--like there might be somebody in the crowd would lead a chant or something. And then I heard stories like that from other people, who were saying that on this one Metro station, somebody led everybody--they were really stuck there, and somebody led them through a whole song of "Lean on Me." And that whole crowd was singing that. So just that kind of group experience, without any--there was so--I mean, under normal circumstances, those kinds of lines and being stuck in a place, not being able to get on or get off or whatever, most people would have totally lost their temper, but nobody did.

Collings

Yes. Now, during the booing, did the energy of the crowd change much?

Williamson

There was a lot of laughing that would happen, so people would boo and then everybody would laugh.

Collings

Yes, that's what I was wondering. So not really.

Williamson

No, not really. I mean, there were people who definitely objected to the booing, not because they were necessarily fans, but because they felt that it was disrespectful. My take on the booing was that people have felt so unheard by our past president, and like this was an opportunity for them to see and hear their feeling of disappointment and all the problems that have occurred over the last eight years, so it was like their moment to express themselves, because they heard it. There's no doubt. They were up there. They could look over the entire Mall and see the million and a half people that were there, and they heard and saw people booing. There's no way they could not know the sentiment that was there. So, yes, it was interesting.

Collings

Now, you are not a stranger to large crowd events. Do you feel like people were more open and conversational?

Williamson

I do. I do. In thinking about it afterwards, I realized that's probably the main reason that I went there is to be in the crowd more than anything else, I mean, because otherwise you could certainly view it on TV in a much nicer environment. But to personally be in that crowd and in that energy I think was the main draw for me, because I didn't really care if I was in the ticketed area or not, or whether I was on the parade route or on the Mall. I wanted to be in the crowd. Like, I mean, I think I was definitely like one of the people who--that there was a moment in that first concert, the Sunday night concert, where

Forrest Whittaker and Ashley Judd came on together, and she and he were talking about the importance and the role of the artist in community and society and how beneficial they are for us in so many different ways. Of course, we had just been through this in all these amazing performers, who had moved the crowd deeply, and so it was just a reinforcement of what we had been hearing for the last hour and forty-five minutes or so. And so then when they were re-broadcasting, that was my favorite part of that event at the concert, and then when they were re-broadcasting on the morning of the inauguration and that part came up, I was like cheering every time she was saying "the role of the artist," and it was funny. Like all of these people around me would laugh, not at me or anything, but they thought it was cute that I was inspired by that.

Williamson

Or another experience that we had was when we were coming out of the Metro station on one of the days, and it was not on the--I think it was the day before. Yes, it was MLK Day, Martin Luther King Day, and we were going down to the Mall. It was a giant mass of people coming out of the Metro station, and then I heard a snare drum, somebody go "bak" on their snare drum. You know I'm a drummer and so I'm like, "Where's the snare?" you know, I'm looking around, and I started yelling, "Play it, play it!" And then all of a sudden, even though you couldn't see where the drums were, all of a sudden this whole band was in the crowd, and they started playing. It was a Haitian festival music drum group from Brooklyn, who had come into town for the event, and they were going down on the Mall, so they all came out of the Metro at the same time with us, and it just created this whole immediate, like joyful crowd scene, and a bunch of people followed them around while they walked around the Mall and played.

Williamson

So, yes, I just think people were way more open. I mean, you just had to say the tiniest little thing and then their whole story would come out.

Collings

When did you decide to go?

Williamson

Last summer in June, when I was in Philadelphia for the Americans for the Arts Conference. The Americans for the Arts have really taken a strong advocacy position, just in general on a national level, for the arts, and one of the keynote speakers at the conference was Donna Brazile, who played an important role in the Clinton administration, and then she has been very involved in--at that point, she had been very involved in Obama's campaign. So she was talking about that and again the importance of the arts and how Obama really was the only presidential candidate to have a genuine arts platform, which I knew. So I'd never been to Philadelphia before, and while I was just sort of walking

around and sort of experiencing the history of that city, I realized, oh, he's going to be inaugurated--

Collings

If he would win, because this was before the election.

Williamson

I know, but I knew he was going to win.

Collings

Did you?

Williamson

I did. How can you not? McCain is just so not--actually, it was even before he won the nomination, actually.

Collings

Wow.

Williamson

But I knew he was going to win. So I was like, "I have to be here. I want to be there for the inauguration." And so I started trying to recruit friends then, to plan with me to be there, because I knew the minute he won it would be over. There would be no way to get tickets or anything. So I only managed to get Ramla to go. I mean, other people were like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," but they couldn't commit, and we bought our plane tickets and reserved our bed and breakfast and everything before the election.

Collings

Before he even got nominated?

Williamson

Not before he got nominated, but before he won. So, yes.

Collings

But I'm presuming that you wouldn't have gone if he hadn't won.

Williamson

I don't know. I think we would have probably still taken the trip.

Collings

Really?

Williamson

Just--why not? But, yes, it would have been weird, for sure. But I knew he was going to win.

Collings

Yes. Well, good for you. [laughter]

Williamson

And so did Ramla. We were both totally convinced.

Collings

Now, did the vibe of the town and the crowd change after the deed was done and he became president?

Williamson

No. No. People were cold and tired from standing out there for so long, and they'd closed down a lot of the Metro stations and so it made it even more difficult to get out of the area. So there was definitely a lot of--it was challenging for people, because you would like go to one Metro station, or you'd hear rumors, "No, that one's closed," and so it was hard getting out of the area.

Collings

Why did they do that, do you have any idea?

Williamson

I don't really know why. I don't know why. Maybe crowd control? I can't even imagine. But the vibe was still totally positive. Like there was this one--to get onto the Metro to get out of there, we had to walk a long ways. There was going to be a lot of stairs that we were going to have to climb down if we went in through the regular entrance, and so we decided to take the elevator, and there was a really packed crowd of people trying to get on the elevator. So there were these two guys, just people out of the crowd, two young black men who were like controlling the elevator, because if you get too many people on it won't run. So they were like, "Okay, you, you, you." They were like doing the crowd-control thing and appealing--I mean, it was just a crush of people, and they were appealing to everybody's better nature and saying, "We just had this amazing event. Stand back, make some room." So it was like that. They just spontaneously--you know, they didn't have to stand there all afternoon waiting for hundreds of people to monitor the use of the elevator, but they did.

Collings

Interesting.

Williamson

I know. [laughs]

Collings

Do you have any souvenirs?

Williamson

Yes. I have my inaugural Metro pass, I have my Obama beanie, little things like that.

Collings

It sounds like the trip of a lifetime.

Williamson

Yes, definitely. One thing I want to find out is if there has ever been a crowd that large on the Mall.

Collings

From what I heard, there hasn't been, but that's--

Williamson

I haven't actually heard that reported, but what I know of the other big events, I know they were not more than a million people.

Collings

This was supposed to be bigger than the largest Vietnam War protest and bigger than the Million Man March--

Williamson

Right, which wasn't a million men.

Collings

Yes, and bigger than King's famous speech.

Williamson

Right. Oh, that was the other cool thing. When we got onto the Metro and were going home, there was this guy who was probably in his eighties, Harold something-or-other, African American, and he had been to King's speech, he had been to Farrakhan's Million Man March, and there was another event. Maybe he was at the Million Family March, the Christian Coalition one, and then this. So he was so sweet. He went by himself. He was using a cane. I mean, I was impressed, because Ramla had mobility issues, so I know navigating those crowds with a cane and everything took real courage. It was intense. He was married. He said he left his wife at home because he knew it would just be too much for her, but he was going to be there no matter what. So that was really sweet, to meet somebody who had been to all those big, super-big events.

Collings

Yes, absolutely. Okay, well, on to our topic of the day.

Williamson

I know.

Collings

Actually, I mean it kind of like is linked, because, I mean, last time you talked about how you had witnessed so many ceremonies and processions when you were in Mexico--

Williamson

Right, right.

Collings

--and how this had really piqued your interest in that kind of thing. And you said that you realized that you wanted to do, quote, "art projects that engage the general public," so I'm sort of seeing the whole inauguration as the sort of ritual event that engages the general public, and it would be like an obvious attraction for you along those lines.

Williamson

Right.

Collings

So I just wanted to get sort of from there to sort of how you got to your involvement with the EWALA [Earth Water Air Los Angeles] theater troupe.

Williamson

Well, that--I had already been working on the Ballona wetlands issue for a couple of years. I think it appealed to me obviously because of my interest in the environment, and because it was like perceived as a lost cause, so, of course, I'm drawn to lost causes. I mean, it's not really just about the lost cause. It's more about, what can I do for the environment that's in my immediate neighborhood, and that was literally in my immediate neighborhood. I met this woman, Susan Suntree, at--we were planning a rally, and the concept of the rally had evolved into this idea of connecting the headwaters of the Los Angeles River to the Ballona wetlands, which they were millions of years ago. The Ballona wetlands or Ballona Creek was once--before the Baldwin Hills rose up, it was once a tributary where the Los Angeles River would flow in that direction sometimes, which I learned from Susan Suntree. Is she one of the people you're interviewing?

Collings

Yes.

Williamson

So we were both involved in planning this rally, and we just had an immediate, like, bonding. She's an amazing poet, playwright, and as you know, she was--well, she's finished the book now, but she was working at the time on a book on the sacred sites of Los Angeles, and so that was her attraction to this issue, because Ballona has a spiritual connection through the indigenous Tongva-Gabrielino people. So she and I--the concept of connecting the headwaters to the wetlands really came from Susan, actually, which I didn't know then. But what happened is she had this idea that it would be fun to have like a bunch of people wearing galoshes and traipsing through the Los Angeles River down in the cement channel and going down to the Ballona wetlands, and so that was this kooky image that she had, and I immediately could see it and said, "Oh, we can make some giant puppets," and make it this whole event thing, and so it just sort of snowballed out of that.

Williamson

There was another person involved really early on, Mary Altman, who had--I'm trying to remember what her--she started out being the organizer of the rally is what it was, and had given it the name Earth Water Air Los Angeles. So anyway, but Susan and I really bonded over this thing. Oh, it was Mary's idea to do the--get a hundred people to make the walk, like the walk they do for breast cancer, or the bicycle ride, that sort of thing. But it was Susan's idea to connect the headwaters and the Los Angeles River and so forth. So anyway, just the whole idea for EWALA sort of bubbled up out of that, and then it just

was a flowing conversation that--oh, I guess actually what had happened, too, is the idea for that first event, the rally, organizers of it asked me to do some sort of art event, like to paint a mural or something. So the rally was going to just originally happen at the Del Rey Lagoon down at the wetlands.

Williamson

This was before I met Susan, and so my idea for the group art project was to have everybody make giant dream catchers out of hula hoops, and there was a little play on the--because that was when DreamWorks was involved, and so, you know, dream catchers in Native American tradition are these woven--they look like spider webs. So the idea was that different groups of people, like a family or whatever, could make their own dream catcher, and then those would become--we put them on bamboo poles, and so those became banners of a sort. So as people were creating their--learning how to make a dream catcher and creating it, they were imbuing it with their vision for the wetlands and so forth, and then we were going to do this little procession from the Del Rey Lagoon over to the Ballona Creek and drop flowers and do a little ceremony over the creek for the wetlands.

Williamson

So that was my contribution, and that was how I met Susan. So that was the very first EWALA. In that event, the headwaters was connected symbolically through bike riders who carried water from the headwaters down to the wetlands by bicycle. But then in subsequent years, we actually physically marched. Instead of bike riding, we recruited people to do the whole walk and camp out overnight, etc.

Collings

How did you publicize these events?

Williamson

We went about it from the point of view of targeting the other groups that were invested in--the other environmental groups. So we knew--again, it was about connecting the other environmental movements in Los Angeles, because they're all part of the same watershed, and so at that time there was a group to save Ahmanson Ranch, which was at the headwaters of the Los Angeles River. There was the Pierce College group that was working to save this one--Pierce College was thinking about selling off part of their land and turning it into a golf course. Then there were the Tujunga Wash people, who were also fighting a massive golf-course development, and then what was the other one? King's Canyon was another development that was slated for an area along the Los Angeles River. Then there were the Los Angeles river people [Friends of the Los Angeles River], who were trying to get the river de-channelized, and then the Sierra Club, which is kind of an overarching organization in general for the

area. Who else did we talk to? Well, certainly all the Ballona wetlands' activists. I think that might have been it.

Williamson

And so our approach was to target the communities that were already organizing around a particular environmental struggle in their community and to get them to participate in our event, because our event was showing that it's all connected. Ahmanson Ranch is part of the problem that Ballona wetlands, and if we band together, we're going to be stronger for it, as opposed to kind of seeing our efforts as being in competition or unconnected. So that's primarily who we were recruiting, is the other organizers from those other campaigns. So that was the first year.

Williamson

Then the second year, we decided to try and go after community organizations along the route, either social-justice groups, high school groups. So like I organized several high school groups. I connected with their teachers and then I went into their classrooms and did art-making workshops where we made headdresses or umbrellas and props and things that were part of the parade, or musical instruments, that sort of thing. And then they came and participated in some or all of the march. So we would try to get at least people to walk for the section that was related along the route that went through their community.

Collings

Right. So the second was one was a larger event than the first one?

Williamson

Yes. Well, let's see. The very, very first one was sort of a symbolic one, where the bicyclists connected the two events, and that was before it was even called EWALA. Then the first official EWALA event was where we did march the whole way, although we went up and over Sepulveda Pass. We didn't follow the path of the Los Angeles River. And then the second EWALA event, we followed the whole path of the Los Angeles River down to mid-Wilshire, like where LACMA is, the museum, because that's where Ballona Creek starts, and then we followed the creek all the way down to Ballona from there. That was the biggest and longest one. And then there were two more, so there were four--there were five altogether, including the first sort of precursor event, I think.

Collings

Yes, all involving the puppets as well.

Williamson

Yes. Well, there weren't puppets in the very first one.

Collings

In the first one there were not, yes.

Williamson

The very first one was just the dreamcatchers, so that I didn't make that trip. Just the bicyclists did. But in the other events, yes, there were always giant puppets, and in each of those events I always led--building up the event, I did art-making workshops, either here at 18th Street [Arts Complex], or at community centers or high schools, wherever it needed to happen.

Collings

And why was the decision taken to discontinue the events?

Williamson

It was always an event that was timed with Earth Day, and I think 2001 is the last one that we did. It just--I think we got tired. [laughs] Well, part of it, too, is ceremonially, in a Native American practice you do things in cycles of four, and so we had done four of them, not including the very first sort of precursor event, so that was like a completion of a cycle as well. They were major events that took months and months and months of organizing in advance, and it was time to do something different.

Collings

Yes. And did you have the involvement of some of the local Native American like cultural centers?

Williamson

Yes, all of them, right from the very beginning. That was really something that came from Susan. That was her very smart understanding of the importance of inviting the elders from the Native American community that are associated with that specific land. So like at the headwaters [of the Los Angeles River] it's Chumash [land], and at the wetlands it's Tongva-Gabrielino [land], and so they always were given the opening moment and the opening blessing, so that we were given the permission by their ancestors to be on the land, and to bless our work, basically, or our play or whatever.

Collings

Now, how did you get involved in the Ballona wetlands issue before that? Because you said that this came out of your interests in Ballona.

Williamson

It goes back to my work with Tom at the Geosphere Project. He was friends with Tom Hayden, who had been involved--you know, there was like a twenty-year struggle at the Ballona wetlands that had been going on before I got involved, and Tom was one of those people very involved in it, and so he would come around the Geosphere Project and he was talking about it. It was right about the time that the original group, the Friends of Ballona Wetlands, had made a settlement agreement with--what was the first--was it Summa Corporation, I guess? I mean, they went through so many name changes, I can't remember.

Collings

Yes. I think the first one was Summa, if I'm recalling correctly.

Williamson

So I think they had settled with Summa Corporation, and then that was--so I knew about the issue and then knew some of the people who were like, "Wait a minute. Why are you settling? That's not a good enough agreement." Summa Corporation put a gag rule on them, or not a gag rule, but part of the agreement was that they had to show up and speak beneficially about the development that they were going to do.

Collings

Right.

Williamson

So I was like, well, you know, if there's any juice left in this and it's worth fighting for to push it further, then I'm going to push for that.

Collings

But there was no arts connection at that time?

Williamson

No. No, it was just--the factual information, and that so much of our wetlands in California have been lost already, so I felt strongly about wanting to contribute to that in some way.

Collings

Okay. Why don't you introduce a little bit about what you're doing now with the 18th Street Arts Complex and what it is? And then you also said that you want to talk about your participation in the closing ceremony for the Festival of Sacred Music, which also sounds like another ecstatic crowd type of event. So that will sort of loop us back to the beginning.

Williamson

Yes, right. Well, I've been here at 18th Street for fourteen years. I came here kind of as--actually totally as a favor to one of the co-founders. I was working for her as a personal assistant in a temporary way, moving her studio from northern California down here to Santa Monica, and in the process of doing that, 18th Street was about five years old then, and it was having a meltdown. So because I was her assistant and I was helping her--she was on the board, Susanna Dakin, so she was on the board of 18th Street, and so I was helping her deal with the issues in whatever way. Like she asked me to do some research on finding property managers and stuff for 18th Street, because 18th Street has all these buildings that they operate and lease out to artists, and so as the organization was going through this, its five-year challenge, one of the things that the staff was saying at that point was, "We're really not equipped to be property managers."

Williamson

And so they were looking for a formal property-management company, so I was doing research on that for her. Then one of my friends who is a property manager, who owns all these different properties and manages other people's properties, was talking to Sue and she said, "You know, it's not that big of a deal. You could just hire Jan to do it. It's very simple." Which I didn't even know she was telling her. I mean, I had actually managed property before, when I was in college, an apartment complex, so as a way to sort of ease some of the administrative problems that were going on here, Sue did hire me to work part-time as a temporary property manager for 18th Street, and I've been here fourteen years. [laughs] So I was on her payroll originally and then moved to the organization's payroll later.

Williamson

It's been a fantastic experience, because it's all about supporting artists, and in particular supporting artists who have a social interest or purpose to their work and who are interested in engaging the public in some way. Well, in fact, Linda Burnham, who's the other co-founder with Sue of 18th Street, she also founded "High Performance Magazine." Then she had left, so that was part of the reason that the organization was having a meltdown. So she had left and "High Performance Magazine" and Linda and the other editor of "High Performance" Magazine" moved to North Carolina. But part of Linda's history, too, in the history of "High Performance Magazine" is that their particular interest was in artists who were engaging the community through their work.

Williamson

So fourteen years ago they started an organization called Art in the Public Interest and developed a website called The Community Arts Network, and so they really were very instrumental in naming that branch of art making. It didn't even have a name. There was no description for it. it sort of evolved out of performance art in a way, because it was seen as more performative and more in the festival or the temporal realm of art making, rather than in the object-making world, but it didn't really fit into either of those categories. It certainly didn't fit in the visual museum market model, so yes, they were very instrumental in naming and writing about and articulating the best practices of that whole movement, and many of the artists here at 18th Street have been leaders in that field as well, so it's kind of a natural fit for me.

Collings

Yes, it certainly sounds like it. So you said that you were a drummer. Where does the music piece fit into all of this?

Williamson

Well, I really learned through the EWALA events that when you have any kind of a parade or you're moving through the streets or moving through a public environment, that you want to inspire people in a positive way. So the way you

present yourself is either attractive or repulsive to people, and so if you look like an angry demonstration crowd, people are going to totally hang back and watch and decide if that's something that they care about. But the likelihood in that moment that you're actually going to turn them towards your issue is pretty slim in general. Or if you are beautiful and joyful and celebratory, in our culture, people are still reserved about getting involved in those kinds of things, but certainly you're going to cut through their attention, and they'll be more willing to take your flyer or act upon what you're doing.

Collings

Right.

Williamson

And so music is such a natural, inspirational art form. Whether you're outside experiencing the music or in the band making the music, it's a very bonding experience. You're synchronized with a group of people, whether you're--it's just like at the inauguration, like Pete Seeger was one of the performers, and he was singing "This Land is Your Land," and everybody in the whole crowd knows the words to those songs. Everybody was singing it. So I decided that I wanted--we had to rely upon recruiting other people who were musicians for our event.

Collings

For the EWALA events?

Williamson

Yes. And I've just realized that I really wanted to be playing the music, not just listening to it but to actually be playing it, so I've learned how to do Brazilian samba drumming, which is a form of street music. It's totally designed specifically for parading in the streets. It's loud, it's super engaging and super fun, and it's designed to be ever expanding, so whether you have three drummers or 300 drummers or 3,000 drummers, you can play the music. It doesn't matter. So, yes, that's how I got into it.

Collings

So it came out of your interest in, as we say, "art projects that engage the general public," to quote you.

Williamson

Yes. I mean, I always had this like secret desire in the back of my mind to be a drummer--

Collings

Oh, really.

Williamson

--but I never acted on it, because I always was like, "I'm a visual artist. It'll take too long." I never allowed myself the luxury of imagining that I could become a musician.

Collings

And how did you go about learning this?

Williamson

That's actually one of my most favorite stories, because like I said, I had this total secret desire, but I always thought, "Oh, I'm too old. I'll never be able to learn, or by the time I learn I'll be fifty years old and it'll be too late to really be able to ever experience the fullness of playing in a band or anything like that." And so I had this whole thought formed in my head that it was beyond my reach. There was this teen band [Alma de Batucada], "heart of the drum" group that I loved and who played Brazilian samba music. They were like five or six kids. They were all from Dorsey High in the magnet school, totally inspiring, amazing, and I knew them because of the dance community that I'm part of, etc., and so I would always hear them at these other events and stuff. And I was envious. It was like, "Oh, god, I wish I would have had that experience when I was a teenager."

Williamson

So one day I was really like thinking about that and going--thinking about the envy aspect, and I just had this epiphany, like, "Wait a minute. They're just teenagers. That means they've only been playing for a few years at the most, and they already have a band, and they're already great." And so I just realized, I can start my own band--and so through total ignorance, because if I had known then what I know now about the difficulty of playing Brazilian music and stuff, I probably would have been daunted by the task. But instead, my idea was, I'm going to recruit my friends, all my girlfriends, and we're going to find a drum teacher, and we're going to learn--we're going to recruit a drum teacher who's going to be like our band director, basically, and we're going to make a band as we're learning how to play the music. But totally leaping over the whole process of having to learn how to play first. "Let's just start a band, and learn how to play as a band together."

Williamson

And so that's what I did. I started talking to my musician friends and they're like, "Yeah, you can do that. Why not?" because they taught youth, and so that's what they did all the time. So we tried out different teachers, and we found Carlinhos Pandeiro de Ouro, who is one of the most famous percussionists from Mangueira Samba School in Brazil, which is one of the top ten samba schools, and he became our teacher. So on Friday nights he would come here to 18th Street, and we mail-ordered all of our drums from Brazil, and so for a couple of hours on Friday nights he would rehearse us. And so we learned how to play really basic Brazilian samba from him, and then we would go, because he also directed--at that time there was this club, Zabumba, that

had a drum group that would play on Friday nights later, so once we got good enough, he invited to come and play with that group as a way to practice.

Williamson

And then the word got out there was an all-girl drum band and then so we got these funny little gigs, like there was a [John] Kerry march or rally that we played at and just different things.

Collings

So do you tend to play at political types of events do you think? I mean, you mentioned the Kerry march.

Williamson

Yes.

Collings

I mean, not exclusively though?

Williamson

No. The all-girl group doesn't exist anymore. It was a big--it was another one of the organizing, intensive experiences, so I did that for about three years, four years, and now those of us who have continued on learning and everything have been absorbed into this other group at UCLA called BatUCLAda, which is a student group there, and then we get to be the community members in the band.

Collings

Oh, I see.

Williamson

So we provide continuity, because the students cycle in and out all the time, so there's about four of us that are part of that.

Collings

So you play regularly with them?

Williamson

Yes.

Collings

Oh, that's wonderful.

Williamson

Yes, it is. It's fun.

Collings

Okay. So what about the Festival of Sacred Music that you said that you had wanted to talk about that?

Williamson

Well, I think that's another major--what's interesting to me about that event is the sacred aspect of it. It was a vision of the Dalai Lama's in 1999, and so it's at the turn of the century. He was putting out the idea just in general to anybody who would pick it up, that if we appreciated each other's sacred music, that we

would develop closer bonds culturally, or have more understanding across cultures. And so Judy Mitoma, who is part of the World Arts and Culture [Program] group at UCLA, decided to produce a sacred music festival upon hearing that idea. So she initiated the effort and built a little nonprofit board, which friends of mine who had sponsored the EWALA events were on that board, Andrew Beath. And so Andrew Beath for the very first festival recruited Susan and I to do--he took the idea of EWALA, which he had sponsored all of those years, as part of the festival, the World Festival of Sacred Music, and so he wanted to sponsor four events, one for the mountains, one for the river, one for the wetlands, and one for the sea.

Williamson

So he recruited a whole bunch of us, but in particular Susan and I to do an event for the wetlands, and then other people that I knew as well for each of the other four events. So collectively, all of us--it was like a series. But I also met new people. Actually, this was before I was doing Brazilian drumming, and the way I got into the Brazilian drumming was through this World Festival of Sacred Music, because I met my Brazilian dance teacher through that event, that very first event, because the group that did the event for the ocean was a Brazilian event, based on--Brazil has this tradition from the African Diaspora, or the candomble, of honoring Iemanja, the Orixa of the ocean, and so that was the event that they did here in Santa Monica, was honoring the sea. So when I saw them doing the Orixa dances for Iemanja and hearing the drumming and everything, I was like, "Oh, my god. I have to connect with them." So I started taking dance classes with them, and that was what later, several years later, inspired me to take up the drumming as well, because I was learning the dance. So I thought, oh, Brazilian drumming is so perfect for parades and everything.

Williamson

So that festival, the Festival of the Sacred Music, happens every three years. That was the very first year. So we did our event at the wetlands. Oh, and it was also how I got into Tibetan Buddhism, too. Here at 18th Street, we did a visual-art show as part of the festival, where we showed artists who use the sacred in their art, and so one of the artists that we curated into the exhibition is a Tibetan Lama [Lama Lhanang], so when I met him, I realized that--he lives like less than a mile away from me, and his temple was super close, and so I just started going to his teachings. So that was how I got involved in having a Buddhist practice.

Williamson

But anyway, that festival, the Honoring of the Sea event became--for the first one and all the subsequent festivals--there's been four now, I think--actually, this says which one is it. Is it the third or fourth?

Collings

Let's see. Is it this Honoring the Sea, this one?

Williamson

Yes. I can't remember. The first one was in '99, so it's every three years. I think it's the fourth one. Yes, it is. 2008 was the fourth one. So the Honoring the Sea event evolved from a total ad hoc, non-permitted event on the beach of honoring Iemanja, and then the second festival--Judy, she loved the first--what had happened, the first one, she turned it into a closing event again for the second and all subsequent festivals. What evolved out of it was a true contemporary ceremony. And the reason I use the word contemporary is because it's bringing multiple, different traditions together to create a new ceremony that never existed before.

Williamson

How do I even describe it? It's like it's a complicated--the way it evolved--I mean, the second year it was more produced like an event, with a stage and a sound system and everything, which wasn't at all what it was like the first year. The first year was really a genuine ceremony. Everyone was invited to bring flowers and make offerings to the water, dressed in white, and then there was dancing and drumming and singing. Then the second year, the festival produced the event, but produced it like an event, where different performing groups were invited to perform. So it has this structure of audience and performer to it.

Williamson

Then the third year, when we were invited again to participate in it, we were like, "No, that's not the way it works ideally." Really, it's designed to be more of a ceremony, and in order for it to be a ceremony the different groups who were being invited to participate--the ceremony isn't about performing for an audience. It's about creating a ceremony in which the, quote, unquote, "audience" is actually participating in the ceremony, and they're not audience at all. They're part of the transformation that's happening. "So do away with the stage, do away with the sound system." And so we created this new structure.

Williamson

So there were leaders from the Hawaiian groups here in Los Angeles, Afro Brazilian groups, African groups, and an Italian group that has a relationship with the Black Madonna from Italy, who do offerings to the ocean. There's a big fishing relationship there. Is that it? Africa, Italy, Brazil, Hawaii, I think that was it. Those were the four sort of big groups. And so collectively--they all have genuine spiritual traditions. Their song and dance are totally authentic from their tradition, and so we created a new--oh, how could I forget? Our Tongva-Gabrielino, the local Native American community. So we created a new ceremony out of all of those groups, who all have their own traditions, their own songs, their own dances, their own relationship to the ocean.

Williamson

Like the Tongva-Gabrielino, about sixteen years ago built a Tiat, which is--do you know about this boat?

Collings

No.

Williamson

Well, they have a tradition of canoeing across to Catalina Island, but they had lost the art of building those canoes and weren't permitted, even if they had made those canoes. The Coast Guard wouldn't permit, literally, their vessels, to allow them to be there in Santa Monica. It's different in southern California. I think further up the coast they're not as uptight, but here they're like, "You can't launch a craft off of Santa Monica beaches," or anything. So anyway, one of the leaders had a vision to build the boat and through that process reconnect with their lineage that way. So they built a canoe, called a Tiat, and so that Tiat, which they bring out for ceremonial purposes, was at the third and fourth, the last two events, which was wonderful. So they used the Tiat to take all the offerings to the ocean out and pretty amazing, actually.

Collings

Yes, yes. Well, I mean, this is such an interesting story, because it's just another one of these examples of the interest in transformative social ritual that engages all participants, you know, the inauguration, the Mexican processions that first engaged you, the EWALA theatrical troupe, and even what's going on at 18th Street, because it's arts with a socially activist purpose.

Williamson

Right, right. Yes, that's my passion. If I could just be organizing events like that for the rest of my life, I would be happy. I could do away with a lot of other things.

Collings

Yes. But it's kind of interesting how the notion of the sacred has really become an important element of this.

Williamson

Yes, definitely. That is a really key aspect for me. So I guess in each case, it's about connecting with the larger something or other, breaking down that feeling of being you alone. Like one of the things that always has fascinated me is like how do a flock of birds--you know how like you'll see a whole flock of birds all of a sudden take off together at one time, and then they'll like fly, and then they'll all turn together at the same time, and like, how do they do that? How do they know how to do that? And I know that humans have that capacity in us somewhere as well, and music and dance I think is one of the ways that we--so it's that group mentality or the connection to something larger than yourself as an individual that draws me, and creating a sacred space is part of that.

Collings

> And is that necessarily linked to environmentalism, or are those two separate strains in your interests?

Williamson

> For me, I don't think they're separate, because I think nature is always manifesting those kinds of expressions all around us. So just in my observation of nature it is humans are not separate from nature at all, and to me that was--you know, we're taught--Christianity is kind of the main temperature of the bathwater that we live in in the United States, so Christianity has this notion of humans being outside of nature and having dominion over the plants and animals and the land, and I've really come to realize that that's not the way it is. We are nature and we're part of nature. We're in and of it. We're evolving with it simultaneously, and so how can we be more connected to it and in synch with it, as opposed to out of sync? So I think that's the environmental interest for me, is the feeling and appearance that we're out of sync with our true nature, and that's what's creating a lot of the environmental problems, global warming etc.

Collings

> So do you see these ritual events as correcting that imbalance, or as an embodiment of the balance?

Williamson

> I think we're an embodiment of the balance, rather than trying to correct it. If you're embodying it, then you are correcting it, versus trying to--it seems more a perception of duality if you're outside trying to correct it, or reinforcing the duality rather than just being in it. [End of interview]

Date: