CAITLIN: Caitlin Davis interviewing FLASH on March 26, 2012. Okay, well, I guess we can first start with the Six Shooters Exhibition. So, the work you showed me today are photo sequences. What was your inspiration? How did you get involved with that?

FLASH: How many blinks? How many images do you see in one glance? Since the very first roll of film, I shot photo sequences. You get 36 pictures on a roll of film – so I thought, “Why is only ONE of them is supposed to be good?” Visual storytelling interested me. How do you connect one image to another to make meaning? One nice picture by itself can be admirable. But to me, it’s not enough to see just one beautiful photo.

I didn't know anyone doing photo sequences back then. Moment Preserved was one of the first photographs I ever made – shot on the first roll of film for Photography 101 at the University of Delaware. The first frame shows my neighbor sitting in the breakfast nook in my little apartment on Main Street, with her toast and coffee. Frame two: I wrapped everything (I mean EVERYTHING – the food, the flowers, the plates, her whole body) in aluminum foil. Because what I really wanted to do was preserve the moment. I didn’t want to take a picture. I want to be able to sit at that table with Renee in 1974 having coffee anytime – and forever.

The sense of time in photography interests me more than anything.
The way to indicate time, more than just breathing it moment by moment, is to make it into a story and a memory. I have always been interested in how words and pictures go together. For me, the most perfect piece of paper was in second grade – with a blank top-half for your drawing – and the lined bottom-half to write the story.

All my life I’ve been asked, “So? Are you a writer OR are you a visual artist?” Why can’t I be both? Right now we’re talking AND looking at each other. The most natural way to communicate is to do both.

I consider all my work as sequences, even single photos, because they are captioned. Adding words makes it a two-part concept. I play with language to define, tweak, or disagree with what’s in the picture, to introduce a more engaged way to interpret the picture. The words give the image a framework. I wanted the work to communicate feelings that were not necessarily visible. While above all thinking, “Let’s have fun.”

CAITLIN: How did you get involved with Rob Jones’ Fifth Street Gallery?

FLASH: We went to the same high school. He was older, so sort of untouchable, over there. He was very popular, very charismatic. Also as artists in Delaware, we just knew each other. A better question would be: How could you NOT know Robbie Jones? He was a drum major, a leader, and a vibrant, indefatigable spirit. Of course, I was eager to know anybody in Delaware who was determined to have fun and make mischief while being professional.

CAITLIN: Did he approach you about joining the show, Six Shooters?

FLASH: I think so. There were articles about my work in the local papers. I’d done so many shows already. It wasn’t a mystery to find me. I knew everybody else in Six Shooters. Also I had started a group in Newark called Phark (P-H-A-R-K), for Photographers of Newark. The name was intentionally bawdy and funny. We weren’t a stylistic school or a movement. Just aspiring photographers with busy lives, who got together to make sure we made art. Our meetings provided a much-needed deadline. That’s what inspires a lot of work to be created. It’s too easy to start creating excuses – instead of art. Then you’re in danger of falling in love with those excuses – and never making your art.

CAITLIN: Talk about your photo sequences. And the one in particular you showed me earlier.

FLASH: Creating photo sequences was so much fun. And more than fun– it was a way of visiting with friends WHILE getting my work done. Most artists are either doing work OR visiting to avoid work. I found it – and still find it – far more interesting to spend time with people when we’re doing something productive together. I’d rather go on an errand than go on a date. If I’m spending precious time with you, why not do something genuinely helpful – like take your portrait.

And if my friend says, “Oh, no, no, don’t knock yourself out.” I’ll reassure him I prefer to spend time in an active way – that is productive, not disruptive.
Just like the two of us right now. We could just hang out. That’d be nice...But the process of being engaged in an interview accelerates getting to know each other. Well of course, I’m aware of the imbalance – because I’m not interviewing you. But you are making a verbal portrait of me, the same way I posed my friends for a visual one.

Which brings me back to the photo sequence you asked about. I cast two friends: a woman to drive a white Pinto, and a man in a black Pinto. On a quiet stretch of highway in Newark, I staged an encounter to look like a chance encounter. One car was driving toward the camera; the other driving away. The two cars stop next to each other, facing opposite directions. The man and woman leap out on the median strip. Both car doors remain open. They kiss passionately. Then get back in their respective cars and drive off.

This is what can happen between lovers. There can be this intense, urgent, passionate interaction. Then the two people nonchalantly get back in their cars and zoom off in opposite directions. This is very perplexing to me. How can you fall in love, and nothing dreadful happens – but the relationship ends? Why? Why was this happening so often to me? How do we arrive at knowing, and staying with each other? Or even more baffling, how do we know when to leave?

When this piece was exhibited, one of the funniest remarks I heard was, “Gosh, you must have had to wait there a long time to catch that.” (Laughs) He didn’t know it was a set-up. I guess this was because I was staging photos during a time when most photographers were primarily snapping what Cartier Bresson described as “The Decisive Moment.” Photographers documented what they found; Shapes, shadows, and scenes similar to what I was setting up. But I was deliberately using those kinds of journalistic photos to tell a story. I was not going after the *lucky grab*.

CAITLIN: What was your response when the person said that?

FLASH: I said, “I’m still waiting....” Then gently explained it was a set-up shot.

I loved his comment because it showed how much power photography has, compared to say, drawing. I was a good draw-er. So why would I take up photography? Most people did photography because they couldn’t draw. I’m not trying to belittle photographers’ skills. But photography strikes me as the one art form anyone can do with the least amount of talent.

CAITLIN: No, I know what you mean.

FLASH: I’m talking about “*technical talent.*” Obviously the brain engaged in looking at things incisively is a talent. *PLEASE* don’t misquote that oafish generalization out of context.

CAITLIN: No, no, I know what you mean.

FLASH: It’s just that I was so interested in expressing “*The Truth*” as I saw it in my mind. The way photos looked gave them a resonance of fact. If I drew the same image I photographed, that sketch would always look like something constructed. But photos gave the image a chance to appear more real, more *factual* – even when I was referring to a dream or metaphor.
It was only after I was doing this kind of work for a while that I was introduced to the photo sequences of Duane Michals – and of course, I loved his work. But I saw his work AFTER I was already making similar kinds of pictures. And I have to admit I was a little crushed. “Oh, I didn’t invent this. Oh, well. Nobody invents anything.”

It’s like that when anybody says, “You should look at the work of so and so.” Yes they intend to be helpful. But when people do that to me, I can’t help but feel a little bad too. Like, Oh, I didn’t know. I thought I was being original. And now everyone will think I’m copying someone. Sigh…”

CAITLIN: Talk about other experiences of history. Was this the only exhibition you were involved with there?

FLASH: Fifth Street? He didn’t have the gallery that long.

CAITLIN: Yeah, it was only for a few years.

FLASH: Yeah well, I was pretty busy. I was working full-time and doing all kinds of shows. And I used to think that once I had an exhibit in one place, I was done. Next I had to find another place to exhibit. So I was always looking for a new space. In 1979 I had my first big exhibit in Philadelphia at Muse Gallery on Walnut Street – which made me seriously start to consider moving to Philadelphia to have more opportunities to show my work. Once you’ve shown at the Fifth Street Gallery – the ONLY gallery in Wilmington (as I recall) for relatively unknown local artists – well then, it was everyone else’s turn before I could have another chance.

I think Robbie preferred to curate shows. So he didn’t mount many individual shows – unless you were older and more established. I could be wrong, but the way I remember it, he liked the party of having lots of different works by different artists in different areas of the gallery.

CAITLIN: What was his personality like?

FLASH: He was very energetic. And a little bit frightening – to me – because he was very cool, cheerful, and hip. And I was sure I’d never be any of those things. He was a real do-er; he got things done. For an artist to take on the responsibility of a gallery and to encourage other artists was heroic. Hmmm, but I don’t know; did he make artwork? No, I don’t think he did. He was more of a leader who made creative things happen around him. Also, he was – this sounds funny now because the towns feel more connected – he was in Wilmington. I was in Newark.

And I was very much a part of Newark. I was raised there. I wanted to show in places that were not necessarily galleries. I wanted more chances for people to bump into art, by sticking it all over the place. I was determined to make art a part of everyday life – not something precious and weirdly isolated in an elite gallery.

So I had exhibits in the lobby of the State Theatre in Newark, in community centers, in parks, on fences, clotheslines, basements, on buses.
I had exhibits in vending machines. I mounted individual frames from my contact sheets (of negatives) on little pieces of cardboard. For two quarters “art collectors” could spin the handle and out would pop a 2” bubble with a mounted photo in it. People would play the vending machine like a slot machine, to try to collect an entire photo sequence. These vending machines were in restaurants in Philadelphia. For several months the money I lived-on was all in quarters.

I was seduced by the idea of wanting to be in places with more possibility. I was trying to figure out what I really wanted to do with my work. I always felt kind of sad when my work was in galleries. That’s why I turned to performing.

CAITLIN: Why would you feel sad?

FLASH: Because the work looked forlorn and abandoned hanging so neatly on pristine walls. When the work lived haphazardly in the studio with me, it was in the midst of fun, with lots happening. All kinds of weird people would be coming over. There’d be raucous laughter, drinking, arguments, and sex. But in a gallery, people were quiet and polite. I would go up to my work and apologize, “Don’t worry. No one’s ever going to buy you. It’s fine. You’ll come back home soon where you can relax and get wrecked.” I had that feeling while working at the Delaware Art Museum. I’d visit the ladies in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings when the galleries were closed – and do cartwheels in front of them – to help cheer them up.

I didn’t see a valuable, historic painting. I saw a window into the lives of these Pre-Raphaelite models – imagining them actively being painted. I imagined what their life was like – back when they were probably all having affairs with the men painting them. Awwwwhh. And now they’re here, stuck on a wall, all cleaned up. Yeah, I have a different sense of art. It doesn’t mean I disrespect it. I just have a higher reverence for irreverence. I love that museums preserve art, because otherwise so much of it would be lost. I’m not saying somebody should or shouldn’t hang art in museums. I just believe it is important to simultaneously agree AND disagree, to honor AND challenge how, and where, we view art.

CAITLIN: Definitely. Talk a little bit about who else was involved with photography and the Delaware art scene.

FLASH: Well, Byron Shurtleff, my photography professor at the University of Delaware, was most significant. He was instrumental in getting photography recognized as a legitimate course of study at universities. He was one of the founders of the Society for Photographic Education (SPE) – to help make this happen nationally and institutionally. You see back then, photography was still considered a trade, a mere mechanical skill. The camera was a fussy machine to learn to operate. It was gear. Until pioneers like Byron understood that the operation of that particular camera-machine was capable of becoming ART. It was a fight to get photography into galleries and museums. Byron was a leader and a force, and irresistibly charismatic. He passionately encouraged every shooter, at every level, to take photography seriously AND irreverently. He connected us all.

He introduced me to lots of his former students. Most gratefully to Shawna Reilly (now Corsello), who was in the Six Shooters’ show. She has turned out to be one of my best, most
cherished, lifelong friends. In fact, we worked as a team photographing an event in Wilmington just yesterday.

Another great friend and Six Shooters’ photographer was Mimi Greenberg, who also studied with Byron, and was a member of Phark.

Then there was the whole Tom Watkins - Joyce Brabner - George Stewart contingent in Wilmington. We all knew each other because we were all making art noise in Delaware. Admittedly it was not a loud sound – but all of us making art heard it. I was in animation class with George Stewart at UD. In class, we teamed up to make an animation about a character named Stuart Pidd (for the inevitable nickname, Stu Pidd).

So sure we all hung out – and flirted, and fought. That’s all part of living. While we were highly aware (and possibly jealous?) that artists in other times and major cities were part of great movements and art scenes. While we all seemed to be riding around in separate cars, aware of each other, but isolated. We had our individual shows. While a dim thought gnawed at us (well…at me.), “Maybe if we got together and did big things, there would be some coverage of live artists in Delaware?” You have to understand, this was before the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts. There was NO major venue for living artists. So whatever we were doing felt like one big fat, “Who cares?”

Which gave us a kind of freedom. Instead of Importance, whatever we created was Festive. And we really did try to do our work as well as possible. When we did get written up, it was a miracle. Because the art writers for the News Journal were busy reviewing shows for the established Brandywine Nine museums. The idea that some kids were having a show wasn’t on anyone’s radar. So we were free to just keep exploring. I loved to make art, so I made it. Period.

CAITLIN: Talk about Pulse of Desire. Where did inspiration for that piece come from? How did you transition from doing still photography – to wanting to make a film?

FLASH: Making that film was deliberate, conscious decision. Before that, my work felt organic. I mentally wandered around trying to answer my own questions. I thought that if I followed the shape of my questions, there might be a chance to circumvent what’s conventional and I wouldn’t fall into a rut of what photographers should do.

Before I stared making Pulse of Desire, I thought, “Gee, I’ve been doing all this photography. And ‘people’ – including me – thought I should be making higher resolution ‘prettier’ and more precious photos. Okay. Yeah. I thought I should get a Hasselblad (or some sort of medium format, or 2 ¼ camera) so the pictures will be sharper.

CAITLIN: Were you in Philadelphia at this time?

FLASH: Yes. So I bought a used Hasselblad, which cost a fortune.
I exposed one little roll film – and realized, “I hate this. There are only 12 shots on a roll. I’m working even more SLOWLY than a SLR 35mm film camera.”

I got into photography because I couldn’t draw fast enough. Photography let me get my ideas out more rapidly. So I’m thinking, “This is a giant step backwards. I would rather show 1,000 pictures, not just one.” I was so impatient with only one photo. I didn’t care about pristine, decorative resolution. I thought in sequences and series.

Around that time I met with Marilyn Goodman, then Director of the Philadelphia Art Alliance, who invited me to exhibit there.

But instead of hanging one picture after another with captions, I proposed a slideshow, one still-image after another with captions – like a “real” photo exhibit – only it would be alive and moving.

I didn’t think of it as Performing. Not yet. I just figured this would allow me to show a lot of pictures – without the cost and aggravation to frame them. I could concentrate on the concept, not the cost. This would give me the chance to dissolve from one image to the next, to be fluid like vision – instead of artificially limited to single frames. Who sees only one rectangle?

Then I thought, “Hmmmm, if I put a lot of pictures together, I’ll have a movie.” And that was the moment the IDEA to make Pulse of Desire occurred. Even though I was aware that I had no technical chops for making a traditional film.

This was during a time when companies popularly used multi-image slideshows for corporate presentations. I’ve always paid attention to the current technology for information sharing. David Byrne of Talking Heads (one of my favorite bands at the time) had just started doing PowerPoint presentations. The art world thought that was hilarious. Of course now there’s tons of PowerPoint art. But it was all so new and exotic back then.

Speaking of inventions, it was around this time I became Flash and started my company of Flash Artists.

CAITLIN: What year did you change your name, if you remember?

FLASH: I earned the name by accident in 1982. Then made it legal around 1986. Turns out back then you had to change your name state-by-state. So I have a notarized document from the State of Pennsylvania acknowledging FLASH as a “Real Fictitious Person.” What a wonderful term. The State of New York has a more mundane term “DBA – Doing Business As” form– where I am “Susan J. Rosenberg AKA (also known as) FLASH. So I am still Susan to my mother…and family.

CAITLIN: I know, I hear your mom. Your mom doesn’t call you ‘Flash.’

FLASH: She agreed to let me change my name to Flash – but that’s a swerve in another direction. (Do we need to load up your tape with that whole story?)
Although it is relevant and interesting because naming your self is another way of defining yourself as an artist.

Some artists just make the work. *The Work* is who they are.

But a new notion started shimmering around the ‘70s, to make *Your Self Be The Work*. I saw my work as the sum of as my ideas – not necessarily as some virtuoso product of a camera or a pencil, whose main purpose was to be sold. I am what I understand. Now let’s discover how I arrived there, and what tools I should play with. By *tools* I mean mediums. Adding sound and motion to photography and drawing gave me a chance to become who I had the potential to be – and to convey who I already was.

I was smitten with artists like Laurie Anderson, who created herself as *The Artist Laurie Anderson*. She played violin, created slideshows, did stunts and performances. On a hot summer day, she froze her roller-skates in a block of ice. She brought the ice to a street corner in New York City and put her feet into the skates. She played violin until the ice melted, then skated away. *WOW. Now that’s a poetic moment.* That’s what I wanted art to be. In that piece she created an image, an action, a joke, all supported by elements of chance, manifested by planning. Perfect.

We all know so much more than we can reveal to others. Our experiences are so complex, infinite, and voluptuous. All we can ever do is skim off a little bit. Each one of us has a bundle of deeper thoughts we can never express, but they vividly exist as emotions. They may not be neatly packaged in words, but they’re in us.

Then the fun is to figure out how you can concoct an ability to communicate what you know. Such as when you, Caitlin, curate exhibits. You have figured out how to tangibly apply your sensations as acuity for what goes together – and what doesn’t. How do you know? *You KNOW.*

*Pulse of Desire* was a way to turn slides into a film – without knowing how to make a movie. I didn’t study filmmaking at all. My brother Ken and I used to joke that we should name our production company *DOEP Productions* (D-O-E-P for *Density of Effort*). By sheer density of effort, we figured we were creating *SOMETHING*.

It was the first time we used a computer to make art. Ken composed the music on a Commodore 64. The notion that you could preview the exact track of sound before laying it onto tape was amazing. A miracle. Ken and I huddled in his apartment’s tiny bedroom with sound-muffling blankets draped on every surface – to rally a makeshift sound booth. We recorded my narration for the 28-minute piece in one take. We didn’t know about voice editing. Next I read about *Slide Transfer Service* in a national AV trade magazine. I worked with their technician to program 7000 slides for the duration and the intensity of the light for each slide at any given moment. This is how we programmed the dissolves according to how fast a slide advanced. Our timing was limited by the gravitational mechanics of the slide projector drop. We had 12 projectors, so could only make a sequence to go as fast as 12 slides could cycle down-up-down in one go-
round. This is why the movie has a poetically-jerky, moon-walk, optical-sensation of remembered time.

I’ve always liked figuring out how to engineer things, especially when I don’t understand how it should work. Maybe I’m just too lazy to figure out the right way to do things. (Or too stubborn?) Once you get beyond your frustration, certain limitations can give you clarity – and if you’re lucky, sometimes what’s wrong turns out to be something genuinely original.

One potential limitation that turned out to be a good thing was that the actress, Carolyn lived in New York City. She could only come to my studio once a month for photo sessions. That gave me time to meticulously plan the scenes, in stages, before she came back for another intensive shoot.

CAITLIN: Okay, how did you meet her?

FLASH: I ran a business that hired friends to work as Flash Artists. I sent out teams of art clowns dressed in elegant costumes to take Polaroid photos that were hand-painted to make instant souvenirs, such as buttons, magnets, mirrors, key-chains, yo-yos, and life-sized photographic masks – for all kinds of events and occasions. My dearest friend, the sculptor Robert Woodward – who went by the name Peanutbutter – had a related business sending out artists to do extraordinary face and body painting. We often worked at events together as a team.

We met Carolyn in a nightclub one night. She was hired by the club to have her body painted. But I could see right away that she had far more acting ability beyond dancing provocatively in a club. I was used to casting people in sequences. For this movie, I was looking for a body that could personify a complex character, not just be all va-va-voom. It’s not about being naked or nude. She’s simply not wearing clothes to appear neutral, undefined and uninhibited. The story unfolds in her mind during sleep, while she’s dreaming. She’s the character AND the landscape. The piece emerged from my actual dreams, hundreds of them. I kept a dutiful dream journal at the time, because I was trying very hard to understand my complicated, romantic relationships. I examined my dreams to help give me clues.

What influenced making this film? I think it was all part of becoming Flash. I was in a big splurge of self-invention. I started using color. I started dressing more outrageously. I was in-love with Peanutbutter, who was and remains profoundly original, sui generis. We questioned everything – with humor, energy, and respect. We thought of ourselves as wholesomely weird. Art historians like to believe artists are influenced by other artists and art history. Not me. Okay maybe a little. But who I love, what I had for dinner, what I saw on the sidewalk, what pisses me off, what makes me laugh, and what I want to know next, has always been what drives my work.

This was such a distinct departure from the cool of the black and white photos I was making before Pulse of Desire. I suddenly realized I didn’t have to be polite, proper, and monochrome. Who needed photos to be matted all nicely? Stills lined-up evenly on a wall suddenly felt dull. What’s moving? What’s communicating? Make everything dance like a question mark.
This is typical for me. As soon as I make art, I argue with it. It’s not that I’m not proud of the work. In fact, when I look back at the old stuff, I nod, “Whoa, that wasn’t as bad as I thought.”

Same thing happened after I finished Pulse of Desire. I was dissatisfied with it – because what’s imagined is always better than it turns out. The guy you pined-for, is never as great as the reality you hold hands with. The film I saw in my mind was so much better. But after a while, the finished piece becomes the tangible reality of what exists. Then I like it again. And maybe, eventually, even love it…

Every developed roll of film never quite looked as good as I thought it might – because I can never make a picture look as alive as life. Maybe we’ll get there? Someday there will be cameras that can capture 50,000 megapixels, to exactly simulate our eyes’ vision. Then we’ll be able to totally experience the sensation of walking into this room, sitting together for this interview – immersed in a 3D image that looks and feels exactly like us, in this moment.

We are certainly in an exciting time for visual technology.

But it felt just as exciting in the 70s – when photography seemed so new and vital. It was thrilling to be able to harness what was visible to express the passions of that boisterous era. 35mm SLR (Single Lens Reflex) cameras gave us such freedom to move around. We weren’t bogged-down by heavy view cameras. The social and political turmoil needed us to bear witness – to record how strange things felt on the outside, and on the inside. Photography was an art, a tool and a voice for the counter-culture. Being counter-cultural was not just for hippies. It entered all our hearts and cameras as an attitude questioning everything we saw. “Tear down the wall” was a Jefferson Airplane pop lyric – and a way I wanted get my work off the gallery walls – to release the arts from being isolated into categories based on the art material you used. I wanted to intermingle photos with everything: painting, dancing, music, clowning, high art, low art, vending machines, rope. I wanted art to connect everybody. It was like the beginning of social media – in a way. But we never know when we’re at the beginning of anything new. We just think we’re screwing up. Not doing things the right way. And of course, that’s always been my intention.

I think it’s not an accident that Hugo and The Artist won Academy Awards this year. Because we are in an analogous moment in history– teetering on the brink of a new vision, after the turn of a new century. 1912 was the beginning of cinema. Who knew what movies might be? Folks stood in lines around the block just to watch a train drive towards them. Same as 2012. Who knows what kind of art is going to emerge from computers? I’m still knocked-out that there’s no more white-out – that messy white goo that you had to paint over errors to make corrections on manual typewriters. The Delete Key has had more impact on my daily life than landing on the moon.

Your job as a curator now, seems especially exciting – and fraught. How do you know what’s art verses what’s fugitive? What must be preserved that cannot be digitized? How is the Internet changing what we think is valuable? How can you curate the sense of being alive right now? What is disappearing faster than we know? What will be lost when it’s gone?
This happens on a personal level too. What work of mine do I need to save? What if everything I’ve done so far is just the beginning – the roman numerals of a long introduction before I get to the main chapters of my career. What if I never get there? I always feel like I’m just starting. How can I express what it’s like to be alive now? What does it feel like to be the age I am – in these times?

Here’s one ongoing project of mine, since I was 7 going on 8: Every year, the day before my birthday, I do a drawing. Because that’s The Day I Am The Oldest For My Age. Logically that means I should be able to draw The Best I can ever draw for say, age 35. My theory is, the next day (the first day) I’m 36 – I won’t be able to draw as well as I will on the last day of being 36.

This playfully assumes it is possible for your work to get better and better. When I was a kid I had no idea you could get stuck – and then have to do work that looked the same for the rest of your life. I thought, “Why would I want to do that?”

But that’s part of the problem that explains my lack of success for being well-known. If you keep changing your style and medium in an art world where coherent bodies of work are needed to recognizably BRAND you, you can’t get famous.

So I’m not “not well-known” because I didn’t do good work – or didn’t care – but because I kept changing what I did. From early on, What I Get To Know mattered far more than Who Gets To Know Me. My career is a portrait of exploration. A lot of artists angle to have a career chasing fame. I am not criticizing that. That’s an essential part of the job to survive as an artist. You have to be known, so that your work can sell, so you can buy new opportunities. Not just purchases. But a kind of career currency that gives your work a way IN – that is validated and acknowledged – so you can keep doing it.

I prefer to keep experimenting. I wanted to experiment when I was a student too. That’s why I was pained by assignments to take, say, 20 pictures of an egg. I wanted to smash the egg, “Done.”

I don’t know if I answered your question?

CAITLIN: Yeah. No, you definitely did.

FLASH: I feel like I’ve over-talked. You’ve filled up so much space in your notebook.

CAITLIN: I write big.

How long did it take you to shoot all of the photos for Pulse of Desire?

FLASH: It took one year to shoot it. Then two months to edit it. Once when I was on a panel for a Women in Film for a screening, I whined that it took A WHOLE YEAR to make the film. I thought that was an unbelievably long and lazy amount of time because I was used to creating an exhibits in a month. Shoot-Print-Frame-Show – Done.
But then another woman filmmaker on the panel seemed incredulous, “How could you do THAT in a year?” Then bitterly added, “Oh, I know. You could do all that work in a year because you don’t have a husband or kids.”

I had to set her straight, “What? Excuse me. It takes exactly same amount of time and disruption to be in quest of a husband, to get those kids – as it is to have the husband and kids themselves. Every one of us is overwhelmed by her own life.”

There was plenty of disruption and anxiety during the production of Pulse of Desire. Hard part was to keep the look of film consistent. The actress needed to match how she looked in earlier takes, over the period of a year. Imagine my alarm when she turned up one day with all her hair cut off. Apparently she got drunk and on whim decided to get a new hair-do. Whoops. She forgot she needed the same hair for continuity. I bought her a wig. But it looked so fake I decided it worked for her to look transformed. It actually suited the film better for her to visibly change, as she grew more confident about herself. So her mistake did me an aesthetic favor.

Another problem was that I agreed to a screening before the film was completed. It was scheduled to premiere in February 1986 at the State Theatre in Newark. I was thrilled my film was invited by Delaware NOW (National Organization for Women) to honor the first Susan B. Anthony Day. (What ever happened to Susan B. Anthony Day?)

Okay. But since this was my first film, I was totally naïve about how long it would take to edit it. Turns out I had to stay awake three months straight to finish it. I never went to bed. I just took intermittent little naps. My brother was working with me to compose the music, and to coordinate sound effects with the narration, and visuals. Then when he went to sleep, I continued to edit the images. I also worked with a corporate slide show programmer, to get the slide and sound cues on a floppy disc to drive the transfer process. We had to program four tracks: One to determine each slide’s duration, one for the changing intensity of light (to create dissolves), one for the narration, and the fourth for the music.

After all this planning, there was One Big Day to compile all this work in the aerial transfer studio to capture the motion picture. Aerial transfer was a technique for converting multi-projector slide shows into films and videos. The studio room had a very solid, giant table, with banks of slide projectors all aligned with mirrors to direct each projector’s lens directly into one main camera lens. This assured the rectangle of the slide frames could overlay exactly from many projectors and not criss-cross to create a rhombus. And this is how a lengthy sequence of 7000, 35mm slides became a literal, Motion Picture that was both film AND video. First pass was onto one-inch videotape for preview, and to generate video output (such as VHS and ¾” tapes). Then we re-set the slide trays and recorded it again – directly onto 16mm film stock. I wish I had taken a photo of the contraption for the aerial transfer set up. But at the time it seemed so modern, I assumed this would forever be The Way To Do It. I couldn’t imagine such a cool set-up would ever be obsolete, historically quaint – and lost. I can’t even find an image of it on Google.

Now we accept and expect technology to accelerate rapidly. We know that whatever we’re doing today – is not the way we’re going to be doing it next week. But in the 80s, such a rapid parade...
of devices quickly replacing devices hadn’t kicked into action yet. Back then I bought something new when the old thing was visibly broken. Now we have to buy new things, even when the old thing still looks and works perfectly okay. Strange.

The strongest parallel from my work then, to my work now, is that I continue to channel everything I know and do, into every project. Live-drawing and animation are as multi-disciplinary as making a slide-film.

CAITLIN: Definitely. That’s great. I read that you won a bunch of awards for Pulse of Desire.

FLASH: Yeah. I was surprised. At the time I didn’t understand that if you won an award, you should go to the party. I thought, “Well, I’d better get to work on the NEXT film.” So I didn’t go to Sweden when it was shown there. Didn’t go to California. Didn’t go to Chicago. Didn’t go to The Netherlands. Damn. I could have traveled around the world with my film. That would have been so much fun. But I figured since it took a whole year to make a movie, I better stay home and get started. Each of us has our own standard for how fast you think you need to churn out new work. I have always lived in a kind of panic that made me think I had to create a lot of work. As if I won’t live long enough for it to all come out.

Eventually I did land in a patch when I didn’t do much work. This was during the transition from film to digital in the mid 2000s. It felt like everything I knew about how I worked was in disarray. I couldn’t learn digital fast enough. At the same time digital quality wasn’t good enough yet to be trusted for documenting significant life events such as weddings. In 2003, a client called, determined to hire a photographer with a lot of digital photography experience. I laughed, “Well, good luck. NO ONE has a lot of digital photography experience. You can hire a young person who might operate the dials on a digital camera better than I can. But I have years of experience telling stories in pictures."

I view my commercial work shooting weddings and bar mitzvahs as honorable work. I have learned a lot about human nature, comedy, family, traditions, and have used these jobs to keep up with the latest gear. I appreciate being immersed – and paid – to spend time in what feels like a gym for noticing things. It is a sensual pleasure to take 700 to 1000 pictures in an afternoon to try to capture the texture of what’s going on. I don’t shoot machine-gun style, you know: blam-blam-blam-blam-blam. I look for The Picture. Then when I see IT, shoot.

This is probably some old-fashioned legacy from shooting negative film, back in the days of manual focus. You couldn’t wiggle the focus ring back and forth, to jiggle wha-wha-wha-wha because then your eye would blur. The way to manually focus was to twirl the focus ring, way out of focus, then snap it in to focus. Stop. I learned to see during a time when the physical gesture to document what you saw had to be more deliberate. Plus film and processing was expensive. I felt like I had to shoot thoughtfully and carefully.

I hope I answered what you asked.

CAITLIN: Yeah, definitely. Let’s see, what else would be most important to ask you.
FLASH: I love your earrings, by the way.

CAITLIN: Oh, thanks.

CAITLIN: Everyone thinks like, oh, my gosh, they’re so heavy, but they’re like really, really light. They’re not made of anything.

FLASH: They don’t get caught in your hair? That’s amazing.

CAITLIN: I mean they probably do sometimes, but today, I guess not.

FLASH: You have a couple of piercings in your ears.

CAITLIN: Yeah. Well, I have three holes here, and three holes here, but I’m only wearing one earring. Then I have two holes here, one hole here, and then I have my nose pierced.

FLASH: Wow. I don’t have any piercings. Let’s just say I gave you mine. (Laughs) I couldn’t understand getting my ears pierced. The way I see it, I already have enough holes that aren’t filled – I’m not adding any. (Both laugh)

CAITLIN: Talk about the Dart Bus exhibit. How did you get involved with CETA?

FLASH: Well, the CETA program was an amazing opportunity. We need a new CETA project right now. Then instead of you doing this interview as a volunteer intern, you’d get paid. CETA stands for the Comprehensive Education Training Act. The idea was to create entry-level jobs. The thought was, once you’re working, there’s a better chance for that job to turn into a permanent position. Having a chance to prove your skills is so important. It didn’t pay much, but it was enough money to rent a goddamn apartment, and start my life as an adult.

That is what the society should do for all young people. Especially now. It’s not right to economically force young adults to go back home to live with mom and dad after graduating. You’re an adult now. You should have access to the means to afford your own home. You should be able to live an independent life. So CETA was a jobs program that created a lot of work for artists.

I was very happy to be hired for *Metroscope*, a program funded by CETA for the Bicentennial in 1976. This project was affiliated with the Delaware Art Museum, but based in the People’s Settlement House in East Wilmington. It was near downtown, and the Fifth Street Gallery. When the yearlong funding ended, a portion of the project moved to the Delaware Art Museum – to continue providing community outreach. The program was adapted and renamed *ArtReach*.

CAITLIN: That’s when you went into schools, right?

FLASH: Yes I was an *artist-in-the-schools* working with students in English classes, Special Ed and other non-art studies to create art. I loved it. After *Metroscope* I continued as an *artist-in-the-schools*, now sponsored by the Delaware State Arts Council. In 1980 (I believe that was one of
the first years the Delaware State Arts Council gave out individual artist grants?), I was awarded one of the fellowships – which surprised everyone, most of all me. I was a relatively recent college graduate. And all the UD college professors who had applied were like, “Whoa, How she’d get this?” But that award changed my life. Because it gave me the validation and courage to quit my job – the only full-time job, I ever had. From 1979 on, I have supported myself as freelance artist.

Don’t get me wrong. I loved my job at the Delaware Art Museum. It was great. (As you said, you love working here too.) But I couldn’t stand showing up for work on a regular basis. It felt like jail. The only way I could figure out how to pursue being an artist while having a fulltime job was to live two days per day. So I would go to work at 9 am. Nap in my car at noon, instead of going out for lunch. Work ended at 5 pm. As soon as I got home I took a nap from 5:30 pm - 8:30 pm. Got up and had supper. Then I would work all night from 9 pm until 5 am. Have breakfast. Nap again from 5:30 until 8:30 am, then jump in the car to arrive at work by 9 am. I was so determined to be an artist. But at the time I didn’t know it was determination. I just thought I was kind of nuts.

What were you were asking me? You asked me something else….

CAITLIN: The Bus Exhibit.

FLASH: Right. A mission of Metroscope was to provide art experiences in communities throughout Wilmington and New Castle County. But just having an art show in a community center didn’t seem like enough to me. Then I glimpsed the backlit display on buses – the stripe circling around, above the seats where the ads are. What a glorious place for an art exhibit. People would SEE it. Instead of bringing the people to the museum, bring the art to the people. I’ve always been interested in making art that moved people. Why not while they are moving? I have a lifelong fascination with art in transit. I taught perception studies in the New York City subways, as Underground Creativity: Subway Games & Inquiries – for Cooper Union.

CAITLIN: That must have been cool.

FLASH: Yes. And as you are asking me to discuss all this, I am suddenly seeing how my life is more thematically connected than I thought. I usually feel like I’m recklessly moving through life without a map or a plan. But then the scenery, though changing, suddenly looks familiar, and matches up somehow. I think I’m bumping into random, stray things. When upon reflection, it all flows together.

CAITLIN: Well good. I’m glad.

I know what you’re involved with now, but please explain it.

FLASH: I’m now serving as the official artist in residence for LIVE from the New York Public Library (NYPL). I draw conversations between prominent authors, provocateurs and artists in real-time, which are then edited to create animated summaries. You actually see my hand making the drawings in the videos.
CAITLIN: Yeah, I watched your work on Vimeo.

FLASH: There’s a new animation, posted just last week called, Imagine: How Creativity Works. It’s a promo for Jonah Lehrer’s new book.

CAITLIN: You said a lot of the animations were based on speeches and interviews. Which ones do you pick?

FLASH: Well, I go to as many talks at the Library as I can. In the mid-2000s, it was a way to survive the George W Bush years. It was a relief and a comfort to be in a big room with hundreds of intelligent people. It gave me hope – and I always learned something new. Not all talks become animations. I recorded drawing them all – but for most of them, the final result is a series of still drawings.

Animations happen when I can get funding to cover my costs to pay a video editor. A substantial amount of work is involved. After going to the talk for several hours to physically draw it, I have to go back to the studio to scan the drawings and caption them. Then I have to edit the full 90 ~ 120 minute audio recording down to a pithy 4 ~ 5 piece. That means getting the audio transcribed, cutting a script down to the key points. Then additional art must be drawn to serve as a bridge between existing segments to make the final piece flow smoothly. A video editor has to digitize the mini DV cassettes, then cut it all together to match the timing of the drawing with the voices. The NYPL does not pay me to be artist in residence. I do it with outside support. I sponsored most of it myself by photographing Bar Mitzvahs.

Luckily I am now starting to get hired to make this style of animation for commercial clients. Select Media recently commissioned me to create the award-winning, educational video The Subject is Puberty.

I’m not doing classic animation. I’m using an Elmo, which is an inexpensive, scholastic-style, overhead projector, also known as a document camera. The lens hovers above the drawing area, so I can videotape my own hands while I draw. I can control zooming in and out – so the resulting motion imitates how our eyes see. It’s as if you are in my lap, looking at the drawing from my perspective. It’s not like a Saturday morning cartoon, where you follow a cast of characters moving from side to side.

I still perform. In my solo show, Laughing at the Speed of Light I walk in-and-out of about 800 slides projected life-sized, as if I’m in a live-storyboard. This is how I continued to use, and subvert slides after Pulse of Desire.

Also after Pulse of Desire, I realized I needed to better learn how words and pictures mingle together in the air to send messages to a viewer. Pulse is verbally plodding, because every image has a comment. Performing taught me how to play with the timing. I began to show a picture, then comment. Or comment first – then punctuate the remark with a picture. Or show a picture while contradicting it. Or be silent and let just the pictures speak. Or sit in the dark and talk. Performing live taught me how to write. I studied how my words landed on people. I never took
one writing class. Performing forced me to write complex thoughts simply and conversationally – so the audience might have a chance to stay with me.

Once again, it felt like all my art skills were playing nicely together. The same as it works in animation. I don’t perform as often anymore. Some of that is because I have “outgrown” the material from that show. Also memorizing a full-length script is agonizing for me. It feels like a colossal waste of my time. My brain craves space to write the next piece – not keep regurgitating the same words I’ve already written. This seems to be one of the biggest differences between theater/music and the visual arts. Actors and musicians thrive on saying or singing the same words again and again, eager to explore nuances for new intonations and phrasings. Me? I’d rather take out a fresh sheet of paper, and make a NEW drawing.

What else is happening now?

I’m a member of a poetry collective called brevitas. You have to be invited to join. We email each other short poems (maximum 14 lines) on the 1st and the 15th of every month. Then you have the option to respond directly and individually to each poet to offer constructive feedback. Once a year, we gather for The Annual Brevitas Festival of the Short Poem, which I often host. I like the way trying to write poems teaches me to say complex things more concisely – the same way drawing and photography seek to make complexity more concise.

I’m also involved in a monthly program called Monologues and Madness. I now have about 35 short vignettes I’ve written, which I hope to edit, illustrate, and eventually animate.

My biggest news is being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for the Creative Arts in 2011. This Fellowship supports a mid-career artist’s work get to the next level. I have proposed to make a feature animation. The funds give me the chance to finally be my own client – to focus on my own work – and not have to say YES to so many commercial gigs.

CAITLIN: Explain what you were saying about some opportunity you have on deck for 60 Minutes.

FLASH: Well, a producer with a new show coming up just contacted me. But I can’t really talk about it, since there’s nothing definite to say yet. It’s only a vague cheerfulness of hope at the moment.

CAITLIN: Oh okay. If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay.

FLASH: Early in my career I was always talking about what might be happening. But by now I’ve learned to only mention what’s really happening. So many things fall through. Nobody’s fault. That’s just how it works. Lots of opportunities present themselves. And every once in a while, something actually happens.

I do feel a significant responsibility to encourage new economic models to help artists survive. An artist’s contribution to the society is not marginal. Every single thing you see around you involved an artist. The design of the furniture we’re sitting on. The clothes you’re wearing. The
ad you saw that made you buy your shampoo. I’d like to see a National Artist in Residency Initiative established. To create a central resource to help artists design their own residencies everywhere. I mean, EVERYWHERE. Using my experience as artist in residence for LIVE from the New York Public Library, I can feel I can offer strategies to help make this happen. That residency was not some pre-existing job. In 2006, the LIVE director Paul Holdengräber generously invited me to attend all his public programs as a guest. After half a year, one night I started to draw a talk. I kept doing it – for 6 years by now. Instead of payment, I got the nice title, artist in residence.

I think every business and organization should have an Artist in Residence. Every shop, museum, institution and enterprise should have The Three Essentials of Life: a Toilet, a Computer, and an Artist in Residence. Pizza parlors could have artists design their pizza boxes. Drugstores could have a sculptor to arrange displays. There’s an artist in residence for the NYC Department of Sanitation. There’s an artist in residence at NASA. Let’s replace internships with paid artists in residence. After my first year at the Library, I received a Manhattan Cultural Arts Fund grant. Then I was sponsored by Lexus (the car manufacturer).

Think about who or what business you might approach to sponsor you to be Curator in Residence for the Delaware Art Museum. What about that place where you buy lunch everyday? What about the company that built the car you drive? There is enough money in this country to do this – we just have to figure out how to harness it.

My goal is to expand people’s awareness in ever more exuberant and abundant ways. Art is a great way to do this. Most people spend their awareness complaining. Why not spend your awareness finding new, more inventive, and humorous ways to solve what’s bugging you? Let’s nurture creative minds to come up with conversations and solutions that are more playful, palatable, progressive – and ultimately, more effective.

CAITLIN: That answers my question.

[End of interview]
Duration: 52 minutes