

Interviewee: Jane Sutton [S]
Interviewer: Heather Palmer [P]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

S: I'm Jane Sutton.

P: Great. And where do you teach now?

S: I teach at Penn State York.

P: Okay. And I'm Heather Palmer. I'm University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. So when did you first join RSA?

S: I joined RSA in 1986.

P: Okay, yeah.

S: I'm not sure what year the organization started, but I think that would be pretty close to the beginning of the organization, when the meetings met in Arlington, Texas.

P: Okay. Do you remember—are there any singular moments you remember about that first conference you went to?

S: In '86?

P: Yeah.

S: It was extremely vibrant. The energy was just palpable. The group of people that were coming together, people like Victor Vitanza, John Poulakos—I'm trying to think of all the people that were there. Dilip Gaonkar was there. We were all really engaged in talking about the history of rhetoric. It was this group of English and speech—at the time we were called speech communication faculty, of which I'm a part.

P: So you are coming from the speech communication side?

S: Yes.

P: Okay.

S: And it was just exciting because rhetoric seemed to be on the rise. It was like a phoenix bird, if you will. And it was coming up, and the panels were just amazing. We just talked constantly and into the night.

P: [laughs] Oh, yeah! So were you a graduate student in '86?

S: No, in '86 I had just—it was my second year. I got my doctorate at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and I began working at Penn State York in '84. In 1986, I published this article called “The Death of Rhetoric and its Rebirth in Philosophy.”

P: Oh my gosh! Yes.

S: In *Rhetorica*.¹

P: Okay, yes.

S: And that is what—that’s how Victor Vitanza found me, or I found Victor Vitanza. He had published something, I think, in *Rhetoric Review* with the claw on it.²

P: That sounds about right. [laughs]

S: Yes, and so that just started this whole synergetic conversation that began this movement that was our interest in the sophists, our interest in this whole idea of really delving into a rebirth of rhetoric and what that would mean.

P: For me ten years later, like in graduate school, hitting upon Vitanza’s work—I could feel the waves of that synergy in '96. You know what I mean? Just sort of re-approaching the epistemologies of the sophists, just how revolutionary it still seemed to me then. So I can only imagine how being there at sort of like ground zero.

S: Yeah, it really was ground zero. People were—now Barbara Cassin has sort of phrased this now, “Who’s afraid of the sophists?” I think she’s in France, a French philosopher. However, that was our question in 1986 at this conference, and we were delving into sophistic fragments. We were—as John Poulakos said, “If you start reading Aristotle you’re starting in the *middle* of the history of rhetoric.” And we’ve got to push back and start to really explore what comes before, and how does it problematize the rhetoric or how does it complement the rhetoric? We were really interested in developing theory.

P: That’s what I—yes!

S: We were interested in developing theory: how does theory grow, how does it emerge? Current problems of the time and the day. How do you reinvigorate or reinvent rhetoric so that—you know, in many ways we saw ourselves as contemporary sophists, if you will. What Victor eventually coined as the third sophistic, that we were going to rebuild rhetoric in terms of a theoretical point of view. And the rebuilding meant, how will you include women that had been left out of the history of rhetoric? How do you include

¹ Sutton’s article appeared in issue 4.3 of *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*.

² Perhaps a reference to *PRE/TEXT: A Journal of Rhetorical Theory*, which Vitanza edited and which featured a drawing of a chicken’s claw on its cover. Or perhaps a reference to Vitanza’s 1987 *Rhetoric Review* article “Critical Sub/Versions of the History of Philosophical Rhetoric.”

the sophists who had been talked about as inessential and irrelevant? How do you incorporate them? Because things that they had to say—there were some really important things in there. Those were some of the bigger questions.

[05:00]

P: Right. And then of course this whole question of your methodologies and legitimizing these lines of inquiry, which we'll continue to write about, these methodologies—

S: Mhmm.

P: Yeah. Even a sophistic methodology, now we're calling some nonrepresentational methodologies. Just the work that y'all started, we're the inheritors of, and it's still so fertile and still going.

S: Yeah.

P: But I hadn't put a date on it until you said that—mid-80s.

S: Yeah.

P: Just a question, we're enmeshed in this—it emerges out of the culture in which it's placed, so what do you think it was about the 80s—either in academia or just the culture—*why* the United States? Why not Europe? I always wonder that.

S: Why did it happen in the United States? This emergence of the sophistic culture?

P: Yeah.

S: I think there was kind of simultaneity where you have, in France, you have this whole postmodern movement. And what they're doing is they're also looking at the sophists.

P: Right.

S: So if you—Heidegger, he talks about the sophists in *Being and Time*. You look at a lot of Derrida's work. He's a classicist through and through.

P: Through and through. And such a close reader.

S: And he's looking at that. The other really interesting thing that's going on is that the Germans are also really interested—German classicists like [Carl Joachim] Classen are writing about the sophists.

P: I'm not familiar with that. I'll just say that straight up.

S: This whole kind of this classical—they were hardcore classicists. And classicists are really gone from universities now. I mean, we, for example, at Penn State, kind of merged with Mediterranean studies—it dissolved. But classics departments in 1986 were very, very vibrant. I mean this is where [George A.] Kennedy comes from as well.

P: Still using his work.

S: Yeah. So you have classicists both in the United States and in Germany. You have the postmodern movement that's coming along in France, especially—and the rise of feminism that's going along with it. Derrida, Kristeva—

P: In the mid-80s?

S: I mean, that we are *reading* now in the United States.

P: Okay, yeah, a little behind.

S: Uh huh. Because the professors that I had hadn't really read them. And that was one of the challenges when you would go to NCA³ is that that wasn't what they studied in graduate school. They didn't—it was strange: "What are they saying?"

P: I remember that in the early 90s even. They'd be like, "That's that newfangled postmodernism." I'm like, "It's only, like, 25 years old." Still fighting against that in the early 90s.

S: Yeah, but it was vicious in many ways, in terms of that kind of a fight. And there was beginning to be a real split, you know, in terms of—because rhetoric had been so saturated in public address and Aristotle. And now you are moving towards these philosophers who seem more interested in rhetoric than rhetoricians themselves.

P: [laughs] Right.

S: Seriously, though! And Vitanza's really looking at Nietzsche.

P: Yeah.

S: And Nietzsche is rhetorical through and through.

P: Oh my gosh, his lecture notes, some of his first, are on rhetoric.

S: Yes, and eventually those were translated.

P: Yeah.

³ National Communication Association.

S: Right. I actually paid some money—with John [Poulakos] and I, and some other people—to have some of his lecture notes translated.

P: I was fortunate enough to have them in graduate school, but I remember poring over them like they were— [chuckles]

S: Now I think that group is published. I think Carole Blair, like, published.⁴ But that was just so amazing because he's talking about truth as a mobile army of metaphors.

P: One of my—chills!—one of my favorite quotes still.

S: Yes. I mean he's talking about it that way. This is not the truth of an Aristotle tradition and notions of public address. This [is] really coming out of a Cold War mentality. I mean, that's how I see it now in retrospect.

P: Okay, interesting.

S: Because the 1980s are not that far from us leaving Vietnam, the whole notion of communism.

P: Mmm. So Reagan—

S: We left Vietnam in '79.

P: Right.

S: It was 1979, so it's the Reagan administration now. There's this—they're talking about Star Wars in the 1980s and building this kind of military. What is it called? A *shield*.

[sounds of another interview wrapping up in the background]

P: Yeah.

S: I mean, there's this Cold War, this war, examining all of that. And over here, we're looking at rhetoric as, what is this thing? And what is—how would you develop it?

[10:14]

P: So it demanded a sophistic epistemology, perhaps.

S: Mhmm. And what would this new development mean for rethinking the condition of democracy?

⁴ See *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, published by Oxford University Press in 1989. The volume was edited and translated by Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent.

P: Yes, okay.

S: Because we have this condition over *here*. And what can we do, how can we reinvent, reimagine, the relationship between rhetoric and democracy?

[conversation in background subsides]

P: So this wasn't just play-pretty, let's get together and bat around some epistemologies. This was like, we're doing some serious—

S: We're doing some serious, serious thinking here.

P: —thinking and working through it.

S: Yes, because rhetoric has this whole history. I mean, Barthes had written about the death of rhetoric that repeatedly dies.⁵ It died in the Romans, it died, you know—how it comes back.

P: Right, right.

[cell phone ringing]

S: This was an opportunity to—bringing it back, and *why* would you bring it back? Why spend all this human capital and resources in looking at that? And going into the sophists that had already been rejected by the tradition. When you look them up in the dictionary, what does “sophist” mean? It's irrational thought. So, “Why would you be heading towards irrationality?”, is how it was viewed. And this “postmodern” was garblygoop anyway.

P: [laughs]

S: So you blend those two together.

P: Yeah. So then RSA—just trying to tie it back to those questions—so RSA gave you a space and a place and a society and a collective to—

S: Yes. And so it was consistently held at Arlington. I can't remember the last year it was held at Arlington.⁶ But it was a long time. Charles Kneupper, you know. And then they started creating the journal, which was stapled—I wanted to bring them. I have the first copy of the stapled together [RSQ].⁷

⁵ See for example Roland Barthes' “The Old Rhetoric: an aide-mémoire.”

⁶ The last in the series of biennial RSA conferences held in Arlington took place in 1990. Charles Kneupper, who passed away in between the 1988 and 1990 conferences, was the lead organizer of the Arlington conferences.

⁷ RSA's newsletter became *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* in 1976.

P: Oh my gosh, that is so cool!

S: It was just a bunch of eight-by-ten sheets that you stapled together.

P: Cause in the 80s—I was in the punk-rock scene—we had little fanzines that we would staple together. You know what I mean? [laughs]

S: Uh huh. It wasn't—this was the *journal*. It was the emergence of *RSQ*.

P: This was the journal, though. Yeah, oh my gosh.

S: I mean, now it's Taylor and Francis, and you know what it looks like.

P: Right.

S: But that was the little copy that you would get in the mail, and I mean—

P: That's kind of like underground.

S: It was underground.

P: Subcultural, underground, kind of—

S: It was so underground that you were really—the work that you were doing really, really mattered. And there was no real, *real* institutional mechanism to produce this work. So we're just going to have to staple it together.

P: It's that whole DIY thing. You know, do-it-yourself kind of from the grassroots collectivization. That is really neat.

S: Uh huh.

P: Well then so, now, one of the questions is the key people you remember meeting or working with during your early years—I think you've addressed some of that, unless there's some people you didn't get to talk about.

S: Yeah. So, I mean, Victor, John, Takis [Poulakos]. Janet Atwill was there. There was Dilip Gaonkar.

P: Now see, I don't know that name.

S: He was John Poulakos' student. He was involved early on. Kathleen Welch, Richard Enos. I'm trying to think. We could fill up—we became about 12 core, 12, 15 people early on, and it continued to expand. Susan Jarratt was in that early group. Takis was her student. There was a lot of this student-faculty coming together. Victor, Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis was a student of Victor.

P: Was she around in the 80s? Diane?

S: Michelle, I think, was a master's degree student at the time, but I'm not sure. Yes, they were there early in the 80s. Michelle was a master's degree student. So there was that dynamic. And I entered it through that article I had published in *Rhetorica*, "The Death of Rhetoric and its Rebirth in Philosophy." And Victor had found that and cited it in his work with the chicken claw on it.

P: Yeah.

S: There's a ladder that's climbing up on revising the history of rhetoric that he published in *PRE/TEXT*, the journal that he started. And it was a ladder and the guy's going up and he's, like, putting a mustache or something on Aristotle.

[15:06]

P: Okay, I'm going to have to go back and find that 'cause, I mean, I've just dabbled around in *PRE/TEXT* and of course *Negation, [Subjectivity], and the History of Rhetoric*—I've read back and forth—but I don't know the claw essay. [laughs]

S: Well, yes, it was *Rhetoric Review* that had a pen, and then he with his *PRE/TEXT* started a chicken claw.⁸

P: So he cites you in that? Does he contact you directly or did you contact him?

S: Yes, we started contact. That's what drew me then to the Rhetoric Society of America. That was. And then I called John. John had published his article in *Philosophy & Rhetoric* on the definition of sophistic rhetoric,⁹ and I said, "Oh, here's somebody we gotta meet."

P: Gotta make these connections and this synergy. Okay.

S: Yeah. 'Cause I always had this idea, I always had this dream that one day there would be a sophistical institute. But there never was. But I always thought—

P: What happened? Or is this it? [laughs]

S: I always thought one day there will be a sophistical institute. And so I started mapping these connections, and [I said], "John, you have got to meet Victor. You've got to go to RSA."

⁸ I.e., the cover of *Rhetoric Review* featured a pencil sprouting into a flower, while *PRE/TEXT*'s cover featured a somewhat similar drawing of a chicken claw. See p. xx of Vitanza's introduction to *PRE/TEXT: The First Decade*, published in 1993 by University of Pittsburgh Press.

⁹ Poulakos's "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric" was published in in issue 16.1 of *Philosophy & Rhetoric* in 1983.

P: Mmhm. So you were putting it together from the ground up, then.

S: Yeah.

P: Okay. [consulting list of questions] “What was RSA when you first joined it? What were its major project and goals?” I mean, I think you’ve been outlining that. Okay, change over time. How have you seen it change? Maybe different phases you want to mark out? You started with the 80s. We’re sitting here now, it’s the 50th year.

S: Yeah, so it was always held in Arlington, and then I don’t know what year it was when it started this travel, this biennial.¹⁰

P: Yeah.

S: Yeah, it’s a massive society now. It was a small group, and now it’s really, really grown. I see it now as a home for other organizations like the National Communication Association or MLA¹¹ that are so scattered and so big now. I mean, they’re so massive that this is a place that kind of recreates what happened in the 80s—this is your place where people can come and do rhetoric, you know, from all of these various disciplines. What’s missing now that was [present] in the 80s is that we don’t have a classicist influence or—there used to be a lot more other disciplines. Even anthropologists.

P: Okay. Sure.

S: In the 80s there was this real grouping, you know, especially in that contribution of classics.

P: I was asking Richard [Enos] about that. Tell me about the relationship between the classics and the rhetorics because he’s kind of in both, right?

S: Right.

P: ‘Cause I remember sometimes seeing it be a little contentious at some conferences, specifically at, like, classicist conferences. And then I will go through the [RSA] program and look for classicist panels and you’re right. Where is there presence?

S: Yeah, their presence is missing. But also classics has diminished. Which is—

P: Yeah, those departments are under threat.

¹⁰ The first biennial RSA conference held outside of Arlington took place in 1992 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

¹¹ Modern Language Association.

S: Yeah. I mean, I think there are big disruptive events, though, in rhetoric. And one of them was the debate between Poulakos and [Edward] Schiappa.¹² I don't think you can whitewash that. It was where what is—I mean the publication of—did rhetoric exist if the word [*rhetorike*] didn't exist?¹³

P: Right. [laughs]

S: Right? Basically, that's the core of that. But around those edges—besides personality, around those edges were real questions of methodology.

P: Yes!

S: And domains of knowledge. How do you produce knowledge? And so that—and different disciplines come at things at different ways. So this is part of that spilt with classicists, right? Because of their demands for how you would know something.

P: Mmhmm.

S: But those were different, they were different questions. But that was always underwriting it, you know? That clash.

P: Yeah. Well that makes me think—it's interesting because when I teach the history of rhetoric at whatever level. It's, yes, you're right, this disruption in this narrative, of course, 'cause it's not continuous as a field. But I will teach the debates as part of them understanding “history of rhetoric”—whatever it is. I like that you brought that up. Speaking to RSA's history itself.

S: Well, it's embedded in the history. But what I did which really rocked—John had written a paper on this question of does rhetoric exist. He missed the conference. He asked me to read the paper. I read the paper. To this day, I don't know if John set me up or not.

P: [laugh]

S: However, his argument was that he used the [TLG], the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae—he had used that to search, and he could not find the word “piss” anywhere in the thesaurus. Therefore, he wondered if the Greeks ever pissed before the word. [chuckles]

P: Right. [laughs]

¹² See for instance Poulakos's “Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric”; Schiappa's “Neo-Sophistic Rhetorical Criticism or the Historical Reconstruction of Sophistic Doctrines?”, published in issue 23.3 of *Philosophy & Rhetoric*; and Poulakos's “Interpreting Sophistical Rhetoric: A Response to Schiappa,” also published in 23.3.

¹³ I.e., one of the major premises of Schiappa's and Poulakos's debate was whether rhetoric could be said to exist prior to when the Greeks coined the word *rhetorike*.

S: This was the *whole* paper! I mean, the audience was there to listen to this debate. And this is eventually where the debate goes. You know?

P: Yeah.

S: It's really—

P: So in your memory—this is a singular memory, so let's flesh it out a bit if you don't mind. So you read this paper at his behest?

S: Yes. And I don't know if John set me up.

P: Right.

S: Because I *honestly*, I mean, he doesn't show up at the last minute. They said John's plane is delayed or he was sick—I don't remember the circumstances. They hand me the paper. I had *not* read the paper.

P: That's what I was going to ask. Had you read the paper?

S: I had not read the paper. I didn't have the time.

P: So it was a discovery for you as well as you're reading it?

S: I mean, I saw the opening paragraph. And I [thought], "Sure, I'll read that."

P: Yeah.

S: But as the argument developed—and he lays it out, and he mimics and imitates the whole methodology that was used to show that *rhetoric* didn't exist, right? And so it's a game of mimicry.

P: Yeah.

S: He's mimicking. And it's also deeply ironic and meant to really open up that conversation, but it throws on the brakes.

P: Mhmm. What was the reaction?

S: Well, people got mad. They said, "Well, that's ridiculous." [laughs]

P: How do you feel about that because you're not the—

S: Well, it became then a matter of—and what happened is, if you'll look into the literature, you'll see that that debate stops. It stopped the debate. And then people

either took a side or said, “Well I’m going to go along *this* vein” or “I’m going yo go along *this* vein.”

P: Right, right. Good, thank you. Okay so then questions about futurity. How do you think the organization will change in the years to come, and maybe what kind of work would you like to see it do? I mean, I guess within academia, within the culture sort of at large.

S: That’s really hard to say. I mean, you can see that it’s becoming more and more like an NCA or an MLA, in the sense that this convention is growing. I *really* push on the integration of disciplines, opening up space for that.

P: Do you have any fears as it becomes larger? We see what happened with MLA, right? And they’re trying to fix that.

S: Right.

P: I mean, I don’t want to approach it from a negative angle—we want to talk about hopes—but some things to avoid or some fears?

S: Yeah. Honestly, I don’t know if that’s just a nostalgia. I don’t know if it’s my age. But I do miss those big conversations about rhetoric. So this panel format—what was different about the 1980s was that we could all be in the same room.

P: [laughs] Right.

S: We can’t all be in the same room.

P: The core group could all be in the same room, you mean?

S: No, a lot of the people that came. I mean it could be this really, really small.

P: You meant *all* the people at the conference?

S: All the people at the conference.

P: Oh my gosh, that’s a whole different—

S: Yeah.

P: I can’t even imagine that.

S: You could all be in the same room at some point.

P: Yeah, yeah.

S: And, you know, continue talking. There was more of a sense of an intimacy and an urgency.

P: Yeah, I think we're getting some of that urgency just because of the political climate. That's here, I think, at least in some groups. What about factionalization? I mean, do we have that? I don't think we have that, do we? Like these different kind of warring factions? I don't ever feel that at RSA.

S: No. I don't feel that.

P: You know, sometimes at MLA you'll get that. Or some other conferences. But there still seems to be some sort of like preservation of comradery.

[25:03]

S: Yeah. Yeah, I don't sense those factions.

P: Yeah. What about hopes for the future? I mean, so we just looked at—I don't know if you've had a chance to look at it. The keywords that they chose, which are—"history," "historiography" is not one of them, which is funny—but it's like "*kairos*," "the body," "energy."¹⁴ Is "affect" one, I think?

S: Yeah, I would like to read about that. I thought that was an interesting, the idea of using those keywords. If you'll notice, none of those words are really, *really*—I mean, you don't expect "rhetoric" to be a keyword because that's what you're doing. But, I mean, in 1986, a keyword might be "sophist," or a keyword might be—so are the keywords really a reflection of how the discipline is changing?

P: That's what I was wondering myself.

S: Right.

P: I need to go back and reread it, really with an eye to that.

S: Yeah.

P: Like what was left out? I'd like to—from a metadisciplinary level, I would like to read what was left out.

S: And if you do have a keyword like "body," is it incorporating things like a trope? What does it house, so to speak?

¹⁴ I.e., the keywords selected for inclusion in issue 48.3 of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, a special issue with the theme "Keywords: A Glossary of the Pasts and Futures of the Rhetoric Society of America." The keywords featured in that issue are "the body," "the digital," "energy," "genre," "*kairos*," "memory," "public," "resistance," and "sound."

P: Yeah, exactly. So we are pretty much out of time. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the organization's future? Or your hopes for it to, say, new graduate students? Say if somebody was attending this for the first time and it was a graduate student who felt a bit overwhelmed maybe?

S: I mean, I always encourage people to attend this conference, as opposed to a conference like an NCA or an MLA, that they can really get their feet grounded and connected in a place like this. That's what I always encourage.

P: Great. Thank you so much!

S: Thank you.

P: Yeah.