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# Interview with George Segal

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# Transcript

## Preface

This interview is part of the *Dorothy Gees Seckler collection of sound recordings relating to art and artists, 1962-1976*. The following verbatim transcription was produced in 2015, with funding from Jamie S. Gorelick.

## Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing George Segal in New Brunswick on April 1, 1966.

George, I wanted to ask you first, is it you are able to express by using a plaster cast from living figures that you were not able to express by building around an armature, as you did as one point I gather?

GEORGE SEGAL: I think—I think the answer must lie in a shift in my own interests. I had been trained in an abstract expressionist tradition, essentially, where the basic—one of the basic concerns of abstract expressionism is looking totally inward, going into yourself to find forms, you know, the forms that are extension of your own body somehow have the secrets of the universe locked in them.

I was shifting my ideas or my stance. I decided that as interested as I am and still am in my own interior mental states, I'm equally as interested in the tangible things around me and more, especially, people close to me and my relationship to them. So that involves a sense of reportage, exactly what's there, truthfully, which is why I am interested in the details of bone structure or stance of someone other than myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a very good, very clear answer. On—it allows me to bring in another question which is, since you are interested in exact reportage and get it to such a very large extent through casting the living figure, where are you able to draw the line between what belongs to life and what belongs to art, in a nutshell? That's a big question. I know. [Laughs.]

GEORGE SEGAL: You know, of course, you're really asking me in disguise that old question, what is the nature of reality? [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I suppose so. But, perhaps, put it another way. Or what do you think about as a formal limitation? Obviously, you can't duplicate life. Also, obviously, the very—even though the technique allows you a great deal of coming very close to bone structure and stance, it still is not the real person. There still are formal considerations.

GEORGE SEGAL: Oh, absolutely. Yes. It is quite important that it is not the real person. You know, if I were interested in the real person, I would be a doing a form—actually, a form of theater as we know it using live people as actors perhaps. The distinction between life and art is to me not as relevant as the private assumption of a goal in art. What do you want art to say for you? You know, what should your art be about?

If I'm interested in life and living life and experiencing it, I'm also interested in making art and can't I arbitrarily decide the nature of my goals as an artist so that, in addition to solving pure formal problems of aesthetics, if I so decide, can't I become interested in psychological or philosophical

probity or what is the—what is the nature of my experience? What is the nature of the object that I'm dealing with? I certainly am not interested in a "slice-of-life." You know, like I'm not interested in being purely naturalistic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you give an example from any specific sculpture of the conscious departure from a "slice-of-life" in the way you assembled and altered or evaluated proportions as you were composing the piece?

GEORGE SEGAL: Almost anyone at random. The—mostly the woman in the restaurant booth of a few years back, you know, one of the—one of the first pieces I did where I was conscious that I didn't want "slice-of-life." It's true. It's a real restaurant booth and it's a real table and the woman is sitting at the table holding a real cup. My choice was why didn't I place the thing in a real restaurant or rebuild the entire restaurant? I was obviously only interested in the booth and the table and the cup and the stance of the figure. And these I took as shapes. They were isolated. They were placed in a neutral background, the silvery gray of my chicken coop, you know, concrete floor, dusky surroundings. I could regard the stance and shape of the table, you know, the central column of the table and see where the feet came off the couch or the—you know, the seat of the booth and regard the whole thing plastically.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were able to do that in advance of posing the figure or in the act of posing it or later?

GEORGE SEGAL: In the act of posing it, actually. That's where a lot of the plasticity came in, I think. I had isolated out the booth from its accustomed surroundings. I was able to look at it as a booth with its shape, you know, with its connotation of place as evoking a whole place, as evoking a whole atmosphere. And the figure sitting there had to contribute. So the figure and the objects had to together make a totality that I could regard essentially plastically, essentially truthfully, you know, by bone structure or, you know, how this person is sitting there. The mood is incidental, I think, you know, the total mood. It may be there after the fact.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did not have in mind a specific mood in—when you posed the model?

GEORGE SEGAL: The only mood I had was, well, I knew something about the person posing and I knew that there would be an air of contemplation and turning inward, in a sense of privacy, which I liked.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You usually do, in any case, wouldn't you say?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, I usually do what?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Prefer an inward mood rather than one of outward-directed attention on the part of the model.

GEORGE SEGAL: I suppose. Yes. Yes, that's true. I think that must be temperamental.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, some have suggested that this was the automatic result of posing the person for a long time. But I suspected myself that it was a subjective preference.

GEORGE SEGAL: I think it is a subjective preference because, since all the people who pose are alive, they're going to be responding to me in a situation. It's a very absurd situation, you know, my asking you to hold still in any kind of posture for a period of a few hours. So, sure, you know, number one, the chemical relationship between people and their—both their essential natures and what

they want. Human gestures are limitless in possibility, covering a whole gamut of things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Fine. Well, I think that answers that very well. Just a second, George.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Since your art is not in your point of view, and not, in the view of most critics, actually a slice of life, it's pretty obvious that simply making a cast of a figure is not really a case of the artist reneging on his responsibility. I was thinking, for instance, of the fact that Rodin was practically ruined at one stage in his career because it was rumored that a figure he had made was actually cast from life. And, of course, the people who were very suspicious about this were assuming that to have actually made a cast from life would be simply for him to have abdicated his role as an artist. And a great deal of water has gone under the bridge since then. Is there anything you'd like to say about that? Do you get this thrown at you a great deal?

[They laugh.]

GEORGE SEGAL: There's a whole history of modern that, in a strange way, supports my stubborn conviction. If, in recent years, there's been a—in the history of American painting, for instance, there's been the act of discarding technique and painting realistic representation. And, as a consequence of that long, long time battle with the camera and making child-like marks or cultivating the art of the child or the art of the insane or the paint as paint and working for pure forms and the whole—well, we can refer to so many movements in modern art where there is a sense of reducing a picture down to an absolute minimum of what a painting is about.

These involve choices and the artist chooses to discard the glamor and vanity of handcraft. Oh, putting masking tape and using the 5 inch paint brush to slash on a absolutely flat area, for instance, in an abstract painting because he's after the irreducible minimum, which is not about bragging about his prowess as a reproducer of an illusion of nature. That's down one alley.

As far as I'm concerned, I haven't in my work in the least bit denied the absolute tyranny of choice, how necessary it is for me to pick and choose out of vast amounts of possibilities and still work with a totality that a figure alone is nothing and it only has a meaning in relationship to a context, a place, physical space, real space. What is the quality of the travel of the observer through that space? How does the texture or the sheer physical bulk and physical presence of the real objects affect you aesthetically as well as—well, aesthetically is a very difficult word anyway. You know, we have to constantly redefine that word.

So, just as I feel very much the same as certain abstract painters who deny craft going toward their irreducible minimum, I don't have to demonstrate to anybody that I can draw realistically or paint realistically if I'm dealing with what I consider to be much more important factors in making a moving work of art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In this sense then, although it may sometimes appear that your figures could possibly have emerged let's say in the '30s and '40s, the truth is that they couldn't have because, at that time, we had not yet passed through this stage of let's say this new insistence on the honesty of materials or the directness in manipulating the materials and so on. Would you think that was one of the main reasons why the timing of your art is really, after all, only appropriate for the '60s?

GEORGE SEGAL: I suppose looking back—well, what's that phrase? Monday morning

quarterbacks. Everything seems natural and inevitable or a simple logic as we look back. It's not quite that simple as you're plowing through the time or swimming in the current yourself. Shall we go back into the state of mind of the '50s?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Let's. Yes. I think we might as well. Let's pick you up at the point where this—you were dealing with these concepts and with your friends and—first of all, I think we ought to establish that, physically, I could as you where you were and who were your artist associates and what you were—I assume you were being exposed to the abstract expressionists mainly, through your teachers and so on. But let's make it real. Who did you study with and who were your friends?

GEORGE SEGAL: Okay. In the late '40s—well, toward the end of the '40s and, you know, finishing 1950, I did study art in New York at NYU and was heavily exposed to the abstract expressionists. Before that, I had been introduced to modern art, which I liked. I liked extremely well. I liked the cerebral nature of it. I liked the whole idea of you could make strange marks on a piece of paper and it would have something to do with your internal experience. From Cezanne through cubism, through fauve, through constructivism, you know, the works—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where had you come in contact with that earlier phase?

GEORGE SEGAL: Years go when I was about 17 years old, before the war, I'd spent a year at Cooper Union Art School. And my old drawing teacher, Delevante, was the first person I met who touched that—the magic—the magic of what art could be. And I responded to that. I think it was after that I decided I really liked it and—because, in his own way, he lived and pointed out how this whole business of making art was part of your whole way of living, that everything you looked at and saw and responded to could find expression in the work.

And I suppose it was my temperamental response to that idea that made me susceptible to art and, when I finally got attracted to NYU because the abstract expressionists were there, I sensed that these men had the greatest vitality regarding art ideas that I could find.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who particularly at NYU?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, my actual painting teacher was Baziotes and I had a rough time with him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In what way?

GEORGE SEGAL: Because I was real charged up and excited by these paintings, these new paintings and I admired their size, their scale, their gusto, you know, their daring, their brilliance and spirituality. All the—all these factors excited me and I suppose I must have been subconsciously remembering nagging feelings of something missing that perhaps Delevante had spoken about that you had to involve your entire self. And surely these men did but I couldn't see evidence of it in the paintings. When I spoke to them, they were extraordinarily cultivated men who hid behind the toughness of a New York cab driver's accent.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [They laugh.] Yes, particularly Baziotes. He always seemed like a taxi driver until you spoke to him.

GEORGE SEGAL: Right. So that there—and it was Baziotes, by the way, who steered me onto the French novelists when I was devouring the German emotional ones. And he was—he was trying to tell me something about the calm, rational—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: —qualities of the French, which were a very valuable thing, I think, to tell to a serious painting student.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who particularly was he—was he talking about then?

GEORGE SEGAL: Oh, I was reading Jakob Wassermann and he said read—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Romain—Jurat Romain or—

GEORGE SEGAL: No, Rolland—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Romain Rolland?

GEORGE SEGAL: Romain Rolland.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes, we were talking about that and Proust, of course.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: And—so then he—well, I suppose my impulse was basically expressionist and he was tempering it with this sense of logical structure. And, you know, we did speak about old paintings and he told me he had painted 25 years, you know, from Cézanne—through Cézanne and gone through all this to arrive at that. I said, well, I can't stand on your shoulders. I admire your spirituality, you know, but where is the flesh? Where is the—where are all the solid things, you know, like Cézanne looked at an apple or a mountain and he was involved with the way the earth was structured, you know, and he was able to make this whole leap and, you know, able to grasp and encompass. And I said to myself—I probably made a premature bad judgment on my excellent teachers. Respected them, you know, but I couldn't follow from their point. And I used to bring in still lives and apples and bananas and fruit into the classroom, paint little tiny Cézannesque derivative paintings. And used to have these marvelous talks about Baziotes, isn't he funny? He ended up calling me schizophrenic and I got real sore at him and didn't go to painting class.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why did he call you schizophrenic about that?

GEORGE SEGAL: Because I was evidently understanding all of his beautiful flights into spirituality and the internal aspects of painting but I was insisting on doing real things. You know, he absolutely couldn't understand my impulse or, if he did, he didn't want to admit to it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Possibly he did respect your honesty and sticking to your own avenue of finding out these things rather than just imitating—taking off of the teacher and doing cute little Baziotes.

GEORGE SEGAL: I supposed so because he was always, you know, a great, expansive human being with me, even though we disagreed very sharply.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that was an interesting experience. Then did you keep right on after you were through with NYU moving still more to still life as a painter mainly? You weren't involved in sculpture at this point I take it?

GEORGE SEGAL: Not at all. I had only an idea of painting then. I graduated then and I was really

quite mixed up because I didn't have an answer, you know, at that—

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did you graduate?

GEORGE SEGAL: 1950. 1950. I stopped painting for two years and I had a teaching degree and I refused to teach because I didn't know what to teach or how to teach it. You know, I wasn't that convinced and I stopped painting and went into farming. Actually built up the farm and made a living from it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was out here in New Brunswick?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes, this—yes, this—where we are now. And it was after two years I finally got the farm going and I started painting again.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you married at this point?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes, I was married, one child. Had to make a living and the farm was a very nice way to do it because, even though you had to work pretty long hours, they were of your own making and I liked that. So that, whenever I could make the time, I would go upstairs to paint. And it was like graduating from college and entering kindergarten all over again, trying to do it from the beginning. And I suppose I was pretty derivative, you know, attracted to the School of Paris, attracted to Matisse, Bonnard. Never purely abstract. Never purely figurative. Interested in construction, you know, and geometric elements but also interested in human form and sinuous line.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now, the artists that you admired at this time certainly all used the specific subject matter, figures or things but they handled them with a high degree of transformation and invention. Were you interested in that kind of invention at that time?

GEORGE SEGAL: At that time, yes. I thought that was what an artist had to do. There is still that assumption. You know, there was still that assumption very strong in the original generation of abstract expressionists, in Pollock, Kline, de Koonig, et cetera, and acceptance basically of the School of Paris idea and especially surrealism that these—all the forms are drawn out of your body and that you had to be in some kind of exalted stated called spontaneity or somehow at ease with your body or cultivate a semi-mystical state so that somehow these forms that came out, in a peculiar way, had to be a matching counterpart of your inner mood and bone structure, the mark, as the extension of the human arm and whole idea of Pollock's dance.

And, gradually, as I had to work more for a living, as I had to deal more with the world and raise my kids and experience my own life I suppose, I began to see that these were ideas invented—insights invested by these men that fitted their bodies and their personalities and their time and that they were, like every one of us in the history of time, seeing the world their way. If the mark was an extension of the human body, wasn't the simple act of putting your hand up to your face and the way you sat also an indication? Why was Pollock's dance on the canvas essentially different from somebody ballroom dancing if they were dancing with feeling? That's a hard nut to swallow.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, there was the ritualistic element, perhaps. Would that have entered into his—if he were answering you, he was doing it as a kind of incantation almost, perhaps, whereas the person dancing in a ballroom was involved in a social experience. I don't know. Would that be a—how would you answer that anyway? [Laughs.]

GEORGE SEGAL: All right. All right. So there—yes. Yes. A very good distinction but it points up

what Pollock wanted from art. If Pollock was interested in a ritual—a ritual, an incantation and the ultimate of something approaching religious experience, that's an indication of his private goal for what he thought art should be.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Don't you suppose that that came out with his generation a great deal out of their involvement with primitive art? Now, this was something you were not involved with directly.

GEORGE SEGAL: But I'm involved in a certain other way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: A very strong other way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't want to divert you with this but this is—

GEORGE SEGAL: No, no. Okay. This is a very—this is a very interesting path because it has a great deal to do with private goals in art. The one thing I think artists in my generation would agree with wholeheartedly with the abstract expressionists would be despising the whole idea of the picture as a decoration of the living room wall on—over the couch. The whole idea that the work of art is somehow a transcendent object and starting—going right back to Picasso and the whole cult of the African negro sculpture or the whole idea of looking at primitive or prehistoric art where the art was absolutely connected with the highest kind of religion, magic and philosophical grasp of the universe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Exactly.

GEORGE SEGAL: Connecting art with that I think is what I'm very concerned with and—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you concerned with it then?

GEORGE SEGAL: I always—yes, I always had this exalted idea of it and I had to keep pretty quiet about it because, essentially, in a—in a hostile or indifferent environment, you know, it's a gratuitous activity. You can't make a living at it. When I was going to school, nobody thought of really making a living as an artist and it was this private, magic cult that you entered with a very private, exalted idea or ideal of what you were doing.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were saying that no one could make a living from it and so it was private ritual and so on.

GEORGE SEGAL: It's a private ritual and I think that basic principle I accepted of this extraordinary function and purpose of art as being the opposite of mundane. And, in a private area where—well, there is no church. You know, it has to do with an indifference to patrons but it has to do with real feelings that people have that, you know, the creation of an artwork is, you know, in this area. And it's very easy for me to understand now why the abstract expressionists hid behind their New York tough boy attitude. They were essentially very sensitive, cultivated, civilized men, I've discovered, aware of myths, you know, aware of nuance, aware of large-scale flux and flow and the nuance of the quirk of an eyebrow. And they had to operate, basically, in a hostile environment most of their lives. And, when the spotlight turned on them, they had a rough time adjusting to a new status which seemed to deny a whole set of values painfully built up over their entire lives.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were struggling with all of this just about at the point where they were beginning to come into prominence.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did that affect you and what you thought about them and what you thought about alternatives to what they were doing? By the way, you were not alone at this point, I gather. By this time, you had friends who were close to you.

GEORGE SEGAL: That's right. Well, by this time I was farming and I had resumed painting again. And I had met Kaprow, who had just gotten the job here in New Brunswick teaching at Rutgers.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's Allan Kaprow?

GEORGE SEGAL: Allan Kaprow. And we discovered that we had gone to the same schools, both intensely interested in art, both sharing this idea that this was a great serious occupation that could be all absorbing, even if it was in the hobby state, you know, you had to do it in your spare time. And both of us baffled, you know. Both of us just pre- the—prior to the point of having any sense of what we could do in our own work, our own way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was teaching at Rutgers. Were you teaching there at that time?

GEORGE SEGAL: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You weren't at all. Oh, I see.

GEORGE SEGAL: No. No. I was farming here and after a while I taught mostly for my own clarification, I think, to clarify my own ideas, some adult painting classes. Later on after I had problems making a living with the chickens, I had to go out teaching full time. But all kinds of things, mechanical drawing and English and things like that, and art later.

I think the value of our friendship for each other was that we were mutual sounding boards for our own dissatisfaction. And there were so many things on the wind about the great virtues of abstract painting, its limitations. As far as our own experience was concerned, we did not live through their history. We were born later. We did have different attitudes. Quite true. And much as I respect them, I had to react against them in certain ways, so that the reality of things, which is something I was always dealing with or trying to deal with in my paintings, was unsatisfying for me because I found myself casting that reality in terms of the School of Paris terms. And I was not experiencing.

I really learned my lesson when I went up to Provincetown for the first time in 1956 and—well, to see the Hofmann School. You know, I had friends who were going to the Hofmann school and I was utterly amazed at this particular piece of the United States. It looked like a French impressionist painting come to life. It's the only place I'd ever seen on the east coast that looked like a French painting. And then I discovered that Hofmann had chosen it—that place to settle in precisely because of that resemblance. You know, so that when you went off on the sand dunes and painted the water there, nature looked just like—

DOROTHY SECKLER: It always looks like Venice to me.

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But it certainly doesn't look like the rest of America that's for sure.

GEORGE SEGAL: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The light is magnificent and opulent.

GEORGE SEGAL: It doesn't look like the rest of the America and it nagged at me that the light I was most familiar was steel light or dusky light and the things I was mostly seeing were chrome mirrors, you know, and black tires and blacktop and neon signs. And I had had a tractor. You know, I plowed the fields and here I was supposed to be close to nature and all I was aware of was a monstrous machine under me and adjusting several tons of agricultural machinery like oversized nuts and bolts. I was more aware of that than I was of, you know, smelling the freshly turned earth. You know, I smelled the gasoline fumes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.]

GEORGE SEGAL: And things began to nag at me that here these beautiful pictures were a retreat into something that either existed far away or in the past. And the things they were doing had nothing to do with the way I was experiencing things or sensing things and this was a continual dissatisfaction.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was—Kaprow at that time was—wasn't he doing sculpture?

GEORGE SEGAL: Kaprow was doing everything and anything. You know, we were both—we were both talking incessantly about all the ideas floating around and we eventually both ended up members of the Hansa Gallery.

DOROTHY SECKLER: About what year would that have been?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, I joined the Hansa in '56. I had my first show there in '56.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was paintings?

GEORGE SEGAL: Paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Still life and that sort of thing or what were you painting now?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. Yes. They were still life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you didn't do—

GEORGE SEGAL: Domestic scenes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't paint your tractors or paint your—

GEORGE SEGAL: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —actual situation at all?

GEORGE SEGAL: These are very—

DOROTHY SECKLER: There wasn't a language for it when—

GEORGE SEGAL: These are very crudely done French paintings. And, you know, the godfather of the paintings is Matisse.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was—you were that much involved with color—

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —beautiful large areas of intense color and that sort of thing?

GEORGE SEGAL: Intense areas of pure color straight out of the tube, no mixing and they looked like, I suppose, enlargements of sections of full paintings in a certain way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you—

GEORGE SEGAL: Big blocks of pure color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't get to Léger. He would have helped you paint your tractor.

GEORGE SEGAL: Another—that's another strange thing because I have been attracted to cubism very deeply. You know, Léger is perhaps my favorite cubist painter and I do respond like a shot to his kind of bulky construction. The one thing about cubism I admired enormously, it's philosophic probity. The whole idea of turning an object around and around and around and extracting its planes and analyzing it. You know, like what is this object like?

And I have been prevented temperamentally from fracturing objects. I've always—you know, I've always wanted to make bigger and bigger shapes instead of smaller and smaller ones. You know, then the cubists cut a thing up into slivers and then juggle the pieces around in their own construction technique. And I suppose because I hate finely detailed work—I could never repair a watch but I like oversized agricultural machinery and build—big buildings. I like juggling around large masses. I've always painted big flat areas of color and I think it just, you know, boils down to body build.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting.

GEORGE SEGAL: So I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your paintings were also not fractured. You didn't go into a cubist thing and, even in your paintings of breaking down objects, did you?

GEORGE SEGAL: No. I went through a Cézanne thing. You know, I really admired Cézanne. You know, I liked the total grasp of Cézanne where he could be as finely nuanced as staring at an object and having its edge waiver from the intensity of his concentration and, in his water colors, you know, see the red and blue flickers on the edge of an orange or an apple. And then he pays attention to the gigantic bulk of how these 10,000 pieces fall into big and small giants. You know, the scale, the implied scale of any Cézanne painting is so massive and weighty and dense that I really admire that. So I guess I like the whole idea of that immensely powerful man able to be exquisitely sensitive in nuance, also. You know, I like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you didn't go into this very—for a very long time in your painting. This was just a passing phase, wasn't it?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes, it was a passing phase. I went—then I even flirted into meaning. All the ideas floating around had to do with chance and John Cage and Arp and surrealism and, you know, all part of our heritage I suppose in—

DOROTHY SECKLER: What specifically was—what part did John Cage's ideas play there? Was it some sort of Zen thing or emphasis on—

GEORGE SEGAL: I suppose it has to do with the hot feverish curiosity of anybody who becomes intensely involved in art as a student. I think I was still a student in those days. For some strange reason, I—you know, I had responded to the ideas in modern art and during the period when I was floundering around testing everything out, getting attracted to ideas and, you know, being interested in philosophy, here come up these ideas of chance and what does that have to do with my life and how do I respond to that.

Well, the old argument, you know, like how much can you predetermine and how much will be accidental? What role does it play? Now, there's a fine balance between that. I went bankrupt on my farm or almost bankrupt not because I was more efficient or less efficient but because a change had come about in the world situation on government farm policy, so that my personal behavior had nothing to do with the ultimate disposition of my farm. But, while it was possible to make a living as a farmer, I could have either goofed it or made it go, you know, so there's an interplay between predestination and chance say.

And then I—so then I got exposed to all the ideas of chance and there was this whole cult which I thought was ridiculous going overboard of saying that everything depended on chance, which I sensed was not quite true. You know, it was regarding the interplay that was the crucial thing. You know, how much should be chance and how much should be pre-determined?

DOROTHY SECKLER: How was that reflected in your work at this time?

GEORGE SEGAL: At the height of—precisely like this. I got involved with narrative stories, myth symbolism. 1958, when everything in New York was abstract or chancy, I showed a big series of figurative paintings that were out of—on a theme out of the Old Testament, the legend of Lot and the pillar of salt at a time where you weren't supposed to be dealing with meanings or symbolism. And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were they shown at the Hansa?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes, they were shown at the Hansa. I also showed them with my first sculptures. I had three big plaster sculptures in with those same paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I probably saw them.

GEORGE SEGAL: You may very well have. I didn't even know what it meant except that I didn't know the meaning of the story then. I'm working on a theme again, now, in sculpture. I still don't know the meaning of the story except that I know that it has countless facets to examine. Now, you know—but that's classified in the area of narrative literary content, which is supposed to be verboten and taboo.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now, at that time, wasn't that when Jan Muller was doing Hamlet and a couple of other things—

GEORGE SEGAL: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —at the Hansa?

GEORGE SEGAL: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was—were you associated with him to some extent?

GEORGE SEGAL: We were extremely close friends. And, again, you know, it's this whole idea of what conscious or unconscious goal you have. And, in the case of myself and Kaprow and Jan Muller, it was this hunt for totality, to embrace everything into your painting, every—literally everything which meant not only the plastic as powerfully as you can get it. What was the psychological equivalent of plastic? What did it have to do with religion? What did it have to do with history? What did it have to do with myth? What did it have to do with how you walk down the street?

See, Muller died prematurely and I was enormously impressed with the fact that he was brave enough to tackle these gigantic themes of—out of classic literature. And I like that. I like that daring. You know, we can—you know, we can make any kind of aesthetic judgment we want, you know, in any context we want. But, at that time, I really responded very positively to how ambitious he was and what high regard he held the production of a work of art. You know, how much could you embrace into it and, you know, taking a simple jump?

So I'm working in real space, you know, with these plaster people. The freedom doors are very wide in this. I can choose any material in the world. I can use—instead of painting light, I can use real light, for instance. The whole idea of combining figures with objects in real places means that, since I have the whole world to choose from, I'm obviously not going to choose the whole world. But my palette is enormously expanded from 12 tubes of paint on a canvas and—

MS. SECKLER Did this come about to any extent from the gradual development also of Happenings about this time? I know that Kaprow's—

GEORGE SEGAL: Absolutely, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —happening was held at your farm at what was it, '58, around there?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. The first Happening—

DOROTHY SECKLER: And I remember—

GEORGE SEGAL: —he did, he did here on the farm at a picnic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember seeing it. I was supposed to come that time and I didn't get a ride. Somebody was supposed to give me a ride, so I missed it.

But that was probably the outcome of all of these discussions that you were all having to bring the whole—the totality into it.

GEORGE SEGAL: That's right. That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you manage to resist getting involved with doing Happenings yourself?

GEORGE SEGAL: It was pretty hard to resist. I was very tempted. I was really quite tempted to do it. Mostly, it was because of a reservation I had aesthetically. The earliest Happenings had to do with fragility and perishability. These things—Allan was convinced that they didn't have to last, you know, that they could be a burst of a brief moment of time and be an image that would be remembered and then could disappear, you know, and have history only as a score to be

reconstructed at some other time.

And strangely enough it was just this whole attitude of throw-away materials and the perishability that put me off. And, again, it was only temperamental, I think, because my sense of time is a little slower, that I need more time to look at a painting. I like to go away, you know, have a cup of coffee or eat, you know, and come back and look and I need a larger chunk of time for me to dig into an artwork which is complex and rich. I like the contemplation time.

And it was only for that. You know, no idea of, you know, preservation for the ages but, rather, I just wanted the thing to be around so that I could look at it, go away, come back and look at it again. Like I like to hear a certain few records a lot, you know. Just as simple as that. Otherwise, I'm sure I would have got into Happenings if I had felt I could do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you didn't even collaborate at all with anybody at that time, did you?

GEORGE SEGAL: No, but I was very sympathetic with their whole idea, extremely so. You know, like I thought it was just as valid as what I was thinking about doing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And what were you doing exactly around—let's say around '58? You had, first of all, been doing paintings in your first exhibits at Hansa. And then didn't you do some plaster sculptures over armatures around that time?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. In '58, I did show plaster figures.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What were they like? What kind of figures were they?

GEORGE SEGAL: They were life-sized figures. They looked as if they had stepped out of my paintings. They were expressionist, generalized, undefined, you know, bulky things with large gestures. Well, I don't know what large means. No, not large. They were simply three figures standing, sitting and lying. And the sitting figure was sitting on a real chair, an old chair.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this was showing at Hansa at that time?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. So, number one, I liked the idea that they looked like they stepped out of the paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: And, number two, they provided for me a very strong clue about what was really bothering me about my paintings. My paintings were dissatisfying me intensely because I'd been listening to everybody's ideas about painting, you know, keep it flat, don't make holes in it, you know, implied two versus three dimensional psychological tension, you know, like you read—you looked at them two dimensionally but you read them three dimensionally. So I said, what the hell? You know? Why should I read them? Why couldn't they be three dimensional if you were talking about that? You know, I got very irritated finally at the sacred cow attitude toward certain attitudes. We talk about one thing and do another.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It must have taken a great deal of strength, however, I would think to be able to say that. I mean I'm kind of curious about where you got the—you know, the courage to just say I reject this because, you know, it became so much a part of our way of thinking about things that I found it—I would—I don't think I ever questioned but what it was exactly the proper thing to do. [Laughs.]

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, maybe it's a nasty habit I've had for a long time. I've had a hard job finding people that I believe entirely. You know, people would tell me things and they wouldn't—you know, things wouldn't quite work out the way they told me. And always I'd be thrust back on my own experience to make a decision. And, well, I was simply, in my life, thrust back on my own resources so much. I had to—I had to make a go of my own farm. I had to support myself and my family the only way that I could. I don't know.

I really don't know but I suppose, since I love the field so much, you know, like I did so much looking at paintings and then I would hear endless talk about these ideas. It would finally being to dawn on me that certain ideas were not God given or by divine right. They were simply the chosen attitudes of certain men. And, once that becomes apparent, well, you know, there's the incorrigible American idea of democracy, you know, that you are another man. And the thing is, rather than the pyramid structure of France with Picasso on top, you know, there's a broad base of abject non-entities on the bottom. I much prefer the idea of strongly convinced men being equal and talking to each other. Again, I really like that. I much prefer that situation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you think you could have arrived at it by yourself or was the association with this other—well, with Kaprow and I believe—were there also by this time a few others in the group who were thinking along these lines?

GEORGE SEGAL: I think at that age—we were what then, in our middle 20s, and belonged to a cooperative gallery in New York and we had our meetings and, again, it was this thing, a collection of very strong-minded personalities arguing desperately at every meeting, you know, trying—you know, trying to run a common destiny. And it was doomed because everybody was so strong to go down his own road. But I think, at that time, at that age that we were, we needed the contact. You know, we were huddled together in a certain sense for support.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was a pretty wonderful thing that happened there at Hansa.

GEORGE SEGAL: I think so. I think so.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who were in the group around '58,'59 that you felt closest to? I mean, not necessarily everybody that was in the gallery but who were you most involved with?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, I was extremely friendly with Kaprow. You know, we were close neighbors and met all the time, went into New York together a lot to see paintings. Jan Muller, I had an enormous amount of respect for. Stankiewicz was then Chairman of the gallery.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Where—I suppose that the introduction of junk sculpture must have been fairly important at that point, wasn't it?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, the Hansa was a marvelously alive place at that time because, in embryo, every one of the major directions of contemporary painting that we are familiar with today was there. The junk sculpturist Stankiewicz, Jean Follett was doing black and white constructions.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Stankiewicz was—

GEORGE SEGAL: But she's—most of her work is destroyed by now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember things with little springs in them, weren't they at that time?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then things with sort of feathers and—or cotton, raw cotton?

GEORGE SEGAL: That's right. And pieces of rope and radio parts and tar.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Yes. So the actuality thing was getting into it for several of you at this point.

GEORGE SEGAL: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did real things and not simulations or plane manipulation and so on.

GEORGE SEGAL: That's right. It was all in the air. You know, the junk sculpture attitude was already there. Everybody knew all about collage but I think just slight—we call them slight but I don't know if they're slight or big jumps in attitude were taking place. The real things were there. They could be incorporated as delicately as Cornell or Schwitters was doing it. It could be as satiric and ironic and plastic as Stankiewicz or as somber and catatonic as Jean Follett was doing it. No matter, you know? And, also, Myron Stout was doing black and white extremely depersonalized shapes. You know, the utmost of—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was he then?

GEORGE SEGAL: Oh, he's been doing that for ten years or more. Myron Stout was doing small intense concentrated versions of absolute purist painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I had almost forgotten Myron Stout as being part of that group. Gee, that must have been a marvelous time. Were you all apt to be involved in club meetings at the 8th Street Club, too, or was that sort of the—not your particular—

GEORGE SEGAL: No. No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —arena?

GEORGE SEGAL: By the time the Hansa was in full swing, there was a distinct separation. You know, there was an awareness that there was a difference in approach and all these—all these alleys were being pursued at Hansa. The Gauguinist figurative, figuration of Jan Muller. Well, Wolf Kahn and Felix Pasilis, were going down that direction, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I know that well.

GEORGE SEGAL: You know, so the lush, juiciness, you know, and bohemian sensuality was there. The rigor of purist painting was there. The actuality of objects was there. The smell of totality was there. You know, looking back, you know—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: —everything seems so clear.

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I can remember how exciting it was for me.

[Audio break.]

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, I don't know what I'm going to say now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, if you—well, no, no. This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing George Segal in New Brunswick, on April 1, 1966, continuing a tape in which we had arrived on our previous reel roughly around 1959 when you were associated with the Hansa Gallery and with a group of artists who were all in very different ways involved with breaking away from—well, from abstract expressionism, although absorbing, certainly, certain of its attitudes and giving them a very different direction. Let me see if there's anything at the moment I might want to ask you. Well, I suppose at this point we—the transition, how you happened to become convinced about going in the direction of sculpture and giving up painting or largely giving it up at that point, what gave you the confidence that you had already made a group of figures, working those on an armature earlier, several years earlier, and then you had gone back to painting? How did you get back to sculpture and what made you feel sure that then that was to be your major expression?

GEORGE SEGAL: I suppose mostly it was my dissatisfaction with my paintings. Well, not only was I involved in wanting to make my own work, I was very excited about all the ideas that were floating around and, well, I guess, you know, I was impressionable, too, at that time. The trouble was that everybody impressed me. People would come with great theories and great convictions and set up limits. You know, this was the way to do it and this was the way to make a work of art and say, keep it flat, or wipe out the figuration. You know, it was a sin against mankind if anything resembling a nose or an insect appeared in the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Even after de Kooning sailed into his Women series, was that pretty prevalent?

GEORGE SEGAL: I began to become aware that there was a difference between the talk and the look of the paintings. Privately, I really admired Pollock's paintings and privately what intrigued me most was the battle, the figuration absolutely creeping into the painting and Pollock beating it down with a club and then it would creep out again. And nobody ever spoke about that. All people seemed to talk about was spontaneity, wiping out your conscious mind, you weren't supposed to be able to talk or think logically. I supposed I was hearing a lot of second-rate talk and looking at first-rate paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What did you think about this concept of the unconscious? Were you involved at all in any kind of psychoanalytical thing or did you experiment with automatic writing in any way?

GEORGE SEGAL: I drew that way on my canvases. I tried to—I try to be large and fluid and make the marks dance-like, perhaps.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Even though you were doing objects?

GEORGE SEGAL: Even though I was doing objects and that was what was dissatisfying me about the painting. I was interested in certain ideas and applying them to other things so that there was a warfare set up in the paintings. And I started producing paintings that had Mondrian severity in structure. The paint was dripping around like the most violent kind of abstract expressionist burst, sensual, Renoir-like, juicy figuration coming out in some areas, absolutely heavy, solid, Giotto kind of modeling in other places and then other areas flat.

And I said to myself, what kind of insanity is this? I was—I was accepting everybody's way of looking at things because everybody was so persuasive and these were all great, logical schools and ideas

of modern art. And, finally, the devil with it. If everybody is right, then I'm right, too. And then I had to —that was really the impasse. That as really the crisis at the time, I think. And that's when I remembered the sculptures I had done. If I was either that impressionable or convinced of the profundity of people batting at me with their words and their paintings, well, what did I see? Because, after all, these art objects that were impressing me were done by men, other men.

If everybody has ideas about real space and the interior of the mind and an artwork is going to occupy some peculiar nether area between what's out there and what's in here, then, for heaven's sakes, everybody has to decide for himself precisely where you're going to stand in this gray land. So I felt since I didn't understand any ideas about space, the only thing I could understand would be the real space and how I move through it. And it was just as simple as that. And so we dress it up with fancy words like "environment," et cetera, but as far as I'm concerned I had had such a belly full of fancy theories that I simply wanted to breathe a sigh of relief and stand somewhere where I knew where I was and nothing more than that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that was a pretty important thing to be conscious of and recognize and get into. [Laughs.] And how did you actually—I mean, on some bright Thursday morning, how did you decide to do those figures or who did you do first?

GEORGE SEGAL: I did myself first or—well, let's see. Let's see. I had already done some sculptures and they were too generalized for me. You know, then it began to dawn on me I was dealing with real space, real things. And I suppose then, too, you know, it has—it has to do with an internal attitude. I think I started out on tape saying that, sure, I was very interested in myself and my internal reactions but I was also interested in things around me. And I couldn't quite understand them. After all this thinking, aesthetic and philosophical, I discovered I didn't know what space was. I didn't know what an object was. I didn't know what a meaning was and I had to find out for myself.

It was just an accident because I was at this point in my thinking. And while I was teaching an adult art class, I accidentally managed to get a hold of a quantity of Johnson and Johnson bandage. It was casting bandage.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That has the kind of plaster of Paris in it.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes, the dry stuff mixed in with the bandage itself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: You just dip it in water and you put it on something. And what should I use for a form? So, being so egocentric, I used myself for a form. My wife put the bandage on me and everything failed. Everything fell apart and I had to rebuild it and fake it. But a certain few details came out that really goggled me. Details around the nose and the mouth came out, fingers came out and, because I had to botch the thing back into shape with an armature and I lost so much detail. So half the figure looks like the older sculptures I did, which were rough and generalized, you know, with all the gesture and the accepted Rodin—the Rodin surface is like Manet's brushstrokes, the old familiar memories of, you know, the mark.

I was very intrigued with the juxtaposition of the human mark with what was there. I sat the thing in a real chair and the chair became so transformed just by, again, being placed next to this strange mixture of things—

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was still your figure?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes, this was still my own figure, you know, the first one I did. So I—all right. So the figure's sitting in a chair. So I found an old table that was knocking around the farm and I sat the figure at a table. And then, incredibly, the whole thing had the whole sense of years and years of setting up still lives, how carefully I remembered we always used to choose the objects in the still life. We had favorite coffee pots in the house that I had set up to paint in still lives because their shapes reminded me of coffee pots in French paintings.

All right. And then—so something strange happened. You know, again, a transformation of attitude in your mind. If I like this coffee pot because it reminds me of a Chardin pot, what about a table that's out of my experience? Like I had lived with that table for 20 years and it was old, beat up and simple. But I had lived with it. You know, I had the crumbling—you know the crumbling brown enamel paint on it and that old oil cloth and that has something to do with my whole history of life. And then it just struck me like a clap of thunder that that old table was, for me, like Chardin's coffee pot was for him. You know, this had a connection with me and it seemed to be at least truthful, that, for better or worse, the things that I had all around me that I had neglected as being just the accumulated garbage of my own existence had something to do with my own history or, at one point or other, I chose to save that table. I could have thrown it away but I happen to have saved it because I like something about it. And then I looked at the table legs and the legs of the man on the sculpture and I said, that looks just the way the legs look in a Cézanne painting. You know?

DOROTHY SECKLER: In what sense?

GEORGE SEGAL: If we start—this memory of plastic admiration where we look at—we look at the forms in a painting and we get excited by the rhythm set up, by not only the objects but the air between them—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I've felt—yes. I have felt that.

GEORGE SEGAL: —and the procession of forms, oh, you know, everything that we love about painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: I said, so there it is. You know, two human legs and four table legs and four more chair legs make a forest. And, as I walked around it, sometimes it looked great and sometimes it looked silly. You know? But, at certain points, it looked just as beautifully composed as the implacable forms in Cézanne's *Card Players*. And it's something—you know, something which I had really admired.

So, you know, how original was Cézanne? Very original but Cézanne looked back at Poussin and Piero. So I look back at Cézanne and Piero and Giotto, you know, and Rembrandt and Goya, you know, et cetera. You know, certain things really are true over a long period of time and certain things are ephemeral in that they accidentally happened to me in my own history.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So, at that moment when you saw this as being comparable to the plasticity of a Cézanne, it really could be both reality and, you know, life. I mean it could be both life and art. It could be both—it was—it—the bridge was gone then.

GEORGE SEGAL: Why not? Sure. Especially since these things were wrenched out of context and I could—I had the room. I had these blank, bare, dusty coops.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Chicken coops—

GEORGE SEGAL: That were neutral.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —that you no longer kept chickens in—

GEORGE SEGAL: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —at this point, right?

GEORGE SEGAL: They were neutral. They were neutral and I didn't see this table in a room any more but I saw it in some kind of blank space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was very, very important.

GEORGE SEGAL: You know, just the accident of a blank, neutral space—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: —that wasn't pure white, which was again important to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was with gray cinder block in the background.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a very interesting thing. You're probably the only painter in our history who owes his [laughs] turning point to a chicken coop environment as far as I know.

GEORGE SEGAL: You see, it's not chicken coop. It's just—it's really anonymous building. It's really a blank box.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Functional building.

GEORGE SEGAL: It's a blank box, you know, to house anything. And so what happens within that blankness, which I suppose is an American phenomenon.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Absolutely. It doesn't seem as though the same kind of expression would likely have occurred in, say, France or even England, although one can't ever rule it out. But it seems peculiarly American in the sense of the environment that you invoke. But, I mean, this isn't anything you have to strive for. It's simply—

GEORGE SEGAL: No, it just happens because—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I read somewhere that you did later go to Europe and did this affect your way of thinking about anything?

GEORGE SEGAL: I'm afraid it made me more insistently American. [Laughs] I went to Europe. I enjoyed it as a hauntingly familiar place because I had cut my teeth in School of Paris and every corner I turned in Paris I felt that I had been there before and, of course, I had in photographs. Other things surprised me and shocked me, well, like the smallness of the French and how they automatically come up very close to you and how small is the diameter of a cafe table and how delicate is the wire chair that you sit on, how decorated are all the surfaces and how much intense activity and movement from mosaic tiles to tenderly cared for flowers and wine bottles with intricate little beautiful labels on them.

The intervals are small pattern jumps and everything felt like a minuet. And I realized for the first time that, if I did somebody sitting in an American diner seat with a bare expanse of red leather with nothing happening in it, just that red leather there or a blue Formica-top table with a shiny chrome edge and how much space there is around the person and how big and vast are the walls in America and the intervals between people and how we are slightly more than arm's length away from each other characteristically in America, or how big a gas station is compared to a French gas station. The intervals between things are very telling.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Giocametti said that, actually, he looked at things differently after a certain point in his life. And I think it had something to do with emerging from a movie house. Suddenly, everything really looked different. Somehow that came into my head while you were talking, the way one could become so intensely aware of distances and proportions and relationships as to become aware in a different environment on this—a whole new kind of structure emerging from where you look. It didn't, I gather, affect—when you came back to this country, you fell right back into your largeness and American ways?

GEORGE SEGAL: Oh, I—well, I was—I became so intensely aware of this quality in Paris. I was supposed to be there for two weeks or so setting up a show and one piece was hung up in customs and I had time on my hands. I got restless and I worked. I did a piece there and they ended up—I—speaking not a word of French, you know, getting people to guide me to Monmartre and I found a place where I could buy a secondhand American pinball machine manufactured in Chicago. I did a piece of—I did a piece in Paris of a man playing a pinball machine.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I remember that. Did—that wasn't the second one? That was the only one you did of a man—

GEORGE SEGAL: That's the only one I did. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, isn't that curious.

GEORGE SEGAL: And it was Michael Sonnabend who posed for it. And we—he had just—

DOROTHY SECKLER: He's so little.

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, he's a marvelous little guy.

[Audio break.]

GEORGE SEGAL: He's taken me to see the Gardens of Versailles and we saw a luminaire, a light display, and he was showing me these limitless geometric gardens and, you know, great, charming little Michael talking about the grandiosity of Louis XIV.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm sure he could do it. [Laughs.]

GEORGE SEGAL: And I found—

DOROTHY SECKLER: He's one of the greatest talks I ever met in my life. [They laugh.]

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, he really is marvelous and he was so enthusiastic about it. So I found an American pinball machine that lit up. It works and it goes up to 7,000,000 and you have to—you can still play the machine. You have to put centimes in. You—it doesn't—you know, it's translated for French money.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you ever get it home?

GEORGE SEGAL: I didn't. It stayed in Paris.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Oh, that's a fascinating story. But you surely must have taken more than two weeks, didn't you? Was that only a few weeks to do?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. I did it very fast because I was restless, I think. I felt I was—well, I had all kinds of what was I doing showing in Paris and, you know, carrying close a Newcastle idea?

DOROTHY SECKLER: How was it received in Paris?

GEORGE SEGAL: I lost my nerve and I left before the opening. And then I began to get sheets of clippings. It was received extremely well. The French were very excited and—

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year was that, by the way?

GEORGE SEGAL: —I suppose chauvinistic—what year was that, '63?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Well, seems to me it was '63.

GEORGE SEGAL: '63 I guess the show was. Ileana Sonnabend had done pioneering missionary work, had shown a lot of new American art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They knew Rauschenberg pretty well at this time.

GEORGE SEGAL: Rauschenberg, Johns, Dine—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: Lichtenstein I think had already shown. So there was—the gallery did have a reputation for bringing this new American work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There was not, in their minds then, any confusion as to viewing your work as let's say American social protest or linking it with the—somebody like the Italian, you know—I can't quite think of the name, the social protest painter in Italy and so on? They didn't—they didn't link it with that kind of thing at all, did they?

GEORGE SEGAL: Oh, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was seen as a new American movement?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. Well, I don't think my work has much to do with social protest anyway.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't think so either but it struck me that, to a person—European sensibility might read it in that way somehow. And, probably, the reason that that comes to my mind is that I remember reading so many of the reviews in France of the work of Ben Shahn and people like that that were sent over immediately after the war. And there were very curious attitudes, quite unexpected in many ways. So I thought they might be a little mixed up about this. I'm sure—

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, the French are just as mixed up and how—I think have exactly the same problems as the Americans have and had and will have. You know, if we read Simone de Beauvoir,

say *The Mandarins*, post-war France could have been translated to 1940 New York, art versus politics and, you know, what is your role. And the abstract expressionists went through exactly that. I don't know a single artist who's not aware of society. We simply take differing stances in relation to society as the times change.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I would gather, in terms of everything that you've said, that you don't see any likelihood of art becoming so much—so closely identified with actuality that the function of art, of—in its more traditional sense, or is likely to be eradicated or taken over by, well, even forms like Happenings. What—in other words, what do you think is the future of sculpture and painting?

GEORGE SEGAL: Most likely the future of sculpture and painting rests in the hands of those people most passionately committed to it and will depend on how strongly convinced they are about what they're doing. I certainly don't want to—I don't want to make any predictions because I think it's—chances of being wrong are too great. Possibilities are too open. I owe a certain debt to abstract expressionism, its stance, its attitudes, its literal way of working and certainly the ideas involved are so provocative that I had to consider them in shaping the way I wanted to go.

If I go a certain way, I have six or eight friends who chose other ways to go and they're perfectly right for themselves. You know, if they end up doing work that agrees with their whole body temperament and they have a large enough ambition, you know, say one thing we would share would be this ambition of totality, how you go about suggesting totality—and we all—you know, like we're all still trapped in—you know, like, we are not God and I don't think that we want to be. You know, like we simply want to be human beings, I suppose, understanding as much as possible. So, therefore, okay, so maybe it's all right to just suggest totality.

The ways of doing it are so open, if I—now, this month I'm involved with incorporating a piece of film. I'm combining—I'll be asked to list the materials in my sculpture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I did hear about that.

GEORGE SEGAL: It'll be metal, glass, plastic. How am I going to describe the movie film and the projector?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. By all means, let's talk about that for a moment because we're talking about the future and this is the one you're working on at the moment.

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, all right. I think this attitude of openness about materials, number one, is a basic beginning point. How can I automatically rule out that something will be good or bad or worthwhile or what, you know, a judgment on art quality because it has or hasn't got the particular material or means used? Theoretically, it's quite possible to make a—an artwork that involves film. Why not? You know, and then we judge that thing as an experience somehow, you know, and bring all our background to it. Any combinations of materials are all right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But let's take—let's say specifically I'm going to ask you in a moment to describe that piece involving the film. But, if we assume that let's say what is your—what effect would you like your pieces, whatever, whether or not you use extremely unusual materials or new techniques, what effect on the observer would you hope they would have? I know that's a very broad question.

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, all right. I can answer you very directly about that. I've done a few pieces before using real light and I'm still intrigued with it. I feel I haven't even begun to scratch the

possibilities of real light as an expressive tool.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And here we—you mean things like neon light or actual sunlight or actual electric light or—

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. Absolutely, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: All right. So here's a piece that's going to be a man sitting in a cab of a truck driving, you know, holding the wheel and the thing will be set up somehow so that the windshield will become the screen. The sculpture will be still and the man will be staring at the windshield and so will a small ring of observers. And the windshield will have an image of driving down a highway at night, everything black with the lights floating at you endlessly. These are all colored lights, either white or colored, driving down some industrial highway.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Which you have filmed at night—

GEORGE SEGAL: Which I filmed myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —driving down such a highway?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Obviously.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. I made—I made the film myself. So, obviously, the truck is red. It'll have to be a very dark room. There will be a lot of red. There will be a lot of black and there will be a succession of moving lights in it. So something will be moving. Theoretically, I can animate any limbs of my sculptures or I can use real people, you know. But I'm more interested in dealing with light as disembodied, floating and moving and I'm curious to see—I still don't know. You know, I have to put the whole thing together yet. But I have an idea that I'll be intrigued somehow with that particular combination of heavy weight, you know, massive stillness and disembodied floating light. Let's see what happens when I put it together.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: We had been discussing your—one of your latest pieces of sculpture in which a figure of a truck driver will be related to a windshield acting as a screen for a projection of lights and so on. Would you like to go on and talk a little bit more about what you hope that experience will be for the spectator? I think that's how we got off on this.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What you would like the person viewing it to feel and experience, is it a matter of re-experiencing something from real life and saying, yes, you know, I've always been fascinated by these lights coming toward me, or is it a more existential thing of just, you know, this is the way life is now? Could you bring it [inaudible]?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, I can try, perhaps. On one level, I want the piece to be very straight and direct, you know, with a minimum of obvious transposing on my part. It's going to be all about the experience of driving at night. And I took many rolls of film and anything that didn't feel like driving at

night was rejected. So that—you know, that's an arbitrary and ruthless insisting that the experience be concrete in a certain way. So I try to keep the experience concrete all through the piece.

And I've already seen on the film, on a film that I've taken, that it took—for me anyway, my own response to the film is that it takes a huge jump into abstraction and the qualities of moving light. I know that it's real. I know that that's exactly what happens when you drive down a road and—but seeing all the lights floating and disembodied means that something else occurs, at least for me, that there is something that I don't understand about these qualities of light.

And the simple way that I decided that—it was such an obvious reversal here. The truck will be standing still and the image of the road will be moving is about all I'm doing. But it seems to be, from my tentative setups, it—I hope it'll be effective. You know, I hope that it'll give some glimmer of a whole range from the earthy concrete and make a transcendent leap somewhere else and combine in a single piece qualities of disembodied photons with heavy gravity, you know, literal weight. Beyond that I don't know. I don't even—well, I'm just hoping that I'll have—I'll be able to get something like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is the spectator likely to experience actually a sense of movement through space, himself, do you think? I mean is that part of it or will he simply view this as another person, the driver, experiencing this projection through movement along and so on and things coming at him?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, again, if I can judge from my own past responses, you know, as I have been building things, no—there will—I doubt if there'll be any single effect. If, for a moment you feel that space is moving and you're floating in it, you can turn your head or move a step and, you know, sense your own body and understand that you're in a room, you know, seeing some arbitrarily-arrived-at set up.

I think I'm interested in experiencing the whole range of sensations and even if for a split second, you know, there's a disembodied floating effect or the transport is for a split second and then you come back to reality, it's—I think it's the shuffling play.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It should be both. Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: It should be both, which is probably why I'm not capable of making a pure mandala. You know, I always—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I know what you mean. Yes.

GEORGE SEGAL: I've always seemed to insist on the earthy origin, well, possibly because I sense—I don't even know if I'm right, you know. We can't have any transcendent experience without our viscera and colons working.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How true.

GEORGE SEGAL: [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'd say we're mandalas.

GEORGE SEGAL: I don't even know if I can explain why that happens.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it's a centered figuration, I guess.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. All right. It's a—well, what's a mandala? I suppose everybody has their own idea. It would be a representation of a sensation of an ultimate or a center, sensed or intuited, which would have no visual referral to anything that we can see with our eyes in the world, you know, but a referral to a sense of the center of energy in the universe or—

DOROTHY SECKLER: An ideal figuration.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: An abstract—ideal abstract figuration. That was what I assumed you meant when you spoke of a mandala. So—but, as you were saying, going away from the mandala into the actuality that we don't have any experience in which we are not still there and all our bodily processes working. Would you like to take up from there?

[They laugh.]

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, that's a—that's a tricky point because if I do say that I'm interested in totality, I find myself as much interested in magic and intangible qualities and sensed qualities as much as I'm interested in the physical and concrete. I do suspect a relationship between them, you know, a play back and forth. I don't quite know precisely the character of the interplay. I don't think anybody does, you know, in spite of all the science and in spite of all the religion and philosophy.

All we can do is sense the quality of the interplay, which means that, if we can suspect hidden relationships, then all we can do is hunt them down and, in the same way that many artists today have opened up gigantic doors permitting all kinds of physical material to be used, it also opens up other kinds of doors where hitherto forbidden subject matter can be incorporated into art, combinations of things can be tried.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And perhaps a new involvement of the audience? Would this come into this particular project of yours in any special way?

GEORGE SEGAL: That's—wait a minute. Now, wait a minute. That—you see, there's a vast area in which to operate now with all these ideas and openings and potentiality. Somebody can say the real painting is the structure and no figuration. Somebody else can say the real space and the intervals between objects and their contemplation has something to do with truth. Somebody else can say it's the internal response of the observer that constitutes the true result of the artwork and can work on any number of means to provoke an internal response or involve the audience to a greater extent. I suspect that everybody is reflecting a sliver or a fragment of a total truth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you tended in your work to move from one position of—one of those positions to another to any extent, having started off with the idea the importance of that space being like Cézanne and so on? Have you tended to perhaps become more and more involved with other possibilities beyond that or to think that's less important?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, I've discovered—no. I have tended so far not to move into theater or Happenings, per se. I'm intrigued by certain ideas and possibilities. I may. I don't know. You know, it may come from the outside. It may be internally directed. There's still so much about myself and my relations to things immediately around me that I still don't know, that I'm still interested in exploring. So I can go from a light piece to an interior psychological piece or a mythic piece. At the same time I'm working on the movie of the truck riding at 60 miles an hour down the highway at night, I'm also working on Lot and the pillar of salt. Again—

DOROTHY SECKLER: In a sculpture?

GEORGE SEGAL: In a sculpture, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A life-sized sculpture.

GEORGE SEGAL: A life-sized sculpture. Life-sized sculpture and no environment for figures. And it has to do with subject matter. It has to do with forbidden areas. It has to do with the tension of relationships between male and female people, figures.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is there more than one figure involved then? Is there a group?

GEORGE SEGAL: Lot has two daughters and a wife.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I see.

GEORGE SEGAL: Exactly how I'm doing it I don't know except that I have to put myself into the flesh of each character and flesh out a spare myth. There is a lot of inventing of what kind of people they are. There's a lot of leapfrog. You know, what was—what was it like 5,000 years ago? What is it like now? Aren't human beings much the same now as then, bone structure, you know, chemically, physically? And, in quality of response, situations are different. We're looking at it now and, you know, the piece becomes pure invention or folly or conceit on my part.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In conceiving—

GEORGE SEGAL: I'm making no moral judgments.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In conceiving a piece like that, would you be apt to conceive it in terms of a sketch or how does it proceed in conception?

GEORGE SEGAL: No. No sketches.

DOROTHY SECKLER: All right.

GEORGE SEGAL: No sketches. Everything has to be built into the physical action of the body. And I suppose it's my own version of the Dance. The reason I'm so interested in the new theater, you know, which has to do with choreography and body movements and reality and the naturalness of everyday gestures as opposed to artful gestures mostly because my work coincides with the same problems I have. What—I've seen how emotional attitudes of people who pose for me absolutely color the total body look of the sculpture.

And, if I'm dealing with my own interior state of mind, I'm—I also have to consider the interior state of mind of the person posing, the quality of their self-awareness. And it sometimes becomes uncanny how states of mind, in casting live people, you know, rather than casting dead things, how states of mind become revealed in the plaster which is why it continues to fascinate me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So it does at times I gather then surprise you. The outcome is what you considered and yet different?

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Plus the model and plus others.

GEORGE SEGAL: Oh, almost always. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To what extent do you allow yourself the liberty of changing proportions, alignments, spaces and so forth in reassembling parts of the cast for the final thing?

GEORGE SEGAL: Really—oh, that's a tricky question. I try to monkey as little as possible with the real proportions. What I do monkey with and I lie and lie and lie—I really—my favorite tool is a hatchet. The minute adjustments of fractions of inches and—well, I'm jumping around. When you're working with the plaster and putting the cast together, by nature it must become wet and floppy and loose. Everything is cracked and the plaster takes so many minutes to set. So I'm aware of the plaster while it's in a very fluid state. When it's all finished, it's rock-like and immovable. It looks implacable and as if it was predestined that way. It's not true when I work with it. So that—I have to catch with wet, floppy stuff total lines that have something to do with the interior attitudes either of myself or the person posing. The truth of proportion is something I automatically want to keep because I could take the cast and cut it up into pieces and put it together in all kinds of odd ways—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you ever experimented with that?

GEORGE SEGAL: No, in the same way that I have not experimented with cubism because the only way that I know of right now to chop up these fragments and put them together would make me remember surrealism too much. And it's simply another arbitrary choice.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was wondering if, for instance, if you feel that sometimes perhaps a very attenuated leg would be interesting in relationship to a swelling portion somewhere else? Would you then allow yourself the liberty of say exaggerating one part and cutting down the other a bit?

GEORGE SEGAL: I haven't yet. Probably it's a philosophic idea right now. I played around. You know, like I've put—I've put the head of one person on another person, you know, so you get an incredible distortion if you put the head of a small-boned person on a large expansive one. And, you know, then—I did that the other night and this small-boned person was also timid and shrinking, you know, and as a—you see, along with the size is a whole interior attitude that strangely enough is reflected in the casting. It becomes a monster somehow when you mix that small-boned tentative withdrawal with not only the physical build of exuberant vitality and breadth with the emotional attitudes that are connected with it. It's not just putting two ridiculous sizes together. You know, there's an emotional, psychological shock involved.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But it wasn't an interesting or a fervent shock in your point of view? It wasn't anything you'd want to explore in particular?

GEORGE SEGAL: If I were interested in—oh, let's see. Under what—under what situation would I be interested in such a thing? Creating the most untenable kind of tensions, perhaps, you know, like really setting somebody ajar, really wanting to induce hallucination or what the surrealists wanted to do. You know, like then, of course, you know, like if—then you simply take a principal and you go as far as you can.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Or even mannerism that you let result in that kind of—you know, crazy jumps and proportions and things.

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, for better or worse, all these possibilities are open. If somebody comes along who is interested in something like that, sure, these things are alive. I've never wanted to fracture, fragment or do cubism and I'm putting big blocky things together. It must be my particular

sensibility I guess.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you would never be tempted in doing something like the truck driver with the projection on the windshield to let's say carry that further into reality by supplying sounds of traffic or any of that sort of thing? That would be—that would go beyond the—what you consider the limits of—

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, sound intrigues me, so I don't rule any of these possibilities out. I just think that, if I introduce too much extraneous stuff, it would interfere with the purity of the ideas that I was tackling. I can very easily conceive incorporating sound into a piece, you know, but in a particular way. I'm not interested in evoking—well, we return to the *Slice of Life*.

DOROTHY SECKLER: *Slice of Life*.

GEORGE SEGAL: Should I have—should I make the sculpture in a real truck and part it on the curb, you know, and have you crawl into the back of the truck? You know, then you're aware of whole situation. Yes, somebody who wanted—you know, interested in the Happening philosophy would say, well, that's the whole thing that we're talking about.

DOROTHY SECKLER: If they are oriented to the idea of a certain kind of audience awareness of itself in an experience only, then you could be satisfied with *Slice of Life*.

GEORGE SEGAL: I'm still dealing I think very strongly with abstraction. You know, so that's where I am. That's where your questions are—

DOROTHY SECKLER: There still are very definite formal limits to what you can do—what you want to do?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, they're self-imposed simply because I'm interested in those areas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now, we also have a recent piece of yours. I think people who wrote about your work earlier assumed that the whiteness of the cast was also one of the self-imposed limitations that, of course, had the tendency to give it a kind of aesthetic distance from reality in the sense that there was this ghost-like whiteness. However, in a recent group that you did, the Costume Ball—*Costume Party* at—that was shown recently at Janis, of course, the figures were colored. Now, how did you come to accept that much of a departure or are you likely to do it again? I know that, of course, you don't want to be rigid about it. But would you like to talk about that experience that's difference from the others, at least?

GEORGE SEGAL: Well, I've always known that the pieces could be colored. One of the first pieces I ever did was painted, which I suppressed. I—you notice in *The Costume Party* the color is not naturalistic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No.

GEORGE SEGAL: There's no flesh tone. You know, each figure's simply drenched with a different intense color so that—and it takes place against a red background. I think I'm still mentally working on that piece and I may change it yet. I've been interested in color a long time, you know, as a painter. And, in the sculpture, there's an awful lot of color in the—within the environment itself in many of the pieces. Many of them are restrained down to black and white or black and—or brown and white with just a little clustering of colored spots. Others have gigantic areas of red in them, for instance. One piece has, you know, blue, orange and ivory at the bus station. You know, the entire

surrounding is brilliantly colored so that the sculpture becomes say a white form in a—in an intensely-colored field.

The real light is—also produces color. Some pieces are made for natural light and changing daylight. Others carry their own illumination.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Such as a neon light in *The Cleaning* sculpture and so on.

GEORGE SEGAL: Yes. So that—I am interested in color and, if I use it in a particular way, it's because I want to because I think that the color contributes to the total idea that I'm dealing with or the sensation or the experience.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you conceive that piece as colored from the beginning, *The Costume Party*, or did that develop in the course of the working it out?

GEORGE SEGAL: I thought of that piece as colored from the beginning. I may have made a mistake, you know, or I may—is it the—that piece still nags at me. I really—I wanted to set up a lot of disturbing tensions in that piece. Usually, the pieces have a certain resolution or largess or calmness that I like. You know, I really don't rest until I get that sense. This piece I knew was going to be tense and there are so many things you can do to make a piece tense.

Well, it's like you can decide to play the piano loud or soft or in a dissonant way. You know, you can—after you've worked for a while, you can decide on all these notes you want to strike. But you don't—you can decide—you decide only to the point where that's really the way you're feeling now. You know, after a while you can't decide because your general tenor dictates the resolution of a piece. I don't know about the color. If—I could paint the next piece that I do, if I so choose, you know, if it happens to fit the way I'm feeling.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But as far as you can see now, would you say that you are apt to be entering a period when the quality of tension in your figures is likely to predominate or is it just impossible? Are you likely to have calm periods and tense periods?

[They laugh.]

GEORGE SEGAL: How do I know how my life is going to go? [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I assume that's very hard to answer. Let met turn this off for a moment.

[Audio break.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]