



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Transcript of interview with Fred Smith

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Interview with Fred Smith

at Pleasant View Nursing Home, Phillips, Wisconsin

May 18, 1975

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "theirselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "'cause," was transcribed as "because," "'fore" as "before," "'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

FS: Fred Smith

WV: Willem Volkersz

DV: Diane Volkersz

[**Tape 1, side B**; Volkersz' No. R1-2, reverse side of Herman Rusch interview; 45-minute tape sides.]

[Mr. Smith was having some difficulty speaking due to a 1964 stroke.—Ed.]

WV: I was born in Amsterdam. Have you ever been in Europe?

FS: Come one day, Germany.

WV: Ah hah.

FS: One day. Was born in United States.

WV: I see. Hah. [WV clarify?]

FS: (laughs)

WV: I see. (laughs) That's wonderful.

FS: There's a ____ little ship.

WV: Pardon?

FS: There's ____ a little ____ one time.

WV: I see.

FS: And it's ____ that way, too. Pretty country, you know.

WV: Oh, it's very nice. Very nice. How long did you work on your sculptures?

FS: I imagine I've been at it for 26 years.

WV: 26 years?

FS: Yeah.

WV: That's wonderful.

FS: And as long as it was ____ keep right on.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: But a stroke cut me down.

WV: A stroke, uh huh.

FS: Stroke.

WV: I understand.

FS: When I made them Budweiser horses there.

WV: You were working on the horses?

FS: I got two strokes that night.

WV: Ohh, boy.

FS: Put me right down. [unintelligible] All my [riders] didn't, could, just couldn't know what to put on, but they can see me.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: [unintelligible] ____ read ____.

WV: Let's see. [reads:] "This work just came to me naturally. I started one day in 1950, and I've been doing a few a year ever since. Have about 119 now. First I make a footing about one foot deep and pour concrete in it."

FS: Yeah.

WV: "The figures are started with a couple of strips of lumber, which I wrap with mink or barbed wire. The arms and hands are made separately. After the form is made, I begin filling it in with cement. I do half of it lying down, and then I raise it on the footing and do the remainder after the standing up."

FS: Yeah.

WV: "Then the heads, arms, and hands are erected to the form. It is then dressed with colored glass and other bits of things. I welcome visitors. I like to watch their reactions, but I never sell any because that might spoil it for others." That was written in October 1973. That's really a nice idea, that you wouldn't sell anything.

FS: No.

WV: Because it's all there, right now.

FS: Right. What I made is free. Right in ____.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: They're just _____. When I started them, I had the opinion I wanted to have _____.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: Not unless they wanted to buy the whole goddamn thing.

WV: Hah. (laughter)

FS: And now it's not for sale. [unintelligible] _____ couple of thousand dollars. Couldn't sell nothing. Never got it, not one dollar.

WV: Uh huh. Would you like it to stay there, and to have somebody maintain it, and. . . .

FS: Well, I _____ got two son-in-laws there.

WV: Two sons?

FS: Two son-in-laws.

WV: Son-in-laws? Uh huh.

FS: One lives across the road. The other one lives on this side of _____.

WV: And they take care of it?

FS: They take care of it.

WV: Very good.

FS: Sure. So's if I can't move around anymore, they's always there. Thousands of years more.

WV: That's right! Thousands of years from now they'll be there. (laughter) Well, they're permanently built, you know.

FS: You're damn right.

WV: They're made to last.

FS: I made a little money, but I saved my money. I tell you, anybody can make a dollar, but to keep the dollar. . . .

WV: That's harder.

FS: There's _____ to that. (laughs)

WV: That's right, that's right.

FS: Sure. If you want to make something and you don't know how. They can make _____ dollar.

WV: Yeah.

FS: But to _____ right, don't do it. . . . the tavern [unintelligible].

WV: Huh. (both chuckle)

FS: That's a funny thing, you know.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: Sure.

WV: Is the tavern closed now?

FS: I sold that.

WV: You sold the tavern?

FS: Yeah. And now a person wants to buy my home. (chuckles)

WV: Uh huh. Oh, I see.

FS: He said he never seen a [house] like that ____.

WV: No. Did you build the tavern as well?

FS: Yeah.

WV: You built it. I really like the colored rock in the back. . . .

FS: Yeah.

WV: . . . or around the house. It's very beautiful.

FS: I spent a lot of money. . . . I made money, but I kept ____ under ____, too.

WV: Um hmm.

FS: I never got drunk in the tavern, tavern 26 years. I never got drunk.

WV: Good for you. You had the tavern for 26 years?

FS: Yes.

WV: Did you get the tavern after you retired? Is that right? [FS built the tavern in the late 1940s, just before arthritis forced him to retire from logging—WV]

FS: _____. I tell you how I worked there, the Budweiser horses.

WV: Um hmm. . . .

FS: It was the last thing I [built].

WV: Uh huh, right.

FS: A man _____. I started in the morning. Naturally I had ten horses [the number in the Budweister teams—WV].

WV: Oh, that's extraordinary.

FS: Yeah. And ____ I ____ good example of in the morning I couldn't move. Stroke cut me overnight.

WV: Yeah, sure.

FS: And it was and ____, ____ a little bit _____. _____. I got up ____ the next after _____. I couldn't _____.

WV: No. Boy oh boy.

FS: But it was just _____. [unintelligible passage]

WV: Huh.

FS: You know, you can't judge sickness.

WV: No.

FS: It would be ever so good _____ sickness _____.

WV: Yeah.

FS: But sickness, so many different kinds of sickness.

WV: Yes.

FS: And you don't know which one's going to get you overnight, you know.

WV: That's right.

FS: [unintelligible passage]

WV: Well, you worked very hard all your life.

FS: ____ long _____. (laughter)

WV: Do you remember a man named Herman Rusch, from Cochrane? He's come up here a couple times to visit with you, and he plays the fiddle real well. Do you remember him?

FS: ____ _____.

WV: He's come up here to play fiddle with you. We went to see him yesterday, and he told me to say hello to you.

FS: Oh yeah.

WV: He's built some real nice sculptures in Cochrane, Wisconsin, close to Minneapolis. Do you know. . . .

FS: I think I met the man, I should ____ know him.

WV: Well, do you remember that you had some photographs of your work in an exhibition in Minneapolis? Do you know about that?

FS: Well, I got some, that's over there, that picture right there.

WV: Right, right.

DV: Oh, uh huh.

WV: Now that man is in this same, was in this same exhibition.

FS: I'll be goddamned. (chuckles)

WV: You don't remember. Did they give you one of the books? Do you remember the book from the exhibition? Did you ever see that?

FS: No.

WV: I'm going to go get that.

[Interruption in taping]

WV: You raised what?

FS: Ginseng.

WV: Did you? Huh!

FS: [unintelligible] that's a root.

WV: Yeah, I know, that's very good.

FS: [noise] [unintelligible] I went to the ____ ____ and [unintelligible]

WV: (laughs)

FS: [noise, unintelligible] ____ didn't notice that. Yesterday ____ ____ people from Chicago.

WV: Chicago?

FS: Yeah. They was here yesterday. ____ know about them ____ [noise, unintelligible]

WV: Uh huh.

FS: [noise, unintelligible] know that. ____ put that ____.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: [noise, unintelligible]

WV: He [Herman Rusch—Ed.] used flower pots to cast these.

FS: Sure.

WV: And cups, coffee, plastic coffee cups with a point on them.

FS: I see.

WV: He used to cast those, the tops for those.

FS: I see. These are _____. (laughter)

DV: And he put a nail on top so the birds wouldn't land on them.

WV: He wants to keep them clean, you know.

FS: Sure.

WV: Yeah.

FS: That fellow, you know, he isn't a young man.

WV: Yeah, right. (chuckles)

FS: You say he's old, but. . . .

WV: He's ninety.

FS: That don't mean a damn thing.

WV: Right.

FS: They took my pulse yesterday. She says, you _____ the _____, and she's [called, caught] the [beans, bees, beads]. And she's caught the beans. And I asked _____, one of the beans was _____. I asked her, "How many beans you got?" Well, you going to live another three hundred years! (chuckles)

WV: Right.

FS: _____ beans. [unintelligible]

WV: Uh huh.

FS: [unintelligible] . . . and they bite. (laughter) Like I said, it don't mean nothing.

WV: How old are you?

FS: I'm getting there, I guess. You'll find out when you go [to my] home.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: Right by the [TV]. They got my name there.

WV: Oh, you do. Okay.

FS: You'll find it says my age.

WV: Okay.

FS: But it'll be, I'm going to have a birthday. The twentieth of September is my birthday.

WV: Your birthday, eh?

FS: [Had] a birthday party. The whole goddamn _____ must have been here. (laughter)

WV: Wonderful.

FS: Sure.

WV: There's a nice picture of you in here too. Is that the one that's on the, up on the wall there, I think?

FS: Yeah, that's the one.

WV: Let's see. [pause] There your are. Right there. That's you.

FS: By God, I see it now. (laughter) ____ old man when that ____.

WV: Looks like a young man. Now was that taken at the same time that they took that one there?

FS: ____, but I don't know. They come in here, I don't know how that come in.

WV: You don't remember?

FS: No, they come in here when I was sleeping, I guess. (laughter)

WV: Let's see.

FS: ____ they [unintelligible] ____ [private]. [unintelligible]

WV: Sure. Do you recognize those?

FS: No.

WV: Are your eyes bad?

FS: My eyes is all right.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: As a rule, you know, I can't read, you know.

WV: Too small, huh?

FS: [unintelligible] I never had no schooling.

WV: Oh?

FS: Sure!

WV: Huh! You never learned to read?

FS: No. Just write my name. (laughs)

WV: Well, that's all you need.

FS: Sure, country ____.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: And I got [unintelligible] Nobody knows; they're all _____. [unintelligible] Nobody know _____ [unintelligible] how much _____. [unintelligible] might be more of it. . . .

WV: Or less?

FS: Yes. But I asked to _____ what his [Princeton] was costing. [unintelligible] to [learn, run] that _____. There's too much _____. [unintelligible] They want to know if I got _____ some _____.

WV: (chuckles)

FS: And how much land I got. [unintelligible] And _____, I don't know how that's come to _____. I was _____, get that _____ [unintelligible] Boys, you only got the _____. But he didn't know how many acres I had.

WV: Huh.

FS: You won't _____ my _____. [unintelligible] boys, a couple of crooks, [unintelligible] he told them that your money but [unintelligible] sick of the land _____ over here [unintelligible] and _____, he says. Then they went _____ where they were right downtown and they said it, _____. That's _____ [unintelligible] his left _____. [unintelligible] (laughs)

WV: Very good.

FS: ____ people going to ____ [unintelligible]

WV: I see.

FS: I give them away in the winter and ____, and I judged ____ land ____ that up. I know ____ [unintelligible] from now. ____ the right _____. [unintelligible] Used to was if I had _____. But it ____ some _____. [unintelligible] [swamp] lands.

WV: Right.

FS: [unintelligible]

WV: Um hmm.

FS: You over there that ____ in September, [unintelligible] I says, ____ very much _____. ____ I ____ my work right through there.

WV: Huh.

FS: _____, and I'm going to tell you just _____. And by God, there ____ [unintelligible] got a little _____. ____ come over here and he says, "How much money you want?" [unintelligible] I says, _____. (laughter) Tavern. Put up [unintelligible] and have [unintelligible]. ____ in my wife's living room _____. [unintelligible] And he wanted to _____. [unintelligible]

WV: Huh.

FS: [unintelligible] [peppers, papers]. That's ____ what he done. [Amoeba, Or maybe], without _____. [unintelligible]

WV: (laughs)

FS: More numbers at you. That's the way he used the work, you know.

[Interruption in taping]

WV: [reading:] Grass Roots Sculpture Sprouts at Walker. Two [untrained] Wisconsin sculptors are among the nine naives and visionaries whose grassroots art is being shown through January 26 at the Walker Art Center here. They are Fred Smith, 89, a retired farmer and tavern owner from Phillips, and Herman Rusch, 90, a retired farmer from Cochrane. Both are self-taught craftsmen who worked for decades to create complex imposing environmental structures that constitute a kind of private utopia. Smith, now a resident of a nursing home, built more than 200 life-size concrete figures encrusted with shards of glass and mirror on his property just outside Phillips. The groupings, a blend of legend and localism, include Paul Bunyan and a double wedding complete with four-seater buggy pulled by a team of concrete horses. Smith is represented in the show with several figures from his concrete park.

Long a tourist attraction along Highway 13, Rusch, who started work on his Prairie Moon museum and garden at 71, built a concrete post especially for the exhibition. This post and arches in stone and red-dyed concrete often suggest ancient, near-Eastern astrological forms.

[Interruption in taping]

FS: ____ too.

WV: The kids, uh huh.

FS: Sure.

DV: Are these your grandkids?

FS: No, some of them, but not all of them. But my own kids are in my _____.

WV: You were a fiddler yourself, weren't you?

FS: Oh, I got four good violins. I can go ____ right to Wausau in one and play there.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: Sure. [unintelligible] Do you know anyone in Wausau?

WV: No.

FS: I been in there [unintelligible] Unbelievable.

WV: Really.

FS: ____ play right away.

WV: That's nice.

FS: [unintelligible]

WV: You've always played, since you were a boy?

FS: I made my own violin when I was [fourteen] years old.

DV: Really?

WV: Sure!

DV: Wow.

FS: I got a ____ box. (all chuckle) I didn't have no money but I play a couple [noise]. [noise, unintelligible] best ____ but I said I got ____ [here, hear]. ____ eighteen dollars. Give me _____. [noise, unintelligible] I says, "Well, yeah, I ____." [noise, unintelligible] Now I can go anyplace in the United States [unintelligible] play if I ____.

WV: Wonderful.

FS: Yes.

WV: Do you still play now, too?

FS: [unintelligible] I can't do it . . . cut down by the horses.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: I had two strokes.

WV: Yeah.

FS: And by God, ____, two.

WV: I see.

FS: ____ the matter.

WV: Ohh. That's too bad.

FS: Yeah.

WV: Huh. I'm sorry to hear that.

FS: But I can [unintelligible] keep time.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: As long as they tell me what numbers are in it. [unintelligible]

WV: Right. And then you can keep time?

FS: I can keep [unintelligible]

WV: Huh. Wonderful.

FS: ____, I never lose that.

DV: Good.

FS: [unintelligible]

WV: Well, you ____.

FS: ____ [Tavern] big bucks down there.

WV: Right.

FS: [unintelligible] Dig your rock garden ____ ____.

WV: Are you going to go back pretty soon and finish your work?

FS: I don't know whether I'm going to make it or not.

WV: Sure you will. (chuckles)

FS: [unintelligible] Sickness is a funny thing. Can't judge sickness. Might be later ____ today, tomorrow? ____.

WV: Huh.

FS: It's covered with _____. I got _____. It's getting all right, but they _____ stroke comes [unintelligible]

WV: Hmm.

FS: [unintelligible]

WV: Sort of unexpected, isn't it?

FS: Yeah, sure! _____ that's what's the trouble. [unintelligible]

WV: Yeah.

FS: But I hope. That's all I can do is hope. (all chuckle)

WV: Never lose hope. Can't lose hope.

FS: No.

WV: Well, I think maybe we'll go back and take a few more pictures of your sculptures.

FS: Why sure, sure.

WV: And I'll send you a few prints if you'd like. Would you like to see a few prints?

FS: Sure.

WV: A few pictures? I'll send them to you in the mail, in a few weeks.

FS: Why sure. (laughs)

WV: Good. Good.

FS: You're a good man to me. I can [remember] every time you talk to me. (chuckles)

WV: Good. Well, it was very nice talking to you.

FS: Sure.

WV: Really nice meeting you, and I really like your work, very, very much.

FS: Sure.

WV: I think you did a . . .

FS: Yesterday a bunch from Chicago.

WV: Uh huh. We're from Kansas City.

FS: Which way is that?

WV: Kansas City is south. In Missouri. That's, let's see, it's between Illinois and Kansas. And it borders on Arkansas. It's south of here, about 600 miles.

FS: What kind of work do you do?

WV: I'm a teacher.

FS: Teacher.

WV: Art teacher.

FS: (chuckles)

WV: That's why I like your work so much.

FS: (chuckles)

WV: I teach students how to draw, how to paint, sculpture.

FS: Some ____ you ____ young. I thought you never could have done that. Sort of got to do something in that _____. When you get old and then the older you get, the more _____, just _____. Get _____.

WV: Did you have any idea as a young man to do these sculptures?

FS: No, I started too late, you know.

WV: The idea didn't come to you until you'd built the tavern?

FS: No, I _____. You know, I built the tavern, just _____ when I started the tavern _____. I just had _____. Just have to come too. [unintelligible] because my memory is on [unintelligible]

WV: Oh. [reading:] "I started one day in 1950."

FS: Yeah.

WV: Yeah.

FS: That's _____ my _____. [unintelligible] right now. [unintelligible] I might be _____ all that.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: [unintelligible] But I [unintelligible] Budweiser horses, you know.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: I thought I was all right. [unintelligible] I woke up, I didn't even remember.

WV: Hmm.

FS: [unintelligible]

WV: Hmm.

FS: [unintelligible] (chuckles) Like that, I can get along, but I keep time. [unintelligible] Well. . . .

WV: Well, it's been very good meeting you.

FS: [unintelligible]

DV: Yeah, that's good.

WV: Uh huh.

FS: [unintelligible] Just [unintelligible] The more company I got, the more I learn. Now _____ you to talk. [unintelligible]

WV: This book here?

FS: Yeah. Now see, it's ____ learn. I know who ____ ____.

WV: Good.

FS: (laughs) But you learn every time you say something, yes sir. Wonderful thing.

WV: Good.

DV: Well, we learn from you.

FS: Well, sure. You learn from me, and I you. Either one.

WV: Right. Both works both ways.

FS: Well, sure. [unintelligible] (all chuckle) [unintelligible] in here ____ make use of it. I got a lot of nice nurses who ____ that like it. (laughter) Like ____ ____.

WV: Wonderful.

FS: Sure.

WV: Well, I'll send you a few pictures in the mail, and thank you for talking to us.

FS: Yeah, ____ _____. [unintelligible] right here. [unintelligible] right there.

WV: Hmm?

FS: The pictures you're going to send me?

WV: I'll mail them to the nursing home here.

FS: Oh, ____? That's right, yeah.

WV: I'll do that.

FS: ____ ____ to me ____ ____.

WV: Um hmm.

DV: Okay. We'll get the address.

FS: Sure.

WV: Good. Okay.

[Interruption in taping]

WV: [reading:] "Fred Smith and his cement friends."

[End of interview]