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Tape-recorded notes on Benjamin Oscar
Ward

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Notes on Benjamin Oscar Ward

at Sugar Grove, North Carolina

March [20, 21], 1977

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," "themselves," 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

[Tape 1, side B; Volkersz' No. M1-1]

[This is recorded on the same tape with interviews with Ed Martin and C.McGriff.—Ed.]

Notes on Benjamin Oscar Ward:

We talked to Ray Ward, Benjamin Oscar Ward's son, in Sugar Grove, North Carolina. Ray told us that his father had served in World War I and was totally disabled during the war, and apparently was pretty much of a nervous case. He had a vision apparently for a house that he wanted to build in 1929. He said he was driving along and suddenly had a vision of this house. Now the house is built of stone and the stone wheels out of old mills. Some of them came from mills that were in the family in that area and others came from other mills. Two supposedly came from a mill in Belgium, although Ray wasn't sure how they had gotten to Sugar Grove.

The inscriptions on the stones were done by a friend of B. O. Ward's. Not only did he build the house, but he liked to play baseball, and apparently because he wasn't a very good player people wouldn't always let him play with them on a team, so he decided to build his own baseball field, and it is apparently a copy in size and in terms of design of the Cleveland Stadium. The stadium is—I mean the baseball field is located in the area of the house but we didn't see it.

B. O. Ward was a farmer, and he bought farms in the area, bought land. He would fix up houses, fix up, fix the fences and then suddenly drop them. He didn't really want to farm them. He primarily was involved in the work of fixing them up, and then suddenly would drop that and go on to something else. He had a sawmill across from the house for quite a few years until one year during a flood—I think of 1942—all the lumber floated away, and

that was the end of the mill. Even though his original vision of the house came to him in 1929, the house wasn't built until about ten years later in 1939.

B. O. Ward was an avid reader and the inscriptions are quotations from his reading with, interspersed with a few of his own statements regarding his philosophy of life. His interest in reading apparently was conveyed also to some of his children because Ray Ward, to whom we talked, very frequently quoted from books, quoting Freud and quoting Karl Marx, and other well known authors and philosophers.

Ray Ward inherited the books, and indeed in the house there were—inside—there were a number of bookcases filled with books and several encyclopedias. Many books on art as well. His health was never well ever since he came back from World War I, and finally in 1970, he committed suicide by gassing himself in a garage with the use of an automobile.

Ray Ward spoke very freely about his father and his father's death—suicide—and I was interested to find that Ray Ward did not condemn his father at all for taking his own life, but rather even thought that this was one way out of a perhaps at times miserable life for the old man Ward.

B. O. Ward asked that his ashes be distributed or strewn over the baseball field, which was done. He said that that would be a way of getting back into action quicker after he departed this earth.

Ray Ward called his father a genius. Apparently, B. O. Ward was a very intelligent and obviously a very well-read man. As a matter of fact, I was very impressed by the articulate speech of Ray Ward. I expected a perhaps somewhat ignorant farmer, but I found someone who was articulate and had read quite a few books and was able to converse well and had many interests. Ray Ward's wife is a school teacher.

The house was built with the financial aid of a disability check which B.O. Ward continued to receive, I assume until his death, because of his World War I injuries.

The small tower on the right hand side of the house he built for sunbathing, and apparently he could be completely hidden from view from the road and if someone came to the house and wanted to see him or speak to him he would get dressed and come down from there.

The stone for the house all came from the site on which the house was built. Apparently B. O. Ward was fairly quick-tempered and not always easy to live with, but after a flare-up of his temper he would forget about the disagreement fairly quickly.

The nature of B. O. Ward's disability was mental illness and I think more specifically schizophrenia, and he was in and out of mental hospitals after World War I, until, I think, he died. Although the first quote that I saw on one of the stones was from the Bible, from Saint John, it turns out that B. O. Ward was an agnostic and his personal philosophy of life came from many sources.

[End of tape]