



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with John Stephan,
1986 May 20-1987 May 7

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Walter Stephan on May 20, 1986 and May 7, 1987. The interview took place in Newport, RI, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] Now this is an interview with John Stephan of Newport, Rhode Island. Brown the interviewer. May 20, 1986. I thought, John, we could begin talking a bit about your upbringing. You were born 1906 in Maywood, Illinois. Is that a suburb of Chicago?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It's a suburb. It's just beyond, uh--it's 11 miles west of Chicago. Oak Park is eight miles west, so it's just a few more. You go through Forrest Park and then you come to Maywood.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were these, were these pretty new communities?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: When I lived in Maywood, we lived right out in the prairie. There was a development, a housing development, you know, wooden houses, clapboard-sided houses. Uh, but the electric railroads and the steam railroads were a half a mile away and they just carried out to the prairie. Nothing just within sight.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were most people there commuting into the city? They'd live out there—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They all commuted on the electric trains, uh the Aurora Elgin electric train that joined the elevated system in Chicago and that has its own depot just at the end of the Loop, one edge of the Loop.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it like for you in general in Maywood? Did you live there for some years?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I lived there until I was 10 years of age, and then we moved.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Maywood, your recollection of it as a very pleasant, kind of bucolic place?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well it was pleasant in that it was quite country-like. [00:02:00] We lived a block away from a streetcar line, which was always interesting because then we could go into the main part of town or even go into Chicago by joining another streetcar. Transferring at Austin Avenue, which was the beginning of the Chicago line. Which we did sometimes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were your parents professionals? Or what was their background?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: My father was a dentist. A graduate of Rush Medical School, I think. And he invented the articulator.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What's that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was a framed device in which you could take plaster casts of the jaw, upper and lower. And then putting this to a clamp device and articulate, mount it, set it in plaster. So that it came together right. Then you could build a bridge--bridges for the mouth where the teeth were extracted. You could build a bridge on this model and it would fit the jaw, because it was an identical matching of the jaw. And that was a great invention. But he didn't make any money on it because he had to sell it when he was 30, just to survive. SS White produced the, uh, articulator, of course made millions on it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your father a very busy man, very interested in his profession?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well he was busy. He took the--he also took the railroad into Chicago and back at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: His practice was in Chicago?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. He was in the Masonic Temple building, which was the first skyscraper, the first steel and masonry skyscraper in the world. And [00:04:00] many architects, today don't even recognize it as being the first and tallest building in the world.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was your mother? What were her interests?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: She was trained as a nurse and used to—if the neighbors called up, if their son or daughter or child was sick, they'd call her up in the middle of the night and she'd come over. Put on her clothes and go over there and nurse them. 'Course then in those days, people had scarlet fever and diphtheria, whooping cough and chicken pox as well as pneumonia and other diseases, sicknesses. And they used to fumigate houses with sulfur candles and paste up all the doors and put a sign on the front door: "Keep out. Nobody should enter except health service persons." So they wouldn't spread these diseases.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You have a pretty vivid memory.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I had them all. I was sick until I was 10.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were fairly sickly as a young child?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Quite sick. I was a six-and-half-month's child.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I had two brothers and a sister. I really had three brothers, but he died when he was two years old or so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where did you stand in the ages?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was next to last.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Next to last.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Next to youngest. My brother's younger.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the family very close? Good deal—many things you did together?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Close and very idealistic. My mom descended from the Carl Schurz [ph] Marxists that moved, I think from Alsace or Germany to this country, to establish, I think, an idealists' [00:06:00] community.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A commune sort of thing.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But she was, uh--her family were--her parents were killed off during the cholera epidemic. So she was adopted by a Catholic family.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But she retained some of this idealism from her parents?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well she had this idea; she was a pacifist. To the last--'til her last days. She had written a book in—can you turn that thing off a second?

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your mother wrote—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: —wrote articles for the trained nurse magazine. That was a magazine that was current at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So she took her profession quite seriously.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And she practiced it, more or less, after you children were born?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, well even before. She also took up Braille, typing Braille. That's for the blind. And she did many translations of novels in Braille during—after the First World War. They were given to the blind to read in hospitals.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She was quite a humane and—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: —very humane. Very idealistic, very righteous. Without condemning people, but she condemned me [laughs] a good deal. Well somewhat, you know. Because as I came back from college, I came back with a number of my friends who wanted to get jobs. And we used to play poker, penny ante poker and all that. And did some drinking and my mother never approved of alcohol. [00:08:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of things did your father have?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: My father was similar, quite similar to that. But he never spoke of it a great deal. But he was a famous doctor, teaching at Rush Medical School root canal filling. That was in the old days when they would drill out a nerve and fill it with gutta-percha and he evidently was so competent, he'd get out all the remainder of it. They very rarely had reinfections or abscesses. And he was known as a wonderful doctor—dentist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he write too about some of this?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He wrote a lot of things, but my brother has them all. Because my brother studied dentistry and worked for my father and with my father and continued and then ended up in the National Health Institute in Washington, Bethesda.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you as a boy have interests in going on, following your father or—?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I did! After high school I would come down, take the elevator into the Loop and go and help my father at his dental office in the Masonic Temple. Squirting water on the teeth of patients when they uh, had their teeth drilled, cleaning out vulcanizes [ph], cutting out the plaster, and taking out the model that was vulcanized and the object and sterilizing instruments. But I never had an interest in being a dentist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you were in Maywood until you were 10, and then you moved. At that time, [00:10:00] or by the time you become an adolescent, were there other people outside of your family becoming influential on your life?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well we knew a number of poets and, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your parents did.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Parents did. And, uh, we did have some people coming through our house quite often. There was a Dutch branch of the family named Van Vessem who came from Waukegan and we'd go up there by steamboat from Chicago, up to Waukegan and back. There were small coastal steamers. Coal-burning steamers.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And some of them were poets or writers?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well there was a poet that I guess was a friend of my father's that would come up to our house. He had a long, gray beard. His name was James Vila Blake and if I remember right, I wasn't interested in his poetry. It was rather sweet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were your interests as a very young boy? Do you recall? What--

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was very much interested in hiking in the country. I loved nature of course, like all kids. I was a Boy Scout and uh, we went camping and hiking and everything, all during the summer, a great deal. Uh, this print shop that I started in grammar school. I think you have a copy of the paper I printed, the Boy Scout paper.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this you did out of curiosity as well as you could make a bit of money?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well we had a neighbor who was a--worked in a print shop in Chicago and he brought me a little press, hand-operated press. Seven by 11 Chase. It was pretty big for a [00:12:00] hand press. And I did job printing, and uh, living near the commercial street, Madison Street, I got jobs printing for the druggist, the auto mechanic, the sheet metal repair shop, a car repair shop, for dentists, for my father, letterheads, things like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have an interest in how you designed these things? Do you think your—some of your—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I was lucky just to get enough type to set up things. Which the neighbor, who worked in the printing plant in Chicago professionally, would bring me monotype. That was cast type by machine, like linotype, on the individual type. So he brought me many typefaces, and I'd naturally use those typefaces.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you think about it, do you think this spurred some kind of interest in design?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I think I did it mostly for the money, as a job. Doing some work. I don't think I ever designed any printing. I never made any plates or any wood blocks or anything like that, until way later

than that, many years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you then, in grammar school or a bit later, begin to have some instruction in art in school?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Even in early grammar school before I was 10 we did drawings of wild flowers. We'd pick clover or daisies or even roses, bring them into our class and draw them. Usually with lead pencil and then color them with either watercolor or crayon. And I always felt that I was better than the usual person in these classes [00:14:00] at making those drawings. So I like it from the beginning, the drawing of natural things. But I never took up, never dreamt of myself as an artist until after I went to—got out and went to high school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what happened in high school?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In high school I took an art class. Although I can't remember what I did. I know I made a lampshade with sailing ships on it, painted them in oil. But I don't think I made any impression on anybody in this class particularly. I was rather subjective, or rather, shy and not very sociable. Maybe that came out of my beginning of being very sick and not being very athletic. But in high school I developed and played on the lightweight basketball team, finally got on the team.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you became quite vigorous and robust in your teenage—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, with the hiking and all this—in high school I got a job—I walked out to Lombard, which was about 16 miles. And I walked passed a farm and liked the farm, so I went in and asked the farmer if I could work there for that summer. And he gave me a job working at milking cows, planting grain, plowing on a single blade plow with one horse with a range over my back. [00:16:00] I plowed acres, and cut hay, and stacked barley and rye grass, rye grain—which scratches up your arms a great deal, and went to harvest. And I had, I even found me a saddle horse that I owned. I would ride back and forth to Oak Park. That's when I moved to Oak Park of course, after 10.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you're still not that far from the country then.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, it isn't. As soon as you got off—on Maywood—and then when I was in Oak Park I was three miles from Maywood—you began to get into country. And you came into Elmhurst and Phillips Park and Lombard and Wheaton and Glen Ellyn and West Chicago and then finally St. Charles, which was 30 miles away. And then I'd hike there many times carrying a poncho and a blanket and a pup tent and camped out along a river, Fox River there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Just for the love of camping?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: For the love of camping and hiking.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you beginning to do any sketching or anything like that in those years?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think I sketched some but not as I remember it as a regular professional—I mean as a regular hobby.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now when you came out of high school you still were fairly indefinite as to what you might do?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was indefinite, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had a love of various things, nature—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't get as deeply involved in art as I did when I went out to the University of Illinois. And then I decided I wanted to be an artist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had Oak Park been a different sort of community from Maywood? Was it a bit more urban?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was more urban and a little more elegant. And it had a large, [00:18:00] more affluent group of students. Perhaps that what caused me to be a little more unsociable and reticent to get mixed up in them. Well Rainey Bennett, a friend who went there at the same time—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who became an artist.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: —who became an artist, was in a much more prominent position in high school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd gone to a more sophisticated—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I did more craft things. I did woodworking and blacksmithing. I went into a lot of crafts in high school. And then in the third year, I went to Crane [ph] Tech, which was a technical school. And took a lot of drafting, and I took four years—one year of mechanical drafting there. And sheet metal and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you enjoy that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I enjoyed it, yes. I like to work with my hands. And all those things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oak Park's also where a lot of Frank Lloyd Wright houses are. Were you aware of these?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In grammar school we had a class, afternoon, where we all walked through Frank Lloyd Wright's studio, in which a tree was growing in the hall of the studio, if I remember right. But that was the time Frank Lloyd Wright's wife was killed, and naturally I was not involved in any of the people, so I only got the gossip that I heard in my own home. And it was thought that maybe the Caribbean servant [00:20:00] killed her, but there was also suspicion of Frank Lloyd Wright. Gossip.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he was evidently a pretty well-known figure by—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes, by then. That would be in—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The late teens?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: —the late teens. Up to the 20s, perhaps. Or before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You finished your high school at Oak Park in, when the late teens or something?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In '25 and a half I graduated. That meant I would graduate maybe in '26.

ROBERT F. BROWN: From the high school.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you know what you wished to do at that point? What did you—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I didn't have any idea what I wanted to do. In fact, I went to Illinois University only because my older brother and sister went to Illinois University. And I went to work at the—it might have been '24 and a half I graduated, because I was in the class of 1929 in the university. I went to work—since I got out of school in mid-year, I got a job at the Northwestern Railroad locomotive repair shop on Keebler Avenue and Lake Street.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Chicago?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In Chicago. Because I liked mechanical things, and I worked on steam locomotives. For—I was a helper for a machinist who drove in—that ground in the throttle valve, the ball valve, up in the dome turret of one of the—of the last turns of the boiler. Or the next to last one. But I enjoyed that a great deal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was a summer's work before you went [00:22:00] to university?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Summer's work and—did I work—I thought I worked three quarters of a year there. That makes it an odd time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you got out of school.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I got out and went to—yeah. I earned \$354 to go to the University of Illinois, for tuition.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How'd you like the university?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was, uh, nice. I not only got away from home and went south, to the middle of the state. Which was very country, um, flat land. And I took a course in philosophy, logic, and, uh, art for one year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the art course in? Studio, what we call studio art or—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We had some lectures on—talks about art, about artists. But otherwise we had paints and went out into campus and painted the little bone yard, the little, uh, creek that went through there. Or went to, uh, little parks that existed. Turn it off.

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I did have the—Donovan said to me—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is one of the teachers? Donovan.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: One of my teachers, painting teachers, said that I would be—I would someday be a great artist. That I remember.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why did he say that, you suppose?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He said, "You have one problem. You don't know when to stop painting." I'd always work the thing over and wreck it. You know, the paint would be wet; it'd get too piled on, and he liked it.
[00:24:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he see the light, kind of Impressionistic landscape painting?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, uh, he didn't talk about Impressionists. But then, before the Impressionists were generally known to the schools was later. Although the Art Institute had donations of a lot of Impressionist paintings, Birch Bartlett and there somebody else who gave a great collection of Impressionist paintings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They got them very early. Your teacher Donovan didn't—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: —that was 110 miles south of Chicago.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in fact, did they like for you to be painting in kind of a loose way?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They never talked about the Impressionists—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did they want you to paint?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They always talked about—what was it?—Rubens and Rembrandt and once in a while about Giotto. But he never talked about anything contemporary or even modern or even 19th century. It ended with Whistler and Turner and it wasn't until I got up to Chicago and went to the Art Institute that I ever knew anything about Impressionists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a fairly good teacher?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That's how backward the school was. It was extremely backward.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But did he at least give you your lead so that you could do what you pleased more or less?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, he'd come and correct, tell you where you blooped it and where the shading wasn't right and where the color was muddy. And we also drew charcoal—I did a lot of charcoal drawing in the schoolrooms in wintertime and all. And [00:26:00] they would draw over your drawing and correct it. And the whole problem was, was that shadow dark enough and was it defined clearly? And as I remember none of them were very good at drawing themselves. In fact, when I got to the Art Institute of Chicago, I was amazed at how awful most of those teachers drew.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But they recognized, or they thought they recognized that you had talent or promise?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well just this one, Donovan is the only one I knew that said that. But it impressed me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it enough to make you think of possibly going on with art?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I always was interested in art. But I never dreamt that I would be able to live on it. And I knew nothing of bohemia, or being able to live on just your ability to scrounge up a living. I never was well off, I worked for my meals at restaurants, waiting on tables, and then later at a sorority house serving tables. And also I worked for my room, taking care of the Methodist minister's house. Shoveling snow, sweeping the floors, mowing the lawn, emptying ashes, emptying the garbage.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was still being an industrious young man. Not the same as being a bohemian, right?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I meant I had no idea—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had to work.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In fact I began at the university to read Maupassant and Balzac. And some philosophers. So [00:28:00] that was the beginning of any kind of awakening that I had as far as the world of art as a—in terms of Impressionists, or post-Impressionists or anything. What little I found myself very much

interested was Whistler, Whistler's painting. And I copied a Whistler painting in Chicago Art Institute as one of the assignments, right in the museum. Which they made you copy, uh, as I remember, three inches in each direction shorter than the original. So you had a double job of reducing all those things, that size. It was very difficult to make a copy of a painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was rather tedious, I suppose.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Tedious but I enjoyed it. I don't know where the picture ever went.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you leave the university then after one year?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: One year. I didn't go back. Then I got a job at Western Electric as a draftsman for one of the designers of the rotary telephone switchboards. He was inventing it, with a number of others. And he would draw by hand something, and then tell me to draw it up and come over, look over my shoulder and tell me what changes to make and all that. In other words, I wasn't a school draftsman in the sense of knowing anything about electrical electronics or even design.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this in Chicago?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was in Chicago.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were back there.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: After I got back from school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you in some fashion pursue art interests at all, [00:30:00] after you got back?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think that I spent all my time having my job. I began to paint in my bedroom. I bought an old table with a zinc top to it and put an easel on top of the table and used the zinc top to mix paint, and did painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were living apart from your family by now?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, that was in my family's house. I lived at home. Then I went to the Art Institute after I went to Western Electric and had my job, and saved some money so I could pay the \$210 tuition at the Art Institute. I did go to the Art Institute, day school. And at that time I thought it was too hard to go from—let me see what I'm trying to say.

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I went to art school. I—naturally a lot of artists were from far away out of town, and they lived on the near North Side of Chicago, in the art colony. So then I began to meet artists and I wanted to leave home, not live at home anymore. Because to commute on the elevated all the way to Oak Park was about an hour's drive if I remember, uh, and a long walk. So I thought that I could—I got a job working nights at the Federal Reserve Bank. And counting checks for the State of Iowa, and adding them [00:32:00] on a computer. And uh--

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your parents approved of you going to the Art Institute? They were—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes, they wanted me to go to the Art Institute. They were not against my being an artist. But they were against my being modern. They--my mother thought *The Song of the Lark* was the most wonderful painting, you know by Millet painted it. She said John, if you don't paint like Millet and Whistler—and they took me to the Art Institute when I was younger. They were interested also in opera, so we went to the Auditorium quite often, the Louis Sullivan building that was very impressive to anybody.

ROBERT F. BROWN: While you were—now that you're at the Art Institute, they hoped that you wouldn't become more modern—or your mother did—than Millet.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were you interested in painting? What kind of things were you—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was just an ordinary landscape painter. Like, you can see on those paintings. Now, there's a couple of quirks in my painting, I think, like Pollock, like Clyfford Still. Clyfford Still didn't paint with a brush. Now he might have when he was up in Washington State studying art in Spokane. And might have painted when he was in Edmondton, because he did paint the plow horses and I saw those paintings. So [00:34:00] a lot of artists did not want to go through the discipline of using brushes. So Clyfford used a spatula. I

used a spatula. I didn't know Clyfford anywhere near at that time. I'd never been to New York at that time and Clyfford was only in New York or San Francisco or Seattle. So I found myself able to paint with a palette knife. In fact, I ground the palette knife for Aaron Bohrod, who wanted to use a palette knife, which he painted with. But he also used a brush. I think he glazed his clouds, or painted his clouds.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you—fairly early then—stopped using a brush and used a palette knife.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You found dexterity and subtleness was possible.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I did paint with a brush at Illinois University. And when I came to the Art Institute I painted with a brush. Because Anthony Angarola was one of the teachers and we used to go—they'd take us out to some of the city parks like Garfield Park or Douglas Park, or some of these—Logan Square, somewhere, all of that. And the whole class would go out, we'd set up easels along the lagoon and paint the people on boats and rowboats and the birds and all the fountains and things, the statues, all that stuff.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a good teacher?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was—like all the teachers I remember then, they were conservative. They were not interested in exciting your interest. There's Lauren Van Pattendam [ph] [00:36:00] who taught still life painting and there's—Dudley Crafts Watson who was head of the school, who always used to come with a bowler hat, cane, spats, and very formally dressed, came to the school and held forth. One time I changed—he set up all the still lifes, the shadow boxes in the class for everybody. You didn't dare set one up yourself. I changed it—I think I had a Benedictine bottle and a purple velvet background and maybe a squash or something in it, maybe geraniums. When you came to the class, he set up the still lifes and you painted those. Well, I changed it around and he came around after I'd started painting it and said, "Who changed the still life? I set it up." And he gave me a bawling out saying I should paint what he wanted me to paint. I didn't like it. Now that doesn't mean he didn't do a better job than I did of setting it up, because I didn't know how to set it up. But I did resist the ideas that a lot of them had. Lauren Van Pattendam was a very nice person, she'd just sit and smile at everybody, and we painted these still lifes. Then there was a man named Copiates [ph], Copiates, who had a drawing class. And we drew figures, nudes, in the class. [00:38:00] And he insisted that we all draw it from circles. The face is an oval, the chest cavity is an oval, the stomach is an oval, and the legs are long ovals, and uh, down to the feet, even the toes were ovals. And I refused—at one time I refused to and I drew a line drawing. And he got mad and he said, "If you don't want to be in this class, you can go out of the room." And he sent me out of the room. And the whole class revolted, and made him come out and apologize to me and let me come back in the class. I was a revolutionary! It was very interesting, because I'd never dreamt anybody would take my side. I was a quiet, was not a very outgoing person. And I never dreamt anybody would do a thing—

ROBERT F. BROWN: These teachers were pretty authoritarian.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Totally. And another teacher named Sterbe [ph], I think. Anton Sterbe, who taught drawing, charcoal drawing of plaster casts. We drew a head, Napoleon's death head. A cast of his head. We drew a—mainly these Greek things. I think the *Winged Victory* once, or *Venus de Milo*. It was in the museums.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Most had them at that time.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And we had charcoal paper and we sat on little collapsible chairs and drew. And we had all kinds of sponge rubber and little twisted paper things to eliminate the charcoal, erase. And he'd come up and draw over it and he'd ruin that. Because how the Dickens can you [00:40:00] go on drawing when somebody, your teacher, draws another line? So you have to erase it and go back and draw it your own way, which you should have done.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So they were heavy-handed some of them?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Awfully, it was awful. I didn't think there was—to my way of thinking there were no good teachers in that one semester. Then when I went to night school, after the first semester. The first semester I got a job—that's when I got the job at night—no, excuse me, I got a job at Butler Brothers when I went to night school at the Art Institute.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was Butler Brothers?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Butler Brothers was a variety and dry goods wholesale house. It had two huge, immense warehouses on the river.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you just—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I drew them interiors of variety stores. With perspective—I was very good at perspective. I could take and draw an atrium of a store that I hadn't even seen. Although I knew how they were, like Woolworth's and Kresge's and all those dime stores, they were laid out similarly. And my job was to lay out a plan for any variety store owner in anywhere in the country. They were from East and West and Mid-West, and draw up the plan of how to lay out their stores. I was very good at it and I worked there even into the Depression. And I finally got to draw perspectives of the ceilings, the lights, the door, walls, [00:42:00] and displays of merchandise. And made displays that were photographed and put out in a brochure that they—a magazine they sent out to store advisors. I did that to make a living so I could go to the Art Institute.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was night school, did you find it a bit different?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Night school was only figure drawing. I did an awful lot of figure drawing. And at that time, they would have a nude pose for about a minute or two minutes. And you were supposed to sketch quickly. Then there'd be a change in position and you'd sketch that. That seemed to be a--the object that came in at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you try it with that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I drove [ph] on that and of course it was very interesting to me because I thought the figure was a very beautiful thing to draw. At that time, one of the teachers was an anatomist, so all we were told was the sacroiliac [ph] and all the muscles. We were supposed to know all those muscles and bones. And we had to draw the figure with the proper slant of the pelvis and the shoulders and the neck and the back and the legs and all those things. So we studied it like the Old Masters studied it, to some extent anyway. And of course, around that time the Depression came and I was working at Butler Brothers and they started the first open air art fair [00:44:00] on Michigan Boulevard. So I showed my paintings—I think a photograph is in there.

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] Side two. You have to have done some painting in high school. Now, the open-air art show. Did you get into this through teachers at the night school?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No everybody that went—

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the Art Institute.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, at the Art Institute did that. This was when I was going to the Art Institute, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you would just set up a stall along a main street?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No! It was a public affair and the artists brought—there were benches for sitting along Michigan Boulevard, so each artist had a bench, and you leaned the paintings against the bench.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And there's a photograph here—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I've got this painting here. I've got self-portrait I did. This is the nude that you have the photograph of.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So these are about 1931 or so?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This is the one—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This one here?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: First open air art fair in Chicago. My folks had—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That would be the early '30s then. This nude would be one that you had in there, is that right?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This, uh—yeah. That painting's right here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were painting very loosely, with a loose technique.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, with a palette knife.

ROBERT F. BROWN: With a palette knife.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This painting is in the photograph, here, of, uh—not, not those. Wait, maybe that's just

—
ROBERT F. BROWN: So all of these are rather—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And this I have here!

ROBERT F. BROWN: —loosely drawn.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In the other room.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Maybe you want—we could bring that one in.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I'll get it.

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This was a painting I succeeded [00:02:00] in doing after I'd gone to the Art Institute.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is the painting that we're talking about, of a railroad station in Wisconsin. You said your boss at Butler Brothers recommended you take time off to paint regularly.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He said—since I drew these plans for stores, he said—and I think it was summer time—and his secretary bought a drawing of mine, an ink drawing of some scene in Chicago. I think it was East Division Street or something like that. And then he said that he wanted to send me to art school in Michigan. What was it called? What was that famous art school? A rather conservative art school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Cranbrook?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, that's Carl Millis [ph]. But maybe it was—no, it was way before Carl Millis came here, even. It predates all that. It was a popular little school, in fact John Spellman, I think, went there. And Carl Craft and all those early painters.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Spellman was someone you'd known earlier.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That's the man I delivered the papers for. And then he turned out to be an artist and he showed and he was, he had nothing to do with me because I was showing in the same Chicago artists' show that he was. And he sort of thought, well what's this upstart, \$11 a month kid delivering papers showing as an artist?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well now this painting from Wisconsin. You did a series of doing these trips to Wisconsin?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I did lots of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did you show some of these? [00:04:00]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't think I ever had that in a show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you're already working with palette knife in all of these paintings?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. All these are palette knife paintings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These other paintings are from about 1930, '31, that first open air art exhibition.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, they're all palette knife paintings. That's here. I don't think that painting is amongst this group.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What in general would you say you're trying to do here? First let's take the scene here of Lincoln Park, the corner of Lincoln Park in Chicago. It's painted very broadly. The drawing is very loose.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This, of course, I think was in wintertime. There wasn't any—there might have been snow on the ground. But it was wintertime; there were no leaves on the trees or anything. And it was very cold, so I go out and I had the idea that I would sketch that. Because I like to paint, but at the same time I was working during the day at the Butler Brothers, so I had to go out and I did a lot of night paintings. There's a couple of night pictures here. Set up an easel right on State Street, or on Michigan Boulevard on the islands where traffic went. And of course there wasn't so much traffic at that time. And I'd paint pictures of night scenes under the lights. I'd set up the easel under a street light. I'd get out of work at 5:30 and I'd come down, get a bite to eat, and grab my easel and go out on the street and paint. I was very enthusiastic as an artist then. I was thrilled about being a painter. This was after that show I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, you had this exhibition in the Palmolive Building at Walden Bookshops in January and February of '31, apparently. [00:06:00] And in it, Inez Cunningham, who was an art critic.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: She was the art critic of the Chicago newspaper, one of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And she says, "An introduction to a painter who considers all public sense of Adeline [ph] painting essential." Is she more or less quoting you? You express your feelings pretty strongly at this point. Or when asked, at least.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think she interpreted from what I said, but it was what I said. That I was only interested in painting, but that I wasn't interested necessarily in associating with all the people. There was, uh—with people, generally. To talk about. I wasn't an artist that hung around with other artists a lot. Although I knew of artists, naturally. Could I see—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That would be very interesting. Most of the things seemed to be scenes of Chicago and the Chicago area.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This model probably was one of them. Might have been that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This reclining model.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. "River Skyline," this isn't here. My brother has that. "Jackson Park" I gave to a friend of mine. "Randolph Street" was done at night. "State Street Bridge" was done at night. "St. Ignatius College Group," that's the, uh—I wouldn't know what that is. "River Warrens [ph]," that's before—that's down on the lower southern part of the Chicago River. Wacker Drive didn't go that far and there was just a soil road going down to the river, and then docks where the factories were. And an artist could stand on the side of the river and paint grain elevators [00:08:00] and coal ships and ships from all over the world, in fact. If I remember right. I think similar from—ones from Norway and ones from South America. How they got up there, I guess they came down the St. Lawrence.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Come down the St. Lawrence, yeah.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: "Des Plaines River," that's the bridge. "Des Plaines River Bridge." "Lily Pond" was in Garfield Park. "The River at Night" was a night scene. "Polish District" was this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This painting we're looking at.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. Now, "The SS Winnetka [ph]," my niece has that painting. Wait, I have that painting here. I had it on the wall here a while ago. She has the "Chicago River," which has one of the yachts anchored on it. "Michigan Boulevard at Night," "Fifth Avenue Maywood." That's a street name. "Near North Side," "Negro Shacks" I did out in Aurora, Illinois. Took an electric train out to Aurora and next to the railroad tracks were a number of shacks, shanty houses where lots of black children were playing and all that and I painted it. It must be in—I don't see it. Oh, here it is, this is it right here. This painting right where my thumb is. Mrs. Hollow Howard [ph] of Dayton Art Museum bought that painting. And I met her nephew many years later, [00:10:00] 20 or 30 years later and he said the house burned down and the painting was burned. North Michigan—"Reclining Nude" is this one, this is the reclining nude. "Sedgwick Street" was a streetcar street in the near northwest side of Chicago in a German neighborhood I think. And I just painted there. Here's the "Fox River Aurora." That's another painting I did out in Aurora.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well these paintings are all very direct, aren't they? Except they are worked on—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They're all—no they're all worked directly on the scene.

ROBERT F. BROWN: On the scene.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Nothing is—nothing here is done from a drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you seem to go into them with real gusto. I mean, you weren't interested in details; you weren't interested in fine drawings.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I'd only had one—I'd only had one semester at the Art Institute and then did some drawing at night. And since I had these jobs, I tried to finish a painting. Go out in the street and paint a landscape Saturdays or Sundays, and get them done and bring them home. I made my own easels. I made easels out of redwood, in fact, vermilion wood. It's a tropical wood. So I bought in, uh—there were lumber companies that imported wood and I, I made chessboards during the Depression and furniture with Caleb Harrison. Caleb and I started a carpenter's shop in the basement of a house on Cleveland Avenue.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was Caleb Harrison? You've mentioned him before as a very close friend.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Caleb Harrison was one of the early IWW radicals. And he's in—I've seen his name published in a book of Wobblies, you know, IWW. He as a child lived in [00:12:00] Oklahoma and was scalped by the Indians in a real scalping. But the Indian was killed before he got the scalp all the way off. So the stitches were still there. And then he ran for—did he run for president?

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is someone you knew—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was a close friend of E.V. Debbs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And he knew the Haymarket Riots. He lived in the same house that Julio de Diego and I took.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now this was when, the early '30s? Late '20s, something like that. This would be when—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It would have to be in the '30s. Not necessarily the—middle '30s, perhaps.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so you got to know him quite well?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes. And he was a very elderly man. He was in his 50s or 60s then, at that time. It was in the '30s; I was 26. And we made furniture and I went out and bought wood and brought it home. And we bought a Delta joiner and saw, that we could saw the wood up. And we made tables and chairs and things. It was —

ROBERT F. BROWN: You and Harrison?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And Caleb. Caleb lived in the basement, in the shop, where all the shavings were. He was penniless. So were we all. Julio had a lot of work. Julio de Diego worked for Ernest Byfield and for—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And which is—what was that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He had the Ambassador East Hotel with the Ball Tavern [ph]. Where the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you get to know [00:14:00] Julio de Diego?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Because he was an artist around with all the rest of the artists. I met him and we did a lot of work—I did a lot of craftwork for him. I made copper, copper shields over the arch of a bar for Ernest Byfield. I made the furniture for his children in the nursery. And I did a lot of painting for Julio, but he had the contract and the job.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like, Julio?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, it ended up he married Gypsy Rose Lee, of course. And I guess they separated. He was a Spaniard and he knew Picasso in Madrid. His father was a stage designer, I think, and so was Picasso's. Julio should be looked up also in the Chicago Art Institute because he showed there at the same time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But did you—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: There were all these people; all the Millmans [ph], we all knew each other.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you and Julio get along particularly well?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We got along quite well together. And Julio came up to Green Lake sometime with me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Wisconsin.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In Wisconsin. And I used to [laughs] this is awful—I don't want to say these personal—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Go ahead.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, it doesn't do any good yet, anyway.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Julio loved to cook, and he'd cook, uh, very Spanish dishes. And he always had a crowd

of people, and Caleb was in with Julio and myself and Caleb—let's get back to Caleb. He was a socialist in the Wobblies, [00:16:00] a radical. And he was given by the Communist Party; this is his own story—given \$10,000 to go up in Canada somewhere where there are mines and unionize the workers. So he was an organizer. But he was like Max Eastman and Joe Freeman and many others; he abandoned the party and had contempt for it. So at the end he had no use for the Communist Party.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why didn't he, do you recall?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Because, well he—Caleb was a man who liked to drink more than anything else. So he would serve—when he would come up to Julio's place on the second floor, I had the first floor, Caleb lived in the basement. Julio would cook, we'd all share the foods, and we'd all have a drink right away. And Caleb would get himself spiffed. And then the next morning we'd go up to make breakfast and here Caleb would still be sitting in the same chair with his chin on his elbows, hands, sound asleep. He could sleep sitting up. An amazing guy. But he had wonderful stories about the Haymarket Riots and about the Wobblies. And of course, I knew something about the Wobblies because I got a—I don't know how I did it, except that the Dill Pickle Club was known by all the artists as a hangout. You could not only buy wine there during Prohibition, and it would be served in a teacup, but a lot of the Trotskyites and radicals that traveled from [00:18:00] San Francisco to New York would stop at the Dill Pickle Club, and they could sleep on the floor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was an artists and writers club?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well there was not many artists; it was a radical place. It was right next to, it was right on the corner of about a half a block away from Newberry Square, which was called Bughouse Square. Where all the—Newberry gave Newberry Park to the city with the stipulation that, uh, that radicals could speak, anybody could speak without being under the threat of the police. Providing it wasn't, uh, obscene or morally wrong. But he could—and that's where a lot of the radicals got together, and I lived right on Dearborn right across the street from Newberry Park, so I got, uh, some association with all those people. How I met Jack Jones, I don't know. Through some artist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Jack Jones?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Jack Jones ran the Dill Pickle Club. It was No. 3 Tooker Place. It was an alley between, uh, Dearborn and I think Clark. No, Clark was beyond. Dearborn and State, must have been. And you go between the corners, two buildings would be set like this, you know. You could just barely squeeze through to go into that alley. But from Dearborn Street you could walk up. And they had people like sword swallows and sold marijuana and they had a lot of ether drinkers at that time. People would buy squid's ether and pour it into their coffee and drink it. [00:20:00] And of course, there was a vacant lot next to it. It was an old stable and it was rather well liked by most of the artists, the bohemians. And Jack Jones. Turn the thing—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Jack Jones, did you get to know a bit?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, at that time there were lectures I think Thursdays and then weekends, Saturday night and maybe Sunday night. And Jack Jones gave me a job to clean the room in which they gave these lectures and talks. It was just benches and not even a stage. And it wasn't the main part of the stable, because the main part was a ballroom, dancing room. And that's where I had my first show. One of my—I think the first show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: 1930.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. First show, just before this one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did they commonly have art shows?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Not commonly, but they had the shows—there was a guy named Jacque-something who showed. And then this, this well-known iron sculptor that built this gate for Henry Ford. That was shown. And my paintings were shown. That, I think, was my first exhibition.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it was a mix of social and kind of drinking place, and serious political and cultural—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was just a cave, like in Paris. [00:22:00] A cave. I remember they had a hypnotist who hypnotized people in the audience and then put a pin through their ears. And even put one man between chairs, hypnotized stiff as a board. And I think put a rock on his stomach and hit it with a sledge. I saw those things. They had a sword swallower from Australia, a short guy who had a big Adam's apple and he swallowed three or four swords, sabers! I couldn't believe it. Of course, they weren't sharp. But he swallowed them down to the hilt! I thought they'd come out his butt, you know! It was unbelievable; the things that took place there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this was quite a change from your upbringing, wasn't it?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes, but by that time, you see, I lived on the Near North Side, away from home. And then again, I was living in association with all these artists that were my friends. It was a very exciting time. It was the Depression. And there was nothing to eat. You could buy a hamburger or a couple of hot dogs and a dish of spaghetti at Thompson's [ph] Restaurant for 15 cents with bread and all the catsup you wanted. Fifteen cents!

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that'd keep you going for the—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Or you could—well, George Constant was in that too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: George Constant was a New York artist, you know. But he was a Greek who lived in Chicago, and he and Connie Moran and some of the [00:24:00] reporters from the Chicago newspapers—there were quite a few of them: Herald, Examiner, Daily News. And they were, um, all dopes [ph] and Jack Jones gave me a room to stay in, but there was a bath in the hall. The bath always was covered with garbage and cabbage leaves; you never could take a bath in it. I was still working at Butler Brothers at that time. 'Cause I remember I finally decided to move out and I painted the whole room red. I was so mad at Jack Jones. But there was--there were--that place, outside of the carriage house were the backyards of a few houses that Jack Jones evidently owned. And they'd bring their girlfriends out there, I was--my apartment was in the back. And I'd hear all these kids screaming at all hours of the night, and uh—people on their dope, or on the marijuana, they made an awful lot of racket. Well I've smoked it, and I remember sounding like a horse braying, you know? And uh, I'd smoked some at that time too. But Connie Moran was a very wonderful person in the art world. And she was--she had a boyfriend named Franz Lippet [ph] who was a Jewish man, and evidently a professor from Russia. And Franz had—if I remember—had a bookstore that all the poets and writers went to. And they all knew Morrie Swatters [ph]. I don't know if you've heard of him, he's a writer? I don't know where he is. Many others, [00:26:00] uh, who are now famous writers associated with those people and I knew them. Well, that's how—Jack Jones was a crazy guy. He never threw out his garbage. He lived on the second floor of this carriage house. He just piled it. It was a big pile, about four or five feet high. Orange peelings, it stunk awful. But then as I remember the windows were all left open all the time because—how he got that stable I don't know. And the story I told you about him, that he took some woman out on the lake in a boat and the boat tipped over and she drowned. And we all thought it was the inspiration for—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Dryser's Store [ph]?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Dryser's Store—I forget the name of the story. But everyone else knows it. I've read it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It sounds like it was a very sordid—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was not very sordid, but if you remembered it as the Depression time when people had nothing to eat and lots of people were poor. And lots of the radicals, the Trotskyites were out of Russia, naturally. And they'd move from San Francisco to New York quite often, and would stop off in the Dill Pickle Club. So the Dill Pickle Club was the center for these people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What effect did they have on it?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They could always find a place to sleep on the floor. Jack Jones would let them sleep anywhere.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were they like? What effect did they have as far as you can remember, on you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: [00:28:00] There were a lot of odd people there. There was a Doctor Ben Riteman [ph], whom you might hear about, who performed abortions and supposedly cured venereal diseases for people. And there were—a man named Green who was supposed to be a Communist representative from Russia. There were a number of Russian people there, as I remember. Because I went with a girl that was of Russian descent. And met her family and her people. So the people that assembled, and off of Bughouse Square where a lot of radicals came. They would congregate. That's how I got into this mélange.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you fairly social aware at that time?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I was a kid and very naive. I didn't know much about it. And also I didn't have much interest in it personally, myself. I wasn't a black sheep in the sense that I was kicked out of my home or left home in anger or anything. I still went to my folks' house and saw them. It was strange. I was perhaps a—I wasn't a do-gooder either. But I had some religion still in me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did your relatives think of where you were living and so forth?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know whether they—I think they must have known, but I don't think they said anything [00:30:00] about it. In fact, maybe they didn't think they could do anything about it if they did. Because I was quite different from the rest of my family, the rest of my brothers and sister.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they more what we'd now call conventional by comparison?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They were very—they were all Phi Beta Kappa students. Honors students. And uh, I just never—I was never—I didn't flunk anything in school, any class. But uh, I wasn't a brilliant student. I was more interested in what I saw; I had a great interest in what I saw. Probably the book I'm going to write, on the primacy of illusion as a human phenomenon, is established from all that background. Which is interesting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's been very consistent for many years now.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In a way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You met a great variety of other artists more or less your age, more or less. You've mentioned the Albright Brothers, Ivan, and Malvin.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And Malvin.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they people that you meet through exhibitions? Or were they in the Near North Side?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I would meet them if there was a show. Ivan and Malvin would have pictures in the Chicago and area shows. Chicago area shows, Midwest or whatever it was called.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were usually in the artist's—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They'd be there. And then of course they would be shown in the Art Institute, [00:32:00] same time I did. And we got to meet for those openings, of course. And then CJ Bulliet was their main art critic at that time. And he would write up all these artists. And there were shows of—what was it called—no-jury show, what was it called?

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is the All Illinois Society of Fine Arts?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know whether that was part of the All Illinois Society or not. I don't think so. There was just a no-jury show. It was held, I think Rudolph Weisenborn and a few others organized it. And any of the artists known would be told they were having a show there. They'd bring a painting, they'd hang it, and they'd be accepted or—they wouldn't be rejected. And that was quite common.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were openings important? Were they a time when you'd make friends?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Not like they are today. They're big social events and the openings at that time were much more a matter of the artists going to see their own paintings. Now that isn't the case at the Art Institute of Chicago. The official art, museum shows, they were attended by lots of the public too. Because it was a professional things for the art world and public.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well how did you happen to get your show at the Walden Bookshops?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think either from this, because Mrs.—what was her name?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Inez Cunningham? [00:34:00]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well there was a very wealthy woman, extremely—Potter Palmer. Mrs. Potter Palmer at this show, and it was in the early '30s, and the first open air art show, which anybody could hang their paintings. Whoever got first would get the nearest one to the Art Institute. And it was on—what was it called—Grant Park, down Michigan Boulevard's street side of it. She went around with a purse full of gold coins. In the middle of the Depression. She gave me \$35 in gold. I think a 20, a 10, and a five gold piece for one of my paintings. And that was East Division Street.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was Mrs. Potter Palmer?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. Now wait, excuse me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because there was also a Mrs. Brewster you mentioned—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Brewster! Mrs. Brewster was a friend of Mrs. Cunningham.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it was another woman.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And then Mrs. Eva Watson-Schütze, I think her name was. They were the ones that we all knew.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you would occasionally—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It wasn't Potter Palmer, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would occasionally then meet these, uh, society types who were interested.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well they came around to this business, uh.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well then how did you get the show—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Wait a second, who was it that brought that—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this woman's buying your painting at the open-air show was almost a fluke then. The amount of money—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, she was a very famous, very wealthy woman. And she was very social and did a lot of things for, what do you call it, [00:36:00] for—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The poor?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The poor, the sick, and all that sort of things, what do you call it? Charities.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Charities. I don't suppose you didn't feel that you were that deprived during the Depression, did you? You weren't too aware of it.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I lived for three weeks on oatmeal that was given to me by the people on the flat below, the floor below, that they wouldn't eat because it had worms in it. And we took and picked out the worms and one fella that worked at the Field Museum and worked as an anthropologist, took the worms out and fried them in grease. Because they gave us also the back of bacon rind and we used the grease out of that to fry things. And many artists would come to my flat and they'd bring a bottle of wine, dago red or something, maybe somebody would bring some hamburger and somebody some potatoes, and we'd all cook together and eat. And it was rough eating. I lived three weeks on that oatmeal and bacon rind. And I never felt myself terribly deprived and I had this job I made \$90 a month on the WPA and I got \$90 a month at Butler Brothers. I mean, when I wasn't working on the WPA. So you didn't have much money. And I think my room cost me \$20 a month. When I wasn't working for Jack Jones I paid rent. I lived in a building for five dollars a month, above a garage. And that—we saw a picture of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: We did, with a coal-burning stove.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, with the stove. There was no toilet in that place, no shower. [00:38:00] I had to go in the basement of the apartment house and take a bath in the laundry tubs, which were slate, diagonal you know. And I could barely climb in. The faucets were in the way and I always had to take a bath at a certain time so that the laundry women weren't down there. [Laughs.] So I mean, and there was no heat in it except in that stove. And what there was, was plaster. There was the brick and just the joist [ph]. So I mean, when you talk about—and I didn't live more frugally than a lot of other artists. But I have lived on nothing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You became friends around then with a lot of other artists.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well sure, there was Jesus Torres, who fought for Pancho Villa.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, there's a letter or two from him.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. He was a, he taught at Hull House [ph], Austin's Hull House I guess. Who was it, not Jane Austen?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Jane Adams.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Adams! He taught ceramics there to the people who came to Hull House. And I went over there and taught for a while too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did that go?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well you just had a big room and all the kids came and you handed out Crayola's and paper. I had a big shoebox full of crayons and they'd take them. They wouldn't give you back most of it, so you'd have to get some more.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now these were very poor kids from very bad slums.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Very poor kids from the Halsted Street neighborhood.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which was what? A very bad neighborhood?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well it wasn't—I never thought of it as bad because it was lined with Greek restaurants, hardware stores, wholesale houses. 'Til you got down to Maxwell Street and there was a great Jewish and Russian settlement [00:40:00] on Maxwell Street. You could buy antique rugs—everybody would come there and buy those Brussels rugs, carpets. There was a fad of using these old carpets with roses on them and all that, and cut up and line stairways with it, the treads in the stairways. I wasn't crazy about that. I've seen Tiffany lamps in antique stores, piles of them. Nobody would give even a dollar for them. Now look, there worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were some of these artists your particular friends at this time? Can you describe some of those who were your closer friends?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Torres was my real friend because we did a lot of work together.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well he was a Mexican Indian, pure Indian. And he was a ceramicist and a wood carver and he also worked for Edgar Miller, did you ever hear of Edgar Miller?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I worked for Edgar Miller and I had a house with Edgar Miller also at that time on North Wells Street.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you work for him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He worked for a lot of architects. He made stained glass windows, he made woodcarvings, he made, uh, fresco paintings. He was more of a craftsman, in a way, than, um, artist. But he did very easily identified as his kind of work. And worked for Holabird & Root and Andy Rebori, and all of those people that I worked for too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean architects?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. I met them through, the architects through, Edgar Miller.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Miller [00:42:00] was a generous and giving person.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: [Laughs.] I don't want to say bad things about him. Miller never gave me a break. So finally I heard through somebody that a keller, a German bar owner—it was when Prohibition was repealed—had a job. I went over and said that I'd work for \$25 a week. I'd design the furniture, I'd lay a floor with jabla [ph] tiles and marble. You could go to junkyards and get anything at that time. So I bought piles of bathroom tiles and pieces of marble and they hauled them and brought them to that place. And I made the furniture in a carpenter's shop of oak and carved it. That's a restaurant called the Golden Oxen. I made the facade, the front. Although the union objected and they made Huntskilller [ph] pay two carpenters, two workers, to drink beer all day long when I was working, and give them a free meal and it would come out of my \$25 a week. Stingy! Well the thing, going back to Edgar Miller found out I got the job, he said, "You got the job? How did you get that job?" He wanted it. Although he would have charged them much more. And that was the first job that I got remodeling apartments. I did a lot of remodeling of apartments for a few years at that time. [00:44:00]

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well this is Max Lippit [ph]?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Max Lippit was a Russian Jew that came across Siberia to get out of the Revolution. I knew a number of people who escaped through Siberia and came to this country. They happened to be Jewish people, but they were amongst all my friends. Fannie Fleischmann was another—

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] Now—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now this is July 22nd. You said, Since a human being can duplicate form—"

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I said since a human being can conceive a form. And can recognize or at least think he recognizes, a form in something that in natural reality has no form. Because form is totally a mental—a human phenomenon. Mental phenomenon. And in fact, all meanings are totally human. They are conceptions that give extra reality to the outer world reality. And so with Mr. Yamada, this Japanese architect and our discussion that it is impossible to paint chaos. I still am stubborn enough to think that it can be done. But not necessarily in the terms that are contemporarily used by philosophers or scholars or by any kind of person. Because I am primarily imagining that I can conceive of chaos as being the true order, the real order. And that what man's illusions and deceptions [00:02:00] create the meaning rather than the reality having embedded in it, its meaning. That thing's working, you can just shut it down.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now we've been talking about Chicago in the '30s.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I'd like to have a number of things to answer—it's not on is it?

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you talk about some of the organizations you were acquainted with?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: John Reed Club was an organization on South Michigan Boulevard near 12th Street. It was the—as its title suggests—it was the leftists' so-called fellow traveler group.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they called that then in the '30s?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I don't know when their pink-owned [ph] [inaudible] after McCarthyism and all that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the '30s it was fairly normal for people, and certainly in the arts and writers, to have some interest—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was fairly normal except they went out hook, line, and sinker for it. And most of those people later regretted that they had. Because in doing so, the propaganda, whether it was a political leftism, the Russian leftism, produced all these moralities and ethics, social ethics that they in turn did not practice themselves.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well they didn't?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I mean, Russia? They killed people simply because some of them owned glasses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about in Chicago? What effect did it have on the artists?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, in Chicago it was a different situation. Chicago had a traditional labor movement. Way preceding the Communist revolution. [00:04:00] There was the Wobblies, there were strikes, labor strikes against the 16 hour a day working in the railroads, about—and the labor movement already was highly developed. Along the nature—essentially along the nature it is now as a union to protect the rights of the working man. The labor movement in the 1930s was taken over by the leftists. The CIO, Congress of Industrial Organizations, was a leftist, radical movement that's ultimate aim was to overthrow the United States government, democratic government, and establish left-run government.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were many artists involved some way or another in that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Many artists were involved, some unwittingly, some intentionally, willingly. Because—

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I hadn't thought this out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, well, we were talking about the leftist organizations. John Reed Club was one place.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The point I want to make is that America had a long tradition of labor struggle, for labor's rights, the rights of working people. And that it was the, in the Mid-West there was Algal [ph] and the Haymarket Riot and many other riots and railroad strikes that were fought to try to alleviate the long working

hours.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you feel personally in the '30s, a part [00:06:00] of this?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In the 1920s, that would be the '27, I worked, when I graduated from high school I went to work on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad repair shop yards. And there I met my first labor relations people. I was a machinist's helper. I'd go to the storeroom and bring back a keg of rivets or axle grease or plastic for sealing the super heater pipes and grinding material and air molders and all those things, to my Hungarian, big Hungarian Bella Zolof [ph] was his name. Who ground in the throttle valve of the locomotives that were torn apart and rebuilt in the yards. Those are the big long steam locomotives.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And there you became—you were approached—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: There I worked very hard, thinking I should work very hard. So I went as fast as I could to get the kegs and came back with them. And finally the foreman, the boss—not the foreman, the labor boss, came and took me aside and said, "Look kid, what are you trying to do? Show us all up? Now next time you are asked to get a keg of bolt or go to the supply department, you go get the supplies, take them to your man, and then go under the loading platforms of a building next door." They're all lined with gunnysacks. And a lot of workers were in there playing poker, a lot of them were sleeping. Lot of them were drinking. It was a regular jungle. [00:08:00] It was like out the railroad crossings. And I was told by him don't try to show us up. Don't work so hard. And that was the first taste I had of a real labor movement.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had a bit of suspiciousness about it?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't have it to begin with. It was a shock right there, that. Now that has no relationship with my later going down to the University of Illinois and for one year going to the university, studying art, and going back to the Art Institute and working at Western Electric and going to the Art Institute at night. And night sketch classes while I earned money during the day. And then changing to a job on the clearinghouse in Chicago.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There's no relationship?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: There's no—I have not kept the relationship of my work on the railroad yards. There was no relationship in the drafting boards of Western Electric.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were partly in that world, but mostly—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was in the floating world of looking for jobs and trying to go to art school, and trying to draw the assignments that we had. From figure drawing and still lifes and plaster casts, and--

ROBERT F. BROWN: During the Depression, during that time, you saw artist friends, uh, becoming more and more leftist and involved in these things. What was your reaction?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The Artists Union idea came after the beginning of the Depression. The artists-- Depression came and under the Republican government, they started the PWAP, Public Works of Art Project. I was [00:10:00] sent a letter saying you are invited to join the Public Works of Art Program. Somebody either suggested my name or—so I got on the PWAP. Then Increase Robinson ran it and Katherine Kuh was her secretary. Katherine Kuh was a famous writer of contemporary art and so-called things. She was a typist then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so did you sign up with that project?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, I signed up. I was a painter. And that project they gave me to start out was to carve some panels, which you have the photograph of. Peter Pallout [ph] had a project to make some carved panels for, I think a university or a school or a government project. And I got the job carving because I worked with wood and all those things for years. I'd gone through high school studying woodworking, turning, pattern making.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So what did that lead to?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Furniture making.

ROBERT F. BROWN: To other projects like that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I have to get to the labor movement. I guess that's where you—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, only part of it.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. Well anyway, I went to the Art Institute. I had saved up working. It was \$210 or \$253, which is a semester's tuition at the Art Institute of Chicago. I went and paid it, I lived at home, and I studied art. The second semester I didn't have the money saved and I had to get a job. And I decided if I had to get a job I would move away from home. We lived in Oak Park. [00:12:00] Then I moved to Near North Side and got a job not at Western Electric, which is way out in Cicero, which was near my home from Oak Park because I could take a streetcar to go to it. Well the other I'd have to take an elevated train. So I got a job at Butler Brothers, which was a wholesale house.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, you mentioned that.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. It was just that they had 10-cent stores—they were wholesalers to 10-cent stores, variety stores, dry good stores, hardware stores. And I did the drawings for all the promotions and the display, made the displays, and did the drafting of the floor plans for new stores.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that work was in some way related to the training you were getting at the Art Institute.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well that's how I got the job. I went to the Art Institute nights then, too. And in fact, the president's secretary bought a drawing of mine at some gallery. Mrs. Ferguson. And she talked to the president along with the secretary of Butler Brothers, Mr. Creighter [ph]. I think Charles Creighter. And they said to me, "John, you really want to be an artist, so you work two weeks drawing our floor plans and doing our work. Then you take two weeks off and do your painting." Because I'd go home and cook myself something and then go out and paint. So they tried it awhile and I didn't figure it would work out good. So I kept on working there and then finally quit, when the WPA came in, or before then, I don't know exactly how that related in. Now, the WPA started that way [00:14:00] and it was free of any leftist or political relationships. I think I know the name of the Chicago society man who was in charge of the WPA then. It wasn't Holger Cahill.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I can't think of the name right now either. You met this person?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Brewster was his name. Brewster. I never met him, but I of course knew Increase Robinson and Katherine Kuh. Then I got—the Democrats took over, and they made it into WPA. We got \$90 a month. I think it was the same as the Hoover administration paid. And there were, uh, all these other camps, civil conservation camps, and all these other projects that were hiring people. Now, up until a certain time then, there wasn't—as far as I knew, now wait I didn't know the inside the thing. But I never had any experience of leftism, of political organization, or of favoritism because of political views or anything. There are people saying you either vote for Roosevelt, or if you vote for—who was that guy? Wendall Willkie, that was one of them. Or Hoover, you lose your job. They were just guys that would suggest that, pushing. But that happens in any group of people. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:16:00] That was your first experience then, of this political pressure.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But it didn't come. It was just said.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Said. That was it.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But I was never smart enough to understand that. In fact, I'm putting intelligence on it now. I just remember it happened, but I never thought much of it. I didn't care, couldn't care less. I went out nights and painted in the middle of the little islands on Michigan Boulevard or down at the Polish neighborhoods, or along the river and did painting as best I could. I didn't think it was best I could, because I thought I was a good artist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These were being done and then they'd show them to WPA supervisors?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Then when the Democratic Party won, when Roosevelt came in, WPA became a much more comprehensive organization. We were very free in the PWAP. In fact, you weren't even asked to hand in a painting, they just said when you get a painting you think you'd like to hand in, hand it in. It was very loose.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How was it under the WPA in contrast?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: WPA, it gradually turned where you were assigned things to do. And you were also supposed—if you were a painter, you painted. But it'd be hard for me to remember how I changed from being a wood carver and a painter to a mosaicist. But I did take an interest in mosaics. I was a man working with my hands. So I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you assigned work, for mosaic work?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I had studied in the libraries the works of the Byzantines by Wentworth, [00:18:00] I think, was a man who investigated San Sophia in Istanbul and Constantinople. And I read that book. I always

wanted to go out—I went to see—Chicago in the Columbian Exhibition had a lot of buildings that had mosaics in them, especially in the floor. And they had poured in lots of marbles of all colors from all over the world, they were used in the World's Columbian, and in building. There was an Italian marble company right near Butler Brothers beginning with Z. I don't know whether or not you'll find the name somewhere. They had already stopped making mosaics but they had sacks of tesserae, you know, cubes of marble piled to the ceiling. They wanted to get rid of them, and I said I'd buy them. So I bought some and they delivered them. And I remember at that time they would do things for people that no company would do now, without charging hardly. I got some wonderful marbles from that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they delivered them to where you lived?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Delivered them to—I don't even know where my first mosaic shop was. It might have been on Dearborn Street above a garage. I would pay five dollars a month for an unlit, unheated, second floor, wood boarded floor without—only one little window, and a sink. And a one faucet sink, cold water. Back of an apartment house on Dearborn Street somewhere between Division Street and the same street the Ambassador [00:20:00] East was on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you just set about learning on your own?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I went on my own to do this thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did you have a commission to do mosaics?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I finally, I did get commissions. I got a number of commissions to do them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find, did you enjoy it very much? Was it a medium that—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I enjoyed anything that I did. I mean, I was young and I enjoyed it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't find it tedious?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was very healthy and I didn't get tired.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you make sketches first? Did the WPA people require designs?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: You had to make a sketch first. Yes, oh yes. In fact, we made sketches; they had even rooms in the WPA office where you did the drawings. And you worked together. As the Democrats got in—I don't want to say Democrats, as the WPA got in—they developed a number of organizations to head the different departments of what they were intended to do. There was the mural department; there was easel paintings. There were projects of crafts, like sculptures and woodcarving. And there were departments of the school—not the school of design, the American design. They did all the antique potteries and Shaker furniture.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Index of American Design.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Index of American Design! That's what it was. I knew the guys who were in that. So I was—I was assigned to—I wanted to do mosaics. I hope I get it right. I was, uh—I think, Vogel Design was the guy who was head of it. [00:22:00] And Rainey Bennett was the head of the mural department at the University of Illinois Medical School and Ashland and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He had a project.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He, he was in charge of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's where his office was.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And I went to high school with him. And I had a studio near him. But he was of a different class than I was, I mean he was far above me in the art world at that time. I mean, at least he thought he was. I say that as something I'll say later as he performed in—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I got his assignment, I think after I did the mosaic at Deerfield. You saw that thing on a scaffold. Deers and a hay wagon, rather crummy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was in the school, right?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That's done and still there. That was done in a school. I got that assignment to do a

loan without help, 5 by 25 feet in glass that I cut myself and mixed the cement. The school superintendent's department built the scaffold for me and the ladder. And one summer I did that mosaic. And that was an overwhelming job, and it was all done by going to stained glass window companies. Flanagan & Biedenweg was the name of one. Who made stained glass windows for churches and architecture buildings. And they had barrels [00:24:00] of scrap, colored glass, they just threw it into barrels. And those scraps were ideal for me, because I'd just take a glasscutter and they were strips, narrow strips. Tap them and they'd break into cubes. And I got them free. So what I did for them there was something they could never have done, simply because I'd found a way of doing it. At the same time I did some mosaics in other churches.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Churches and schools.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Churches, privately. I did the ones at Loyola Chapel, the Chapel By the Sea that Andy Rebori was the architect of. Then Devon and Lakeshore and Michigan. Sheridan Road, I think it's called. Well anyway—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well as you got more into this we were talking of, originally, about organizations and the like. Did you get more involved?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, up until this time at that woodwork of Peter Paul Ott there were two guys who are obviously union organizers. It's unclear who they were, their names, but we had—as you saw on that bench—a photograph of the wood carvers, two of those guys are in there, I can point them out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well it was a very large workshop.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. Now what they tried to do is talk about—I think talk about social problems. And—gosh, I don't even know what [00:26:00] they did. Except that I know that the Swiss wood carver and a fellow named Tuttle and another and myself began to talk about these two guys. Both of us disagreeing. And these two guys evidently came into the thing and seemed aggressive to what was before that, just a matter of functioning. And I got into a fight with one and one of them took a T-square and was going to hit me with it. And I don't even remember what the fight was about, if it was a disagreement. And then those two guys got together and then I think the Swiss and Freeman Schoolcraft was also there. A sculptor. Now wait a minute—I'm not sure he was there. Later on he was a friend of mine. But calmed the whole thing down, whatever it was. But that made me aware and I think at that time, perhaps Hitler was becoming known. So that, whether it was the same time or different times, the fascist idea was becoming known. And people were discussing it. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was your reaction then? You were just becoming more aware of these things?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: My reaction, I was totally naive of what it was all about. But wait a second—I do think that I had known Mitch before that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mitchell Siporin?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. And Raymond Breinin and Aaron Bohrod and Ozzie Brood and Missie Brood. [00:28:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they were all quite involved in leftist things at that point.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Wait I don't want to say Aaron was, but we all went to the John Reed Club. They got me interested in the John Reed Club.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what happened at the John Reed Club? What would you do there?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Nothing, we just sat in chairs and listened to the speeches. One of the speeches—and I don't know when it took place—was when there was the Pullman Riots in which the policemen attacked the strikers with clubs. And the thing that made me astonished, at the John Reed Club they were saying the workers pried up the granite blocks in the road and were throwing them at the policemen. And the workers were really serious and they could win. It was set in different meaning. Later on, the worker was supposed to be innocent of such things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were more militant.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They were more, they were really violent and militant. Now that wasn't the first time, the Haymarket Riots were before that and many other riots. So the chronology of this I don't quite—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Speaking of the Haymarket Riots, what impact if any celebrity, did Mitchell Siporin—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, Mitchell Siporin was an intellectual in a way of reading about the labor movement

in the Chicago area. And I think his paintings and drawings and murals always included those revolutionaries, those labor leaders. And it was good. There's nothing wrong with it. In fact, on my mother's side which was Phillips, was in the Haymarket Riot, was next to the guy who got killed! I mean, they were Marxists, Carl Schurz [00:30:00] Marxists when they came to—one part of her family—when they came to, uh, up the Erie Canal and into Chicago. So, I mean, my background, I'm not innocent!

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you think about Mitchell Siporin at that time, what was your—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I admired them tremendously. I admired the leftists' philosophy. Now, when I say I admired it, I don't mean that I was—I never joined, I never got a card and I never got a membership. But I always went with the boys. Now maybe they didn't have memberships. I don't know whether there was a card-carrying membership to John Reed. I have no way of knowing. I don't even know whether Mitch had a card. But there was another branch that I will mention of Louie and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Part of the leftist stuff?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. That I think was real Communist Party. I'll come to it when the time comes. In which all of us went to a different, faraway place in Chicago. To an upper apartment. And there we got—the real thing was shown. Not that the real thing was shown because at the John Reed Club we were asked to march in the Labor Day parade. And we were asked to protest things and we did. But I never was involved in such a way that I took it up from the inside. Because in the inside movement I was there with all these other artists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were a member? Or at least, went along.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Now who could tell you a lot of this is Raymond Breinin, who lives in Scarsdale. And he was a Russian émigré, [00:32:00] Jewish émigré.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A good many of these people were, you told me last time. Max—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They were the children of émigrés. They didn't—see if their parents left Russia during the revolution to get out and I heard the story of a number of them. They got out in 1917 or '18 or up to the '20s, probably. So when it came to the '32, there were still in their tens or twenties when they left Russia. So they were the age I met them, were the same age as I was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned also the Committee Against the War on Fascism.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That was later. That's when Holger Cahill came in. Holger Cahill was assigned to the WPA project, I think for the whole country. Now I'm not going to say Holger Cahill was leftist. So I'm a little worried about—

ROBERT F. BROWN: I don't mean to stress this.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But if you ever read his book, you'd get a good idea. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the Committee Against War and Fascism, what was its impact?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That was entirely a different thing. I think that took place all over the country in different groups. And I think it was sponsored by the leftists. I call it leftists because I have no source of knowing whether there was an actual Communist Party, although now reading I know there was. For instance, the Pumpkin Papers and Chambers, or whoever it was then, later when I got interested in the thing it became very clear to me that there was a total directive of the left, Communists. In fact, I read Krivitsky's book, who was the KGB appointed [00:34:00] by Stalin who was murdered in Washington, who wrote the book two years before he was killed, defected. And wrote it in England on his way here to this country, in which he exposed the saturation of the KGB all over Europe and the United States. He mentioned all kinds of people. If Krivitsky was living when McCarthy was there, they'd have an intelligent man to say something instead of that creep McCarthy. Who the Communists were lucky to have. The greatest break for the Communists was that McCarthy was an incapable, totally unworthy person to be the opposition. And so the Democrats under Roosevelt were able to assemble a lot of leftist people who they didn't necessarily think there was anything wrong with, because McCarthy made such false charges and such distortions. Which some of them might have been true but he didn't have the backing. Didn't have the facts. In fact, that's how America learned how to insist on the constitutional rights of all those things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there much reaction to the political involvement of artists during the 1930s in Chicago? The art schools, or the exhibitions, effects on—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I'll come to that. Now remember, this is totally my own knowledge, my own memory and it is full of flaws, possibly and probably.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did it affect one's career?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It didn't affect—so, gradually. For instance, in the art museum and the interesting shows, a certain period came when the American [00:36:00] scene—which was the WPA's projects, the American scene. Which had no intention to show labor movements, particularly. They wanted to show buffalos and Indians and farmers or railroads or towns or ghettos, or anything. But it never was organized on the basis of, this is a revolutionary movement to free the working man, and so on. That came in when we took over the WPA. Now if you read, um, certain people in the *Partisan Review*, you'll realize that in New York the same WPA had the same problems. And it took place all over the world, over the country.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you were never so involved in any of the leftist things that it affected where you could exhibit or anything? Not in those days.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Not until I took a stand of opposition. Wait a second, when I say I took a stand of opposition. I never did stand up as a person and oppose anybody in any way. I mean, publicly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the Artists Union developed out there too, and the Artists Congress?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Somewhere after Mrs. Increase Robinson took over. And she was a New Englander of an old New England family. Whether she knew it or not, suddenly and maybe through the development of the Democratic side involving more knowing leftists, they turned the WPA into a serving [00:38:00] situation for the leftists. For instance, they also had in the Art Institute itself a switch when previously it was, the artists involved were people that painted gardens, street scenes, the country, Wisconsin.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The way you did.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And I can name a lot of those artists, like Carl Craft and Schweiker [ph] and many of the New York School artists also showed here. New York School, I mean, Péne du Bois, and then we had those—Rockwell Kent. But in Chicago it became a—the union, I think, did in fact and in reality, influence the selection of the artists and what artists would get the jobs. Now it wasn't controlled 100 percent by the leftists. Now if I say Mitch was a leftist, I do so without meaning anything critically up to this point. Because I haven't criticized what the art world turned to in Chicago. But—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What turn took place?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think it turned into where the dominant theme that the artist was judged for was how much Social Realism he put into his work. That was considered the important thing. [00:40:00] And I saw it many ways. There were art shows at Chicago, at the Art Institute's annual show, annual Chicago and vicinity artists. And there was an international show. And an international watercolor show. And in their local show, the artists who got the attention, including in the newspaper, including in the selection of the shows themselves, were those artists who favored the Social Realist point of view. Now Social Realism at that date did not mean the same thing as it means today. Because in Social Realism, the central committee now uses that work. Says we are Social Realists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean the Russian.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The Russian. In America then, Social Realism meant concentration on the ghettos and the poor people, the blacks that had bad housing, worst.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you notice as you look back in your own work, do you notice a change in it as well?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I went around painting street scenes. In fact, I have painted a number of scenes of Maxwell Street, which was a ghetto. Which was a ghetto section. So I went to all the poor places to paint and I loved them! I didn't love them as poor, I loved to paint them. Because you can paint a lot better picture painting a rundown or dilapidated place than you can a Central Loop office building streets, tall skyscrapers. Of course, I painted along the river too. [00:42:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But only in the very mild way did you show the slums. You didn't—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I showed the slums this way but I did not make a fetish of them. Now Aaron Bohrod was constantly painting the elevated trains going turns and the streets of the, um—not slums, the poorer neighbor--the immigrant neighborhoods. Now we thought—I don't like to say these things—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He made a fetish of them?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That was what he was known as. And that's what most of the artists were known as. They took over the art and I think that there was a good reason to, because they had the power. And previous to

that, people like Karl Craft and Clay Kelly and—go back to—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were very conservative.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: All kinds of conservative guys had the power. But you see, I wasn't aware of the power of group association.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Maybe we could talk briefly about some of the other acquaintances you had out there. You mentioned Boris Anisfeld.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Boris Anisfeld I only knew seeing him at the Art Institute. He taught there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned he was a teacher. And Rudolph Wiesenborn?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Rudolph Wiesenborn was one of the artists—I don't know where he lived—but I would see him at the no-jury shows and all that. And we were great friends. I went to some parties with him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like? If he was a great friend, could you characterize him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was—his English wasn't what you'd call perfect. He was a warm [00:44:00] person. I knew him also with association of his friends, which I saw too. We'd all—a number of us, all the artists would be invited to somebody's party. And that was Prohibition times and we'd try to find a bottle of wine or a bottle of moonshine or something like that and bring it, or some hamburger or some bread or some canned stuff or tomatoes, or candy, or anything we could find. Most artists really needed all those things to get a decent meal. And together we pooled it and had a very nice meal—very nice times.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was convivial.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, yeah. But I knew more of him—he was older than I was and I knew him more as an artist who had ideas, intellectual ideas, and had mostly abstract ideas. I mean abstract painting ideas, of abstraction. And he seemed to like me so I liked him. That's what you often find in this world. People that have an affinity.

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] You may have mentioned another friend, John Fabian?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: John Fabian was a Polish descent.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he was a painter too?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Painter. And would have no use for the leftists, as I remember him. I was a close friend of him but nobody that I knew of could be a close friend of John Fabian because he was a very private person. He went everywhere. We were seen together, he was seen with others. But I don't think anybody got to know him in an openly friendly way like you could with the leftists. Which, they were much warmer. I'm not saying Fabian wasn't a warm guy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the leftists had an interest in being approachable.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They had a song to sing about the revolution.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Whereas someone like Fabian wanted to do his art.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was a very sensitive, especially draftsman. His drawings were linear and beautifully curved, very cleanly done. They weren't the rather more bulky, roughhewn types that--of the other--the artists that I knew. Like Aaron would paint the streets, dilapidated old jalopy cars, people in--similar to peasant costumes, street people. Usually émigré people. Not that they thought of themselves as being émigrés. See, when you come to this country, uh, there's a time when you no longer [00:02:00] excuse yourself as an émigré. You become one of the people. Then you find lots of other émigrés, so you become one of the unidentifiably different. And yet you have your ideas and your principles and your beliefs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: People like Bohrod though, did you think of them as immigrants?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, we never thought of them except they themselves perhaps, at parties would sing Russian songs. Would dance in a way that all of us who were born in America and born, especially not of émigré families, didn't have that lyrical quality.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mention also John Cadell [ph]?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: John Cadell was a very fine artist who was blind in one eye, I think he had a cataract or something. He was admired by every person. He was a gentle person, of Italian descent, naturally. He and I were quite great friends and he had a problem with painting with one eye that he painted a lot of gauche paintings from books. He did a Pinocchio series. And that's the one I remember most. I didn't know him well until after, beginning about 1940. But I would see him. We all circulated through Eddie Millman's house and Winn Nathanson's [ph] and circulated to a number of other places. [00:04:00] The John Reed Club would be one. We would meet at Maxwell Street to see each other because a lot of the artists went there to draw. The streets were marvelous to draw. And you could pick up bargains there, rugs, furniture, it was very cheap prices.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Millman quite the host? Was he an entertainer, Eddie Millman? You mentioned him.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Eddie Millman at that time, Eddie and—do you remember his wife's name?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Dickens, what was her name? She was very nice. They were both very hospitable, very nice people. And Mitch was a nice person. They had a carriage house on—I think Chestnut Street between Michigan Boulevard and Rush. In the back of a vacant lot. A large—in which Wallace Kirkland had one studio. It was a long carriage house. And in front of this house was a big mansion that was rented rooms, and a lot of the artists lived there. It was torn down later and I suppose the carriage house was torn down, because there's skyscrapers there now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Winn Nathanson was another acquaintance?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Winn Nathanson I always met at Eddie Millman's house. And I always met—seemed to meet him when there were political things to be discussed. Winn, uh—Winn's claim that—later, he moved to Westown after I had moved there. [00:06:00] I didn't know he moved, so he called up and said I live in Westown, and want to get together. So we went over, my former wife Ruth and I went to see him. And he had a very glamorous wife named Shiva. Or Siva.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Winn was—as I remember, he didn't give many speeches or talks in front of the groups. Political. And at one time he said he was hired by what was then the FBI. There was some other name, what was it called in those days? It wasn't the FBI. But he was hired to go to Panama evidently to check up on radicals, or leftists or German spies, whatever it would be. Now that's what he said to me. What he actually was I never had an idea because why should he hang around the artists?

ROBERT F. BROWN: He wasn't an artist himself.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He wasn't an artist himself, no. But his wife was very artistic. I don't remember her doing anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Millman was. Did you think he was a pretty good artist, Eddie Millman?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That's a hard question. I would like to say yes. I didn't like it because I didn't like—by that time, as it developed, I didn't like this rather persistent social [00:08:00] realist viewpoint, argument. I began to feel disaffected by them and maybe it was because of my other friends. I got to know Edgar Miller and do work for Edgar Miller and Edgar Miller was a real conservative. In fact he had reason to be, he was successful with all the architects and did many projects, stained glass windows, church things, buildings for the Halliburton Groups [ph], furniture designs, all sorts. He was a Frank Lloyd Wright of the Near North Side. And I did a lot of work for Edgar Miller.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's kind of a counter weight to what the Social Realism—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Edgar Miller actually offered to take a house with me in which I'd have a floor. And I worked for him. But I paid my share of the costs. And that house was on Wells Street, above North Avenue, either one or two blocks, but before you get to Lincoln Park.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you do that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I did that. I moved with him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Speaking of that, what about Fairfield Porter? Was that someone you—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Fairfield Porter I didn't know until after I was doing the mosaic in Deerfield. When I met an artist who was on WPA, Norman MacLeish. And Richard Florsheim and Gertrude Abercrombie. All of the artists interweaved. We knew each other, a great number of us. There were many other artists; I'd have to get that catalogue to [00:10:00] recall some of the names. Who am I talking about?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well I said Fairfield Porter, but talk about any of them.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I only knew Fairfield Porter because when I worked in Deerfield, Norman and his mother asked me to come to live in Glencoe for the summer while I was doing a mosaic at Deerfield, because it was only a few miles up in Skokie Valley from Glencoe. And that was a very elegant home.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you stayed with the MacLeishs?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: So I stayed with the MacLeishs in their summer home, mansion right on the lake. And they were very highly socially prominent, an old family. So I was always included in parties, social parties. So I met Adlai Stevenson. I met Archibald MacLeish. I met, uh, all kinds of people. Sue Hubbard [ph], I did a mosaic for her. She was a friend of a friend of—damn, these names. He was a great economist. Not Burnham. That'll--

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Norman MacLeish a pretty good artist?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well he did, uh—I never was impressed as him being a great artist. He was, um—but he did do a painting that gave him a great deal of renown, that was circulated all over the country before I was ever taken up. It was called, um, "Emperor Jones," was that in some play? Emperor Jones, he did a picture of that. [00:12:00] And it was taken up and circulated and written up in New York and everywhere.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like as a person? Did he become something of a friend?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, he was a friend of mine. He had a family of children and his wife had a nervous breakdown. His wife, whose name was Lenore MacLeish who wrote a book and lived in Jamestown. And I went to see her one time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he discuss art? Or what did you all discuss?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, he was a university graduate and an intelligent person. But I thought more—I don't want to say anything about Norman.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Go ahead.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In that sense of judging him. I liked him. He was a kind person. And his brother Bruce MacLeish, years later after I'd married Ruth, we were out in Arizona and we sat down and he said, "You know, I and Elizabeth," that was his wife. "Are very grateful to you for how you helped Norman." Norman was in the World War in the Battle of Lotun [ph]. Or something. You know, as a youngster. And according to Archibald, something happened to him mentally and he got in some kind of problems with his wife and she had a nervous breakdown. This was just before the '30s. So he sent her to Burlingame's [ph] Health Resort, somewhere here. It's a very expensive place. [00:14:00] And she had a total nervous breakdown and she couldn't see him or have anything to do with him. And that was a hard problem for Norman because he didn't have a good income at that time. And he was having a time paying the bills to Burlingame that sent him awfully big bills. So in a way he was living at his mother's, his elderly mother's house, who was at that time probably 60 or 70 years of age or older.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At that time you mentioned Porter. Did you meet him at about that time?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Fairfield Porter lived very close there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He grew up in an affluent society.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. So I heard mostly about Fairfield Porter from Norman. Norman for instance, told me the stories when I would see him coming back, and when he was out, how he was over at Fairfield's house and how his father would have a dinner party on the weekend and Fairfield would have all his writer friends, who were mostly leftists come over. And they'd all discuss Marxism at the table. And the father would sit there just trembling. He'd carve another piece of roast beef for one of his guests who was talking about how they're going to burn up the country. [00:16:00] It was very humorous in a way. But then I met Sue Hubbard [ph], who gave me this commission to do a mosaic. And Ellie Potter, who lived out here in Jamestown. Whose husband, I think, was the chairman of the Elgin Watch company.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These people were good patrons and good to work for?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well they were very kind people to me. Because I'd sit and play the piano. I never

knew how to play the piano, but I'd get drunk and play and they'd let me play and treated me awfully nicely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it about that time that you got married? How did you meet your wife?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: About that time. I met my wife through—here's another interesting person. There was a Mary Ware, and there was a famous Mr. Ware who was a big Communist in the Midwest, in Chicago. Had you ever heard of him? Well anyway, I never knew about this. But we always were invited out to, I think, River Forest—that's out past Oak Park—to dinner parties, Saturdays or so. And Julio and many of the artists would go out there and I met my wife there, my former wife. And she gave me a job making some bookcases for her.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was she, living at home?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, she was married to Justin Dart. Who turned out to be the pain in the ass of the family. [Laughs.] Very tragic situation.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he because a great druggist.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, he wasn't a druggist, he was a great businessman. Or rather a successful one. But he's failing now, he's died, of course. [00:18:00] On his deathbed he told Sonia, that is my stepson's daughter by his first--second marriage. Said that he was very--she sat at his deathbed and he said, "I wish you to know that I'm very sorry how I mistreated John." That's me. He--I think he was responsible for tearing down my mosaic at Carl Schurz. He was a son of a bitch.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was the time you first met him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, no I first met him when I made furniture for them. Then they had a ranch out in Arizona in Cave Creek. They bought an old ranch, 500 acres, run-down. With just a sheepherder's shack on it, or cow herder's shack. All falling apart. So Ruth asked me, she said, "John you want a job? Build this ranch house for me. But build it essentially the way it was. I don't want it to have any other looks than it had." So I had to copy what was already there, or restore it and rebuild it totally. And I got \$100 a month to do it. And I went over there a couple of years. And even after Ruth and I married I went out and worked on it. Finally built a caretaker's house. And we had to sell it during the war because of the shortage of gasoline and the inability of getting anyone responsible to take care of it. I put a tin roof, a corrugated roof on it, plumbing, a big tank on the side of the hill. And pretty soon it'd be stolen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the idea, they wanted a place to go in the winter? [00:20:00] Is that why—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Every winter they went out to Arizona, the whole family and the Walgreen family. Pop Walgreen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She was the daughter of Walgreen?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Walgreen, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you knew her for some time, then, before you were married?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well of course yes, some years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were her interests? Was she interested in the arts?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: She was very much interested in poetry and the arts. And culture also, of course. And she knew—what's her name, Dorothy Monroe? Who was she that ran *Poetry Magazine*?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Marianne? Not Marianne Moore?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: She knew Marianne Moore very well in New York. In fact, our [inaudible] I first put in those notebooks.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have an awful lot—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Moore was the editor of *Poetry Magazine*. And the creator of it. And she knew all those people, like Peter De Vries and all the poets that went there. And she was writing poetry herself then. And she caused a stir in either Northwestern or Chicago University. I don't know why it should be Chicago because she attended Northwestern. And there met Justin Dart, who was an All Star football player, heavyweight. And all those people knew each other, the MacLeishs—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were invited to dinner parties and things like that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was invited to dinner parties. In fact, one of the things that attracted me to that place [00:22:00] is the fact that I got to know people that were way above my condition. I mean that I was accepted was great flattery to me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It is interesting, on one hand you're making furniture for them, and the other hand they want you to be at the dinner table. That they thought of you as an artist.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They thought of me as an artist, yeah. They were interested in me as an artist. And uh, after I went with Ruth some more and did her house out there, then a lot of my artists became my enemies because they thought I was just going around with a rich woman. Well, I don't know what they thought. It's wrong for me to say these things because I don't have in my mind any illusions about being persecuted or anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But they seemed to cool to you, some of them did.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, uh, Julio for instance.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Julio de Diego.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And Johnny Sedenthal [ph], and, uh, of course Mitch and Eddie. But they weren't cool to anybody. They were very cool cookies, so to speak. They knew how to get around and get by. But the ones who took sides, took sides.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this is towards the end of the '30s then, that you're going with Ruth. When were you married, then?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Married in '39. But it wasn't in the early '30s.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Towards the end.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Towards the end of the '30s, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So the Depression, you were coming out of it with marriage and getting to know people who were better off. Perhaps pulling a bit of weight from the bohemia and the—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I never left the bohemia in that sense. Not willfully. We, in fact, Ruth and I had Fabian at our house all the time. [00:24:00] We had the Bohrods at our house, we had many of those artists that were very poor. I'd have to stop and think of all the things that we did. You know, that's hard to recall because we also had two children to take care of. And then I went out to the ranch in the winters and worked on it, built it. Built two houses by my own hands. I mean nobody else gave me—I mean I imagine I'd have somebody hold a board for me.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The interview is with John Stephan. Newport, Rhode Island. And today is March 24th, 1987. John, maybe we could finish up talking about your time in Chicago in the late '30s, early '40s. In particular, the government projects you worked on. You worked on an easel painting earlier but now you were doing some murals, I believe, and woodcarving. Could you discuss that briefly?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I think I mentioned before that the WPA was started by the PWAP, was started by. And I was invited on the WPA—a lot of us artists were invited to be on the PWAP and we were continued when it was changed to the WPA. And we're doing, mostly allowed to do whatever work we wanted to do. Paintings, sculpture, whatever. And hand in, if I remember, I had a painting every two months. And we got a check for \$90 a month. Which one could live on quite comfortably [00:26:00] in those days. After the project turned into the WPA, they rented a large floor of a building and moved the offices to that building, which included a working studio. And Increase Robinson and Katherine Kuh were directors of it. Katherine Kuh being Increase Robinson's secretary. And, uh, Dora Viviano was the typist for the project, whose husband was a sculptor on the project, Manuel Viviano. Uh, they moved the project to this building. They started asking the artists to—rather than being let off the project, because of the, um, large number of artists who wanted to be on it, they gave them the artists a chance to do other kinds of art. To stay on the project. And I was given the project of a group of wood carvers to carve a set of panels done by the artist Peter Paul Ott. Which was photographed there. And the place became the union. Artists Union began to be effective.

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Head of the artists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Vogelgesang.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Vogelgesang. That's a German name I guess. Bird song, [00:28:00] I guess it means. And the Artists Union came in to compete with these people. And they appointed a number of supervisors, like Rainey Bennett of Chicago was a supervisor for some of the projects. Specific projects. Like the University of Illinois had a series of murals—or I guess the schools did. Had a series of murals and architectural things to be done by the artists. They gave the artists a specific job to, for his own project. We were given a space in a tower of the University of Illinois Medical School, on the nearest southwest side, to do projects for the medical school itself, the University of Illinois Medical School. And Rainey Bennett had charge of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that'd be murals? Frescos?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Murals and frescos. And I did some mosaics for it. The last I was out in Chicago they're still around outside. The unfortunate thing is they were made of cathedral colored glass and by that time I went to see them many years after, lots of the glass had been picked out by somebody. Kids. And it was in bad shape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you taught yourself—how did you teach yourself mosaic work?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I was interested in mosaics mostly because of my interest in [00:30:00] craftwork and doing carpentry, to make a living in the '30s. I remodeled apartments, built fireplaces, actually did tile work and got to doing mosaics because I was interested in it, through books. I was very much interested in Byzantine mosaics of Hosios Lucas in Greece and in Istanbul there are great mosaics. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The mosaics you did on the project for the medical center then are on the outside of the building?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, they were just on a few columns of the architectural columns on the entranceway. They were panels, and I was told what to do by Rainey Bennett, to do a zodiac group. My interest was to take and do small square panels, I think 18 inches square, to do them of a heart, visceral parts of the body, certain instruments like microscopes, and certain animals that were used in experimenting by the medical profession. And then I was told not to do that, to do zodiac. That made me have a run-in with Rainey Bennett.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was Rainey Bennett like?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Rainey Bennett went to high school in the same time I did at Oak Park High. And he was a cartoonist for the high school magazine. And a very nice person, very interesting [00:32:00] person. His brother was Wendall Bennett at Yale University, an anthropologist. A well-known anthropologist. And I'd gone out to see him one time. But Rainey, um, told me I had to do these zodiac signs. And he told me how I should do them and all that. And then naturally, I didn't like it, but I did it. Uh, then that was the end of my mosaics for the—oh no, Carl Schurz. From then I went to Carl Schurz High School. The Vogelgesang gave me the directive to start it. I think no other artist wanted to take the job because it was so immense.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Fifty feet above the—it was the altering of an auditorium in the high school to make it into a library. So they took off the sloping floor, leveled it in concrete, cast it right on the soil with apparently all the drainage pipes, all that underneath. And start to build a library when I began my work. The school superintendent built a scaffold and they assigned a plaster to put the cement and chop out the original plaster in the area that I was doing the mosaics in the four corners of the pantheon-like dome. [00:34:00] I worked two years on this mosaic and then there was a change of either the board of education or the school itself organization, the principal, in which there developed without my knowing, an opposition to my doing—continuing with the mosaic. Saying that I dropped water on the floor and the linoleum that was newly laid all curled. Which was not the truth in any way, because the curling went where the lockers were. And evidently some drainage pipe underneath was leaking and the water went through the concrete and the linoleum started to curl.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What happened? Did your supervisor defend you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They, the Artists Union, which was supposed to protect and defend the artists' right to work, never came to me because I had come to some sort of opposition with the leftists in the Artists Union. They defended many others, like they defended Raymond Breinin's mural and many other artists' work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But not you.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Not me, and at that time, I felt that I had no backing so I had to submit to the canceling of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the program of the murals, or the mosaics?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The mosaics was done like I have in the copy of the magazine, of the school paper. Four characters. This was also suggested to me by Vogelgesang [00:36:00] and another man who was a director of the project.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Vogelgesang a good man to work with?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, he just supervised back in the head office.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He left you on your own.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He would come and see it once in a while, and go away. But—and I submitted my drawing, which was published in the high school paper, of what I intended to do. And Vogelgesang told me to take off any fading out of the mosaic into the walls of the plaster. And have a hard line of the oval. He made certain demands on the way I designed the thing, which I didn't like because I thought architecturally that didn't work out. But that's what, in the WPA the supervisors really did tell the artists how to do things. That is, the ones that were not part of the party that would tell you to do it differently, they would do it on their own egos. Uh, so I was told that I had to stop working because I was destroying the newly laid floor. And I did stop, and in a few weeks after that, I went there to see the work, and it had all been chopped out, hammered out of the plaster. And re-plastered in medieval murals by a commercial mural company, painted clerics and scholars of the medieval times in the place of my mosaics. [00:38:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your mosaic, the subjects were what?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well it was four historic people. I have it written down what I intended.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they were all chopped out? You had Franklin—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: One was Leonardo da Vinci, one was Ben Franklin, the next was Socrates, and the fourth one was supposed to be voted by the high school students of who they would like to have as a character. And since it was a Carl Schurz High School, of Germanic background, name, and Carl Schurz was evidently a—something close to a Marxist in his idealism. I wanted to keep the subject related to the intellectual and social pursuit of—that would be consistent with the name Carl Schurz.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did the students finally vote their choice for the fourth—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think it was turned down before. I hadn't started the Socrates. I had the designs in. I had previously made a panel of Ben Franklin as a head that I submitted to the project in which they okay' d the choices. And they suggested the choices, I think. I mean, we would get in a meeting and talk about it. And the choices were—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would other artists, for example when you were working on this project, would fellow artists come around and see what was going on? [00:40:00]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't remember many. A few of my friends did come.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was a pretty big commission.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was a tremendous commission. The top of the head of the character, Ben Franklin and Leonardo and the others, was 50 feet above the floor of the auditorium. And the scaffold was a triangular scaffold that wove back and forth as we walked on it. We had three people up there. One plasterer, one man bringing the mosaic tesserae up, and my doing the work on it. The plasterer plastered an area, and then I drew the cartoon and I chopped and put in the mosaic, the marble mosaic, tesserae, into the cement.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can I ask for a moment. You mentioned earlier, when they had new headquarters they had a workshop and you did some woodcarving under Mr. Ott. What was that for? Were those panels being installed in some building?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Strangely enough, I don't remember what project. It was for some school and they were large mahogany panels about two and a half or three inches thick. As I would remember, four by eight feet or four by six feet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And were these figures on them or landscapes?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Peter Paul Ott made the cartoons of the panels and they were all projects of—excuse me. [00:42:00]

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] This is tape three.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I would have to look at the photograph to remember. The subjects of the mahogany panels were not only students at their tables, studying, but people working in industry. There are carpenters, there are laborers, there are masons, there are photographers. And men swinging mallets, mallets.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the figural style dictated to you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Totally done according to Ott, and we worked as assistants to Ott.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you like doing that work?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't mind doing it because one has to remember that in Depression times, one was lucky to be able to find something to eat. It was incredible.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you've described how you had to live.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, it was incredible.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And also you enjoyed craftsmanship too.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, I enjoyed the craftsmanship. And also there were a number of European middle-aged people. One Swiss man I worked with who was a professional wood carver and he helped teach a lot of us who were not professional wood carvers. I'd carved wood. I carved a statue, a wooden status of Gambrinus for a building in the Loop of Chicago, a restaurant and bierstube. I don't remember the name of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this man [00:02:00] could take you that much further.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This man took me further. And I took the job because I liked to do the work and I had a lot of chisels. Because I had done this work. And you could buy these chisels quite easily, these woodcarving chisels.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were kind of lucky because it was kind of the tail end of the wood carving profession that was training you, right?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. And also, I went to mosaics from there so I could get on my own personal interest. This was working for somebody else. That's Tuttle, and this is me, and there's Louise Ross, and uh, a number of these were out-and-out Communists. Because we got in an argument and two of them tried to attack a few of us. Because we argued with them. They got very angry. So what I'm trying to say is that the WPA brought together not only artists, but political people who were very serious. So you had to associate with that combination of leftist politics and Russia and not as a country, but as a Communist country, Communist-run country. And so you—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your chief interest now, at this point, was in making a living and developing your art.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And staying on the WPA. Because otherwise you had nothing to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you did that, you were on the WPA through the '30s? You were married in 1939.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Thirty-nine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you still on the WPA at that time?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Before I got married, [00:04:00] my former wife Ruth gave me a job to build a ranch house in Arizona.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You described that to me earlier.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: So that's why I left the WPA—when the mosaic was being destroyed, I had gone to many artist gatherings and poets' gatherings and met her. And I did some bookcases and did some carpentry for her—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, you mentioned that.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: So I went into all this—I did a lot of carpentry for other people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this came at a good time, this work you were doing for her.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was the next thing to do. And it was the only thing I could do—I was given this job. I worked, as I mentioned before, for a number of people and never got paid. Never got any salary. But at ate at their house, so I got my meals. And a lot of the artists lived in unheated buildings without any heat whatsoever. They turned on the gas cooking stove if they wanted heat. And there were coal stoves in some of the buildings, you know. Isinglass-windowed coal stoves. But it was hard to get coal also. You had to buy it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were able to survive. You mentioned that you got to know some of the other supervisors in the WPA. You mentioned Holger Cahill at one time.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes I'm trying to recall the man—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He came to Chicago, or?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Holger Cahill came to Chicago occasionally. He was in charge of the whole country, WPA project. He came to Chicago and when he saw the, as I remember it, [00:06:00] the John Reed Club members that I knew. And we were asked to come to see him, and usually not invited to stay for dinner. Well, Holger Cahill was invited. Now this sounds like a petty gripe on my part.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it sounds as though there was some faction there that were—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But there was a faction. Very clearly defined. Now that's not saying—I don't want to make any remarks against the people I have mentioned that were in this thing, who got quite a few of the projects. Because Rainey Bennett was not one of them. For instance, when he was in charge there was a combination of different ones.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Cahill seems to have been taken over by the leftists.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But as I remember, I just was invited to Eddie Millman's house. We had a few drinks, I met Holger Cahill, I met also Wallace Kirkland then, but he was—lived next door. And was invited because he was a, um, photographer for Life Magazine. And had nothing to do with these people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He's the man who took photographs of your work in college.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He's the man I met there, and then he asked if he could come out and see the project. And he came out and photographed it and said that Life Magazine had assigned him to go ahead with the project. And then the war—I don't know whether it was the war in Europe or the war in Japan. Because I remember also going to the meetings at the same place, at Eddie Millman's house, of artists against and writers against war and fascism, in which we wrote letters to Congress protesting [00:08:00] the fascists. And I suggested—I mentioned this before I think—I suggested that we include Japan in our protests because at about that time, Japan was bombing Shanghai. And I knew these fellows would object to it and they did object. They said don't confuse the issue, we're only interested in Spain—in the Spanish War. So that I lost like many other leftists, like Max Eastman, as he told me, and Joe Freeman of New York later told me, they began to see how this was oriented only for the political purposes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What, the project?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The project. No, the groups were oriented that way. And that's when I think Holger Cahill—I'm not saying Cahill was a Communist. He was white-haired at that time, I think mustached. And not a tall man.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he talkative?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't remember him as being particularly talkative. To us. But the thing was run by the John Reed members. They got up and held the floor, did the talks, suggested what we do. There was talk about the Lincoln Brigade joining us. There was a number of the artists that were totally disinterested in the political side of it were invited like John Cadell. I don't think John Fabian was [00:10:00] invited. Who was one of the well-known artists at the time. Johnny Sedenthal [ph] was invited to it. There are many that I didn't know because I wasn't familiar with them, political people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned meeting Max Eastman, that was later?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh, that was when I moved to New York, way after. That was in 19—mid-'40s probably, or earlier.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you meet Clyfford Still in Chicago?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I met Clyfford Still at Betty Parsons Gallery, where I was exhibiting and he was exhibiting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, in summary, these government projects, you feel, on balance, do you think your experience was good or very mixed? Obviously the destruction of the mosaics was a very painful thing.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That was a very painful thing and also it was a very—I felt very cynical about the way it was done. Because my feeling was that my in-laws, my wife's husband, was instrumental in trying to destroy me.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Republicans perhaps, that were, did not like what you were doing?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Since I was in the dark on what was going on. I was just told, accused of dropping water and plaster on the linoleum and that the linoleum was curled up. And the school told me, the builder, the construction was going on while I was doing this, said that what my mosaic was doing was destroying the linoleum. And that it had newly been put on, the floor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You never learned the real reason you were let go? [00:12:00]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I never talked to them except through the WPA, they told me that it was over.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you then continue with the WPA in any way?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No. Then I started doing some furniture for my former wife and her husband. And then was given this project to build this ranch house in Arizona. Hired to do so. And I went out there alone, there was a cowboy in charge of the building who had a truck and I went out there and myself physically built the chimneys, the fireplace, the total building. Plastered the walls myself and did everything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then after that—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And was very glad to do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: After that did you come back to Chicago? What did you--what happened—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I only worked there during the wintertime.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in Chicago, you lived there for another few years? In Chicago.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes. I lived there until, probably in 1941. I lived—

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you were married did you have a job? Or did you—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, when I was married I had the studio. I painted and, uh, I think I did some furniture. I, uh, the years of this time were a mixture of both doing work for the Darts, and doing work for, um, furniture for odd people that would—I lived in a house that Julio de Diego and I contracted for, and Caleb Harrison, who was an early IWW [00:14:00] radical. And who belonged to the Communist Party also. And was sent up—according to his story—sent up to Canada to organize a mining union. And given, if I remember right, \$10,000 credit to pay for the whole trip up there and to organize the mining union.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That wasn't—now he—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That wasn't during that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he helped you build this house. The house you were building for yourselves.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Nobody helped me build it. Except the cowboy that was out there—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, no, I'm talking about in Chicago. You just said you and Julio de Diego contracted for a house.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh, we signed a lease on a house.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see, and you and your family moved in there.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't have a family. I alone moved there and Julio moved to the top floor and Caleb Harrison lived in the basement.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Caleb Harrison was somewhere after 50 years of age. But very energetic. And he and I had a circular saw and joiner, a Delta set, to make furniture. And we made furniture, chairs, tables, for Esther King of the South Side, a woman that was married to a Spanish man. Who later moved out to the Blue Ridge Mountains and did craft work. I made a Spanish table, copy of a Spanish table. I got the design from the Art Institute library. And made it out of mahogany and I did some other sets. I worked for Ernest Byfield. Julio did the murals in the [00:16:00] Ball Tavern [ph] in the Ambassador East apartment of Ernest Byfield and his wife and children. We made—I made their nursery furniture. I designed it and made it, and made the bar room arch. I worked in metal also, sheet copper. We did everything! Not in a very professional way, but nevertheless it worked out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were pretty close, as least as a colleague, to Julio de Diego at that time.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: At that time Julio and I took this house because we wanted to do craft work. And I did work for him. But I'd previously done work for Edgar Miller in carving and some ceramics.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was Miller?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Edgar Miller was a craftsman that worked for many architects. Holabird & Root, Andy Rebori, and I did two mosaics and a big background mosaic in Loyola Chapel, in the Chapel By The Sea that Andy Rebori, the architect, designed. It was a monolithic, ferro concrete cathedral. And in the basement was a shrine to the Jesuit saints, three Jesuit saints. Loyola, Gonzaga, and a Polish man, I forget the name. And I did those mosaics for them, portraits.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was Julio de Diego like?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Julio was from Madrid and he knew Picasso and he knew many of the artists and he was a [00:18:00] very popular person all over Chicago in the art world. He also had a child by a former marriage—he was single, the time I knew him. He had a child that Paul Hoffman raised named Kiriki. Paul Hoffman owned the Studebaker Company, he was the president of the Studebaker Company. And I would meet them often. And I did lamps for Paul Hoffman, sheet metal lamps, punctured sheet metal designs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Julio good to work with?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Very nice. He was very popular. He had a steady stream of women coming up there [laughs] and I had to open the door for them. That's not saying anything against Julio. He was a very attractive person to women. And a very attractive raconteur of all sorts of lore, mythology and lore. He was a—and I think a good artist. He was a classic artist, he liked to paint in glazes and very photographic, but in his style. And, of course, he went to these meetings, these leftist meetings also, and was very much for the Spanish Republicans. And I met many artists at his house. Like, if I recall right, the architect that did the cathedral in Barcelona, or one of his assistants, came to our house and stayed there for a while. [00:20:00] You know, who did the cathedral—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Gaudí.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Gaudí.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Probably one of his assistants. Because Gaudí was dead by then.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I don't remember. All I remember is the photographs of this marvelous, floriferous cathedral. The slant of all its architecture. And, uh, all of them came to see Julio, and the Spanish consul. [Coughs.] There was a steady stream of people coming.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well then in '39 you got married, so presumably you'd gone out a bit yourself.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Uh. [Laughs.] Well I wasn't—what do you mean? Saying I was a virgin?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, no, just asking. Not that, but—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't want to pretend to say that I was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Once you got married then you continued at these odd jobs.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I got married and, uh—I didn't continue these jobs when I got married. I got--when I was married to Ruth, I was out in Arizona building the ranch. And uh, when I'd come back, I would stay—I don't know whether I was staying in Julio's building or not, I probably was—in the building that we had together on Cleveland Street. Um, it's hard for me to remember perfectly. I think I lived on Michigan Boulevard above an

antique shop at the time I was seeing some of Ruth. Because when I built the ranch house [00:22:00] on the side of the mountainous forest and we walked into the mountains back of the ranch, I first heard that she was a very unhappy person. So we developed some sympathies for each other's predicaments. But I had no romantic feeling or even thought of anything romantic with her. It was only at the last time when I was last working on the building—because I worked a number of winters there, you couldn't work in summer, it was too hot—that I was introduced to her father and invited out to Dixon, to his house. I was introduced as an artist. I had no, no sense of any relationship other than as a craftsman. I'm not protesting innocence, I'm just saying they didn't want me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Her father was a big businessman, wasn't he?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Wonderful businessman. They didn't like—when she did divorce her husband and wrote me about it, saying that I had nothing to do with it. We had no even talk about romantic relationship. This sounds like I'm protesting innocence. I'm trying to get it straight because that is important because she is involved with *Tiger's Eye*. She had many very well-known friends like [00:24:00] Admiral Byrd, Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago, Adlai Stevenson, the social world. And I knew the social world somewhat through Norman MacLeish and all the Glencoe and the Highland Park. And had met Adlai Stevenson there before I knew Ruth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Norman MacLeish is someone you'd know for some time?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was on the WPA project and did some paintings and was way better known than I was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you think he was a very good painter?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I only should compare him with myself. Then my ego says I'm the better painter. [Laughs.] I don't want to say that. He did an Emperor Jones painting that was sent all over the country. And Archibald MacLeish helped him comment about it, so as a family and as a social person, he was known and I was not. And Dick Florsheim knew him, had been a friend of Norman's way before I was. I went to do this mosaic that's in Deerfield and that's how Norman then invited me to stay at his mother's house in Glencoe at the big craggy lee [ph] on the lakeshore. So I joined the family, and I knew Bruce MacLeish and his wife Elizabeth and Norman's mother, who is a wonderful person. And I met Archibald through them. I met Sue Hibbard [ph], which I did mosaics for a fireplace facade for her. I met Dan Burnham there. [00:26:00] Wait, not Dan Burnham.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The son.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No. Economist professor at the University of Chicago. Was very famous. His son's famous in Washington now. I've got to get the name of it--his name.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the MacLeish's, was it intellectually very stimulating, the conversation?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well we, we had many of the people--social people come to MacLeish's house. And I was staying there, and Norman was staying there. Although he stayed with, uh—he had a house of his own when he was married to Lenore MacLeish, who lived in Jamestown before she died.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How was conversation? Was it, did it open up new ideas to you and things of that sort?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know that I ever learned a new idea. [Laughs.] In this one sense, I never learned anything. I was a very naive person at that time politically. I didn't know anything about Marx except the name and the general things you'd read in the newspaper about him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about, you mentioned a discussion of monarchy at the MacLeishes once?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, he being a professor of Chicago University, we were talking about forms of government. The main argument was that a monarchy was a rule by a king. A democracy is ruled by the votes of the people. I said that since you have political parties [00:28:00] and since they are voted into power, you have a president who is in a sense acts in control of the government. It is very much like a monarchy. I said the difference, the intent of the two were the same. I'm improving on what I probably said. I'm sorry to do that. And I said the same with any form of government. There's people who are in the ruling power that act with the same intent as does a monarchy. That was the gist of my argument.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was a fairly stimulating circle to be in.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh, it was. And I was invited there by myself. I didn't, wasn't dragged along all the time but—I mean, in some of these circles.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well then you did eventually court and marry—what was your life like before you met—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Back in Chicago when I was living on Michigan Boulevard, I was invited by Ruth to drive with the children and the governess east. And we drove to New York, we drove up to Massachusetts, to Cape Cod, and then back through the Berkshires on another route. I was the chauffeur. That's how we got acquainted. Which was somewhere in 1938, '39.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was just a trip, a vacation trip.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was a trip. By that time, I think the Walgreen family thought that [00:30:00] Ruth and I were becoming romantically involved. And they opposed me by all kinds of accusations. This I don't like to say because since then and even now I have a wonderful relationship to the Walgreens.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, it could be understood. Were they fairly socialite people at that time?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It could be understood because they weren't very socialite in the North Shore side, in the South Side. The gold side and in the business world they were.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But eventually they overcame that. At any rate, you married her.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Eventually I was very welcomed into the family. Once—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Once you were married were you suddenly—was your economic situation quite different?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: My economic situation wasn't so different so much as I lived, of course, according to the economics of my wife. I worked on the houses, I did my painting, she did her poetry and although I did mosaics and had a show at the New York Architectural Society that, of course, was after 1941, when we moved east.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What prompted you to leave Chicago? Did you both want to leave Chicago?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think, um, both of us wanted to leave Chicago because we felt the art world was in New York City, and the poetry world. She was very involved in the *Poetry Magazine*. And was of course very close to Harriet Monroe, who was the editor of *Poetry Magazine*. She also knew Peter De Vries, who I got to know then [00:32:00] in Chicago before coming east. And Robert Hutchins and other people, many of them. Also, who was this? Ball, George Ball, who worked for Roosevelt, I think. Or maybe Truman. Was also a friend of ours. So we knew a great number of people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But nevertheless, she felt New York was the place for the poetry. What about you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well the way we started talking about it, she said that she was a great admirer of Van Wyck Brooks, who lived in Connecticut, in Westport, in Westtown, Connecticut. And I don't know whether she had conversation, corresponded with him. But she heard about Westport being a colony of poets, writers, and artists. So we started talking about it and decided to go and move there. So we went out there to look around and found a house in Westport. And of course Hamilton Basso and De Vries and Van Wyck Brooks and many others were there and we were very pleased to move there. We had a big problem with the children. I have another suspicion though that since Mr. Dart moved previous to all this, took over Rexall Drug Company. He was voted as president of it. He moved to Malden, Massachusetts, near Boston. And [00:34:00] I have a suspicion that one other reason why we moved to Westport was so the children could be easily transported back and forth. Now that's a cynical thought that I had later when I think of how things happened. But I've never known anybody in this life to not have personal interests. So I never felt it was—I was very happy to do so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was a good place for you as a painter.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was a bad place for me as a painter. As a mosaicist, the problem was, if I had lived in New York and had a studio in New York in the beginning, I probably would have met architects and all that and done mosaics. I did have a mosaics show at Betty Parsons, who then was an assistant to Mortimer Brandt. That was before Betty Parsons had her own gallery, except at a bookstore called the Wakefield Bookstore.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But as a painter you say Westport wasn't too good for—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They were all commercial artists. There were Von Schmidt, Harold Von Schmidt, Austin Briggs, many others, all commercial artists and totally commercial artists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you spend a lot of your time therefore in the city, in New York?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We would go into New York to attend, to see gallery openings. We got to know Pierre Matisse, and many of the others. We got to know all the Surrealists. Pierre Matisse introduced us to many—and Joe Gollem [ph], who I mentioned, introduced us to Ossip Zadkine, who would come out to Westport in the

summer and live in my studio.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to know him a bit?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh, quite well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like? Because he was a teacher of a lot of the returning [00:36:00] GIs who studied sculpture in Paris. How would you characterize him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, he was a wonderful sculptor. He would take a piece of quartz rock that we'd find in the field and carve a head out of it, which I was amazed at. He actually did all—would attack any rough piece of stone that he took a fancy to. And he carved in wood. And my studio worked out perfectly. I did mosaics too and we got along quite well. I had a garage that Ruth's mother gave me right next to our house there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now your friend Joe Gollem, can you explain him? And what he is?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well Joe Gollem was originally a friend of Ruth's, whom she knew before she knew me. And who was a psychiatrist and a writer of children's books. How she met him I have no way of recalling. I don't remember anything except that she was a friend of his. And when we moved to New York or came to New York, then I met him. And he had fought in the Lincoln Brigade and was very disillusioned. He was a socialist. And perhaps a Communist Party member, I don't know. But he was disenchanted. And I think through him I met Ossip Zadkine. Because he said John, I want you to meet Ossip Zadkine. And when I met through him Ossip Zadkine, Ossip Zadkine invited me to meet Betty Parsons, and Betty Parsons [00:38:00] was working then for Mortimer Brandt and gave me the first mosaic show I had. I'd had a show before that at Argent Gallery, that's sort of a small gallery that was not very avant-garde but gave me a one-man show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who ran that, do you recall? Meeting Betty Parsons, she was quite a—what was she like when you met her?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Betty at that time was not the famous Betty Parsons that she was later. Because she was, in the first place she was working for Mortimer Brandt. And her group of artists at that time were none of the famous ones of the later years. To have a mosaic show there of horses and figures and other things was not anything like the shows she had when she was interested in the New York School artists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean was she impressive? How did she strike you as a person?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was never impressed by her as a knowledgeable artist—I mean, knowledgeable about the arts. But I didn't know her very well. And she wasn't impressed by me probably. [Laughs.] So I mean, I have to back out of trying to say anything about her.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A mosaic show was a pretty rare kind of thing for an art gallery then to stage, wasn't it?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That was interesting, and I think she did it because of Zadkine's recommendation. I had that show at the same time as Alfonso Ossorio, whom I didn't know, [00:40:00] had his show in the main room. I had my mosaics in the front rooms of the gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did this exhibition lead to anything?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I got no contracts but then I was—she very soon after that, she separated from Mortimer Brandt. I think he moved out. She took over his gallery and gave me a show of my paintings, a one-man show. And from then on I was in her gallery, as you saw by that letter. Up until 1950, 'til we moved-- stopped *The Tiger's Eye*, and went to live in Italy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But uh, you did quickly then have results from your paintings in the gallery?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I did sell a few paintings through her gallery to somebody living in Maine, some collector I don't remember. But uh, there, in that gallery, I started to meet the New York artists. When Betty Parsons took over the gallery by herself and called it the Betty Parsons Gallery, then suddenly all these artists were knowledgeable to me. I met them. Like Barney Newman. Clyfford Still later because he was in California. Mark Rothko later, as I remember. *The Tiger's Eye* has a lot of names of her early gallery. Kamrowski, Stamos was in it and Hedda Sterne, Saul Steinberg. [00:42:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd go to each other's openings.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We'd go to each other's openings and we'd often see each other. Meet at the gallery and meet and then go out to some Italian restaurant or Jewish restaurant to eat.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Tell me, did these artists you were meeting now in Manhattan, did they strike you as any different in focus or in interests, from those you'd been with in Chicago?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I had not become an abstract artist in Chicago. By meeting these people, it opened up the abstract art world to me, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were quite convincing in their—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, they influenced me a great deal. And also, at the same time I knew Zadkine and Joe Gollem, we met Max Ernst and we met Matisse. Because Ruth bought a Chagall painting from Matisse. And a Bruegel—not Bruegel—Rouault painting, a small painting. So we were introduced to many of the collectors and artists through that association. In fact, I met Julien Levy and Marcel Duchamp—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you say something about some of these Europeans that you met?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They were all the expatriates.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How would you compare them? Were their goals and aspirations different from the Americans? How could you characterize that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, they were of course satellites of André Breton and the Surrealist movement.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean in talking to them did you get a different perspective? [00:44:00]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I learned a great deal. After all, I was a hillbilly before I got there. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well how did they strike you? Were they very much more at ease with themselves? I mean, because you mentioned in Chicago—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was still doing mosaics some of the time. I was also raising two children, and also fighting a running battle with their father. Alongside with Ruth, we had an awful time trying to raise those children. Because of the father's intransigence to cooperate and collaborate with us on the bringing them up. And it was very painful and probably the cause of her final giving up.

[END OF TRACK.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: [00:00:00] Julien Levy I used to play chess with. He could play when he was stone drunk and play a very good game. I played with Marcel Duchamp a few times and I didn't win. He was a wonderful chess—I think I played with Max Ernst also, a couple of times, chess.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did Julien Levy strike you as a very astute man? Was he quite knowledgeable?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well he was a very sophisticated man and a very brilliant man. A great alcoholic. This is wrong, for me to label him that. I was too, I drank my share. But as I remember him, he was a wonderful friend of the artists. I never met him alone so much as we met him at openings and all of us going out to dinner together with Tanguy also. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did these Europeans seem to think of New York?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Dorothea Tanning and Max—and in fact, Peggy Guggenheim was Max's wife at that time. And we got together before Max married Dorothea.

ROBERT F. BROWN: As you recall, what did the Europeans seem to think of being in the United States? Did they put it down or were they just grateful to be out of Europe for the time being?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I think they were, of course, hating Hitler. And politically, um, not necessarily left. [00:02:00] They were more interested in art, and in literature, poetry, music, the cultural things. I don't remember any of them holding forth in an argument on dialectics or on Marxism or anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The sort of thing you heard in Chicago.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Heard in Chicago. They were above that. Now, Max Eastman was also disoriented from leftism. And he was rather a philosopher at the end, uh, laughing at a lot of the things that happened. Same with Joe Freeman and the same with Joe Gollem. Joe Gollem was very, uh, disillusioned.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But these well-known European artists generally didn't talk politics. What would they talk about?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, they were talking about Surrealism, Lautreamont, Baudelaire, all the—Freud, uh, all the dream world, all the psychic things. There were others there if I could try to recall some of them. Uh, we were very much involved in it, as much as we could. But living in Connecticut and raising two grammar school children and high school children, later high school children, we naturally could not live the life of New York City. So we did *The Tiger's Eye*—oh, we met Nicolas Callas through the group, who was involved with Surrealism. [00:04:00] And who suggested starting a magazine with Ruth. Which I think I talked about this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, I want to get to that in a minute. I want to ask just for a moment though, you talked about the Europeans, what about the Americans that were meeting then? What would they talk about mainly? Or were they mainly sort of listening to the Europeans? Rothko you mentioned.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Rothko as I remember, didn't associate in the same group we did. Nor do I remember him necessarily being talked much about by the Surrealist group. I think he perhaps didn't want to be too well connected. But Peggy Guggenheim liked him very much, and Clyfford Still. And a few others, Pollock.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were some of the American artists you were getting to know in New York?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I mentioned most of those that were in Betty's gallery. But also de Kooning, Kline, Kavalan [ph].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were some of them you getting to know pretty well? Could you describe them a bit, as they were friends to you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, not knowing the chronology of it, exactly, when they started the Eighth Street School. That was after we came back from Rome. We lived two years in Rome and one year in Arizona and then came back. I got to know, through Barney Newman, Bill de Kooning and Franz Kline. Now I probably knew them before we went to Rome, in fact I'm sure I did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well maybe we can do that after. What about Newman? You've known him since the mid-'40s.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Barney Newman was an appendage to Betty Parson's gallery. He was a spokesman. [00:06:00] Whenever there was a show he was there first. And he held forth on all the talk about the artists. I think he thought himself as a spokesman and many of the artists accepted him because he was their friend, and my friend. I had always thought of Barney as being very much my friend. Until that painting situation came and *The Tiger's Eye* came, when he thought that—to my viewpoint, he thought *The Tiger's Eye* was becoming too big for—and he was not a part enough of it. He disagreed with its principle. And we didn't become enemies so much as he began to act and from the little remarks we'd get from our friends, he became an enemy of us before I even thought of him as disagreeing with us. Even Betty Parsons began to look, be much quieter in our relationship. And complaining about *The Tiger's Eye* a little bit. And Barney complained that we're putting in Surrealists and other artists when we should put in just the group, the gang as he called it. I think that's where the enmity and disagreement with us started.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He wanted the New York group?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He wanted just the so-called gang.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now it was Nicolas Calas who, you just said earlier, talked with Ruth about starting a magazine. How did you get to know him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: [Coughs.] [00:08:00] I imagine we met him like we met all the other artists. The Surrealist artists, through the cocktail parties and the openings and the shows. And Calas of course, was a writer. Had written a number of books. I've re-read some of them, I don't remember them except they're rather chaotic in sense, anyway. Like Surrealism. Uh, Nicolas Calas wanted to get a magazine that he could run, that he could be in charge of. So he started to talk to Ruth about starting a magazine. This was without my knowledge [coughs] at first. He suggested running a magazine, and Ruth said that she would be interested in running, starting one. A small magazine. And um, when it finally came that they were talking seriously about it, he wrote her a letter saying that he would be glad to be on this magazine, but she should submit her poems to him before the final act would take place of starting it. And Ruth considered that a gross insult. And um, I, living with Ruth naturally, heard the pain and disappointment and said, "Why don't we start ours?" And do it accordingly to the things I suggested and she had the things she suggested. So actually we started the magazine, totally independent of anybody, even Barney Newman or Marguerite [00:10:00] Young or Horace Gregory or Herbert Calhoun and many others. We brought into the magazine after the first issue. The first issue was just with her secretary Emeline Page [ph] and she and I. And we had an independent printer up in Meriden, Connecticut that we contacted and was recommended and he agreed to print the first issue. From then on, we went to New York City to a commercial printer who was very helpful. And agreeable to print.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Looking at the first issue, you have a statement of intention, which I guess the both of you wrote together.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Both of us wrote, but I wrote about where it concerned the artist and what the purpose of the art is. She also wrote on the front page of that. It's here in an envelope.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She wrote?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: About the integrity of the artist, about his relationship to art critics, about his independence from it. About the two having entirely different cross-purposes. And the way we'd publish it, we were not interested in names. Now I'd had a show at Betty Parsons, which I never named a painting. Clyfford Still says he never named a painting. Who did it first? I don't know. I think it was simultaneous because he was out in California and I'd never met him before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There's a little footnote in one issue of *Tiger's Eye*. The previous issue, someone had titled—the dealer had titled a Clyfford Still painting and he took exception to that.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: [00:12:00] Betty Parsons gave me the photographs that I went around to all the galleries and collected photographs of the artists' work that I wanted. And Betty handed me a Clyfford Still painting before I knew Clyfford Still, and it had a title on it. And later Clyfford said he blamed me for doing it. And I said, "But Clyfford before I knew you or anything about you, this is the way Betty titled that painting." Now Barney accused me of trying to retitle his painting too, and hang it upside down and he's totally false. But Barney had a period in which he was angry at everybody, even became an enemy of his best friend Mark Rothko, called Mark Rothko a whore and antagonized many people. And I think I was a victim of that same period of Barney's extreme—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was later though.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, this one was later because he had a show at—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because Barney Newman contributed several things to *Tiger's Eye*.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I suggested to Ruth that Barney should become the artist editor of the magazine. Because I was more interested in, I think at that time, mosaics, even at that time, and painting. And I didn't have the necessary ego to do it as a project. I never considered myself a writer or literary person or a scholarly person. And Barney, of course, presented himself as a scholar too, [00:14:00] which he was. He was quite a—when I first met Barney he was interested in bird watching. And he was known as a bird watcher. He went to—out into swamps and to places with groups and watched birds. Now that doesn't mean I knew anything else about Barney. He could have been an artist, as he later claimed, but for years with Betty, nobody thought about Barney as an artist. As Clyfford Still has said in his book. Now that doesn't mean you know everything, because after all a person can be a surprise at the end of their life, here they were interested in something that nobody ever knew about. So I'm not saying that against Barney except that—and I remember Barney mentioning Clyfford Still's paintings to me with great respect of Clyfford Still's work and Clyfford Still's verticality. And that was in my first show. That was when I had my first show in Betty Parsons' gallery. On my first painting show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About 1948.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Around that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But Barney then did contribute, but he did not become the art editor, however, did he.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He never became the art editor, but he did introduce me to Bill de Kooning, to Franz Kline, and he came out to our house quite often, he and Annalee. And we talked about art and he told me a lot about the art world in New York. So I owe Barney Newman a great deal. Nevertheless, I didn't agree with his premise.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which was?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Which was only to show—have a magazine representing and showing the group. I was interested—and that was [00:16:00] my suggestion in *The Tiger's Eye*—rather than promote names, because it was quite obvious to me that standing in the art world depended a great deal upon the promotion that was carried on in it. And every artist, young artist realizes that he either does or doesn't get shown because of the people who choose to show him. And it's a political thing. In fact, that argument I had at Sue Hibbard's house on the monarchy and the democracy was the belief at that time I had even then in Chicago before I came to New York. Was that it was political power that governed what kind of the real quality of government, of an artist's possibilities. I had a leftist taint in me then socially because I knew that in Chicago I was—not only the left didn't

support me as a mosaicist and the Carl Schurz job, but in showing at the Art Institute in the annual shows, which I was in regularly, all the prizes went to the steady same people. And when it did shift it went to the leftist people. And Bridaham, who was a curator at the Art Institute under Rich, I think—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Lester Bridaham.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Lester Bridaham really selected the—and recommended those leftist people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you supposed the same would be [00:18:00] in place in New York as well?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Not leftists. There were political situations like many of the artists went to the Art Students' League and many of them were involved in the '30s in the Social Realist subject that was brought about in the '30s. And that was there before I ever went to New York. Everybody knew that, it was quite popular.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And some of this attitude carried over into the '40s?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well that attitude still exists. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you in your initial issue of *Tiger's Eye* say that you're ready to observe, not to criticize. You wished to be—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We didn't believe in art criticism, because we didn't feel that the experience of a work of art and the meaningfulness of a work of art had anything to do with what somebody else said. It's all right to read about other people's ideas, but not to read them before you get your first impression from how he's praised or blamed or written up.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is it for that reason that you had no names or titles—or you had titles, but no names until one got into the mid or back section of the magazine.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The idea in the magazine, which I think was my suggestion, was that one should read a poem, read an article by a writer, look at a painting, or look at a drawing before you had any concern of who you were reading. That it was the work of art that had its own integrity. [00:20:00] That the meaning was a work of art. Now in today's world, if it's Pop art, you have to know all about Pop art before you can really understand Lichtenstein and Warhol and all these people. And before you can understand the New York School. Because it's written up and you're really joining an enthusiasm that was well promoted in the press and museums.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Said that art is a quest and you wanted to lead your reader in without the impediment of names and other associations.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. That's quite obvious to my way of thinking. And of course, I don't think I was alone in suggesting that. Ruth had that idea and agreement in literature and poetry. Because at that time, the Surrealist movement was so dominating that even the—a lot of the museums, and especially Museum of Modern Art, would not even look at a New York artist. Except through the lesser branches. The Whitney did, but both museums had a period of leftism, of Social Realist art. Museum of Modern Art in the beginning was oriented towards Social Realist subject matter. And *Art Digest* and *Art News Magazine* were. That's one reason *The Tiger's Eye* changed, it went against that. Is the complaint of most of those artists as we met them in Betty Parsons and [00:22:00] through Charlie Egan and others, were complaining themselves of how the museum world and the art critic world would pay no attention to them because they only followed the going thing. That was the reason why the names were taken out, because we also published many famous pieces of poetry, famous classic works of art —

ROBERT F. BROWN: Indeed.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And showed that they could cohabit with other works.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well maybe this lies behind—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But no intent whatsoever, which we were criticized for, of obscuring the authorship, or the painter's name, identity. None whatsoever, we were accused of doing—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it could be found, you have a very good [inaudible] index.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It could be found. A little hard to read because of the papers we got. We had to have a hard paper in the index because it would be referred to. You had to find it easily, by touch.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Maybe this led to the, the countering of predominant taste. The MoMA for example, looked to Europe mostly. There is an article in No. 2, uh, by Boris Margo.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes, I knew Boris. He was in Betty's gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he says that, uh, he does not favor the development, or looking for distinctly national schools of art. But then he does go on to say, "I feel that a group of individualists who are working in this country are doing the job of integrating the new forms and techniques with the new content, a job which is not being done at present in Europe." So was this possibly accepted [00:24:00] for your publication because it was a counter to the kind of always looking to Europe on the part of the museums?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I don't think we were, if we complained about what was going on in New York because it was, seemed to be dominated by the Surrealists—there were expatriates from Europe. In that sense, yes. But we weren't at all like Boris Margo also, we weren't at all interested in nationalism. Or even racism or anything like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Simply pointing out that there was good experimental work going on here. He's calling attention to that. The others who write in that issue No. 2 are mostly—entirely people in America. They identify as mostly New York School. Herbert Ferber, Newman of course, Stamos, Gottlieb, Rothko, Hedda Sterne, and yourself.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. In that sense I was very much influenced by the New York group. And Barney Newman was instrumental in suggesting those artists. Only because of the conversation we'd have whenever we went to the gallery and we'd sit down and talk. And then we'd go out to dinner with Betty often. And Mark and Barney and Baziotis, and Stamos, and Ferber, and Lipton later, Seymour Lipton. We would discuss at a table, usually an Italian restaurant at a big table. We would hold forth 'til late at night about these subjects and of course I was quite influenced by all that too. But I think the [00:26:00] ideas of *The Tiger's Eye* had nothing to do with these other people. Because before I knew Betty Parsons well, we'd already started *The Tiger's Eye*. And wait, I don't know Dick, chronologically, whether that's true or not.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, it is I think.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know. But we had a probably—no, I'm wrong. Since we knew Calas we knew the Surrealists and at the same time we knew the Surrealists we got to know Betty Parsons through Zadkine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were beginning to get to know her.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, so the thing came together as a total thing, rather than a separate thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, I think the magazine reflects your knowledge and interests in the Europeans and the Surrealists as well as the New York painters. It's very evenly divided.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: But the complaint was that the museums were not interested in any of the New York people and there was a big struggle. That's how Pollock and Mark and many others got known because the dealers began to defend those artists. And I think *The Tiger's Eye* along with perhaps Bob Motherwell's *Possibilities* was the one that brought out the New York group of artists to show them in relationship to all other art of the Surrealist movement, the Europeans. Intellectually, the Surrealists were the ones that were thought of as being the great people. That's Max Ernst [00:28:00] and all the rest of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you, by the way, settle on the name of the magazine?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That was Ruth's idea. She, uh, in deciding to give it the name *Tiger's Eye* she was thinking about "Tiger, tiger, burning bright." That fierce look of an eye, seeing. That's how the whole thing, that's her—that was her idea.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's tied in with the idea that the magazine would be a quest, or reflect the quest—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, and it was a way of looking out into. Usually looking through the darkness. And that's—she asked me to do that painting for the cover. And I did, I did it for that reason, the cat face and then the second one, the—was also a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So the magazine lasted into 1949, I believe. There were nine issues.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, nine issues.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it got quite a lot of press? Or was it mainly a stir in the art community.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, it didn't—it met generally in the literary world, the small magazine world, it met with opposition saying that it was run by a person who had a lot of wealth and could spend so much to give it such elegant paper and elegant reproductions and all that. It was opposed by the *Partisan Review*. It wasn't

recognized by the Museum of Modern Art. In fact, they just—I think I mentioned it before, they put the magazine that we sent them gratis, two copies, each quarterly, each time. And they put them in a file cabinet. And I went in there and asked—did I [00:30:00] mention that? I went in and asked, I said, "May I see *The Tiger's Eye*?" And the librarian said, "*The Tiger's Eye*? I don't know what, what you mean." And I said, "I've sent you two copies every quarterly." You have, uh, *Art Digest*, *Art News*, all those art magazines, which there were a lot then, on an open rack, and you don't have our *Tiger's Eye*! And she went back to her boss and they discussed it and she said, "Oh, here they are." Took me in the office; it was upstairs in the library, and, uh, opened a bottom file, and there was the *Tiger's Eye* in a folder. Not even looked at, as I remember. So that's what the Museum of Modern Art really was at that moment, I think after a few copies, because the second or third copy had a Picasso's dancers, "The Three Dancers." And, um, I went to the Museum of Modern Art to ask for permission to reproduce "The Three Dancers" in color because I myself liked the painting very much. I have a name, I can't remember the name. Monroe Wheeler, that's the name. Monroe Wheeler was in charge of, evidently, the Picassos. And I introduced myself and he said, "Well, the Museum of Modern Art doesn't own these paintings, they belong to Picasso. And we've had a lot of trouble with Picasso." These were his words. He said, "I don't think we can allow you to reproduce that painting." So we were in quite [00:32:00] a conversation. And I suggested that I write to Picasso and ask him for permission. And he said, "Well we've had too much trouble, we don't think we can do that." So I did take it upon myself to either send a telegram or a request to Picasso. I sent it to Jaime Sabartés, his secretary. And I got a telegram right back and the Museum of Modern Art got a telegram. "Picasso hereby gives permission to *The Tiger's Eye* to reproduce 'The Three Dancers.'" [Laughs.] And Monroe Wheeler was furious. And I said that the photographers that did the plates, the color separations, would come and photograph it at the museum or send it over there. Because he objected, he said, "We can't send a Picasso on the streets of New York to some engraver to reproduce because it could be damaged." So the engraver, I don't know whether he went there and photographed it, separation of colors—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you got what you wanted.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Or that. But we were called up and the plates were ready. So we did it. But at that time, the Museum of Modern Art disliked *The Tiger's Eye*. I mean, would have nothing to do with it. There was a lot of gossip. It's just like the gossip that's in politics today. It's just as vicious then. And the people who were in did not like the people that wanted to get in. And they wanted to maintain their relationships of preeminence and prime relationship with the artists. And so there was a lot of opposition. And then there was a going struggle between the left. Social realists and that, [00:34:00] in the art world. That existed just previous to this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But that didn't continue after World War II very much, did it? Or did it?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: What, the leftists?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well the Social Realists versus the abstract.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know. There was a period when the Social Realist was generally accepted as being old stuff. No more elevated stations and no more crowds of Third Avenue and the markets and the people and all the laborers and farmers and all those things. They came with the WPA, the American scene, they came in under the aegis of the American scene. They pulled a fast one. And of course, many of the émigré families who were artists, uh, painted the American scene, because that was their backyard. So that became very popular, and then of course there was Reginald Marsh, and Hopper, and all these people that were in on it previous to the WPA, even.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But by the time you were doing *Tiger's Eye*, though, there was increasing interest in American abstract painters, weren't there? It was growing through these dealers that you mentioned, Betty Parsons, and so forth.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Um, I think there were a number of people, probably, instrumental in developing—Peggy Guggenheim was primary in the development of an interest in the New York School, so-called.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to know her a bit?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes, through Max Ernst. When, when we'd go to dinner, he'd bring Peggy with him. That was before we met Dorothea Tanning.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Max Ernst, what was he like as you knew him then? [00:36:00]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, he was a very sensitive man, very Germanic in appearance and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he very didactic or authoritarian?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: As I remember him he was always talked to rather than outspoken himself. Which is

interesting. But many of them were, because also if I remember right, they talked with either a French or German accent in their voice, and since they all knew each other, they had a society of expatriates that was quite conducive to them to stay together and not to go out into—and they were sought after rather than they sought anybody else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Guggenheim, what was she like?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, Peggy as I remember was—our interest was in Max Ernst and Julien Levy and those people. Who's the fellow that committed suicide? Gorky! Arshile Gorky. We would go to parties—Peggy was usually in the more elegant meetings, parties. I never knew her much in the ordinary dinner parties. Maybe it was because we also knew Max Ernst and Pierre Matisse, Tanguy, and many of the others.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Kay Sage, I guess you knew?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Kay Sage and oh, I would have to look at all these names to get back into it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the magazine [00:38:00] you felt, had been a very worthwhile undertaking?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, after the magazine got started, we got a tremendous growth of subscriptions in the West Coast and in Paris, in England, and Italy. Many writers—we got a tremendous number of manuscripts to be published, offering to be published. And we read every one of them. I didn't myself, we had Margaret Young, Kay Calhoun, Horace Gregory, and later some others, John Nurber [ph], and other people who'd help read every manuscript that came in. That was our policy, to read everything. And every one of the assistant associate editors handed the manuscript to the next, so it was read by the total group. It was rather a democratic thing. Not that we prided ourselves on democracy. But we were very much interested in the total decision rather than a singular. For instance, Mark Rothko—you have to push the--

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I would like to know who wrote that article for Mark Rothko in there. It was a Columbia University student, it was a well-known artist of abstractions.

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, anyway.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A Columbia student wrote an article about Mark Rothko—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Art student. A student under a wonderful teacher, uh, art teacher at Columbia.
[00:40:00]

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I admired Meyer Schapiro as being one of the real art critics, one who really understood art. Uh, at that time Clement Greenberg was thought of a—I want to say a dog, I don't mean that. Barney hated Clement Greenberg. In fact, that's how I learned my first things about Clement Greenberg, is the awful things Barney held forth on these particular people. Also Hilton Kramer and others.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did he think of them? He just thought they were—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, they liked Harold Rosenberg, because Harold Rosenberg became a friend of all of the New York artists. He was a real—and he would come to the dinners and the meetings and we'd all see him at the shows.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the others? Greenberg—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Greenberg was more of a paper writer, a journalist, and they didn't like him because he associated probably, in the beginning, with the Surrealists as his prime interest. At least, this is my remembrance and I could be wrong. I can't remember the writer who wrote the original article on Mark Rothko's issue—the issue that has Mark Rothko's paintings in it. We asked Mark Rothko. And the group of the literary writers read some of it and didn't like it. And we all discussed it, liking or not liking. And so I naturally went directly to Mark Rothko and told him what they thought. We did the same with Barney Newman on the "Genesis" [00:42:00] title. Well, the night issue was not intended to be religious, to have a Biblical connection. It was the artist's interest in darkness and light, night and day. It was emphasizing night and we wondered if he, instead of calling it "Genesis," thought of it as being something else. Now I, naively in a way, told Barney that Horace Gregory was outspoken about it. And the others and, uh, Betty Parsons gave me the photograph of that painting, and it was called "The Break," and Barney wrote it on the back of that photograph. And he came to—this is the

truth, he came to my office and he thought that the painting he called "Genesis" or "The Break" was very fitting for the night issue, which it was. It's the Biblical story of the separating of night and day, and we reproduced it. But I never hung it any different than it always was hung by the wire. And I was accused falsely—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That you had printed it upside-down.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He said that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he was becoming an increasingly difficult friend.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, just in that time. I never saw much of him—there was a break between he and the magazine. His warmth and our association tapered off before that. Because he complained of the fact that I was [00:44:00] putting in the Surrealists and putting in historic painting, Classical, Bruegel, and everything else.

[END OF TRACK.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: [00:00:00] —I remember what a wonderful person he was. He was not only a medieval scholar, and had a great library of ancient literature, ancient books, but, um, also was very—I think—one of the prime Surrealist artists. Because his figures were fabricated figures of fabrics, or they weren't eyes-nose-mouth-chin, they were ghosts or spirits. And he was a very open-minded and philosophical person. And a very kind, warm person. And I thought that in the Surrealist movement that perhaps some of the other artists were a little envious of his aloofness, of the interest in getting in struggle with the art world.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean including some of the other Europeans as well?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Some of them resented him a bit?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know, because we never talked about it. But some of these things you sensed without saying. That's the way whatever I say has to be taken because a lot of it, a lot of it did not have documented moments of when these things were specifically said.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These are your experiences—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: This is my memory.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Which is unfortunate.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you did show and illustrate work.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Illustrate, we had an issue. He had a very, um, disillusioning view [00:02:00] of Nicholas Calas. And he encouraged us, in a way, to go ahead with *The Tiger's Eye*, while Nicolas, we denied, uh, any interest of him any more—further when we started *The Tiger's Eye*, because he did insult, Nicholas.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Although Calas did write once or twice for *Tiger's Eye*.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes, we were—in these situations, we never broke relationship. In fact, in New York a lot of people that hated each other acted very pleasantly together and—it was a very strange relationship. Talk—in talking, it sounded as if a battle was taking place. It was mostly a battle of talk, rather than a battle of actual performance.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Here, you mention you and the editorial board read through things very thoroughly. One evidence, in the index there's usually a very personalized synopsis of the person's work and the person's career.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Ruth wrote those.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She would write those. Sometimes rather whimsical.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. She was a very much-misunderstood poet. And a very unfortunate person because of her family connections and because of her—the problem is being the mother of children that were quite aggressive and playing the two homes, one against the other. Now, I love these boys and I'm writing to them now. And they [00:04:00] have told me they're very appreciative of, of their experience with me. So, um, none of this goes—is carried on into today's world. It's funny, it's settled down. It's too bad—it's tragic that it

didn't happen during their mother's time, that they now could see how much their mother cared for them. That was very strange.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why did the magazine end?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well the magazine ended in a strange combination of reasons. One is the manuscripts became too numerous for the people that would work for us.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were overwhelmed by the—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Overwhelmed by the manuscripts. Second was, Ruth was writing novels herself. And Alfred Knopf published the first one and she was getting to know many of the publishers. She belonged to the Pen Club and other—and um, she got to know many writers personally. And, uh, her first book was published, it was very much liked by the Knopf. And Harold Strauss who was her editor liked very much the second book, and told her they'd publish it. And Alfred, for some strange reason, took the second volume—manuscript—that is, "Christina [ph] in Rome," uh, and read it on the train going to Boston from New York. [00:06:00] And he came back and evidently complained that he didn't like the story, but he said, "Since we agreed to publish it, we'll go ahead and publish it." But he wrote her such a letter, a discouraging letter on the story. Because it wasn't—she only submitted the first two chapters, I think. But um, as she was a very sensitive person, she was heartbroken. Well, heartbroken by many things besides the book. She felt also that *The Tiger's Eye* wasn't appreciated by anybody because while we published *The Tiger's Eye* and had a lot of friends, the New York literary world did not recognize us. Harold Rosenberg was very friendly, and we might have published something he wrote, I don't remember. I don't think it was art criticism. But we always felt that the New York literary and art world was too difficult a thing to be accepted for us. So *The Tiger's Eye* was discontinued, first on the fact that the manuscripts piled in too greatly, second is that Ruth wanted to write her own books. And I suggested, let's go to Rome and visit all those places that Christina took in her carriage on the way from Stockholm, all the way to Rome. [00:08:00] We went through that same route.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was an historical novel? That she had written.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. [Coughs.] It was the second one. She'd written books of poetry also.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this then, these things converged and determined you to close the magazine.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They determined it. Plus the fact that we felt that, uh, we wanted to exchange ads with the *Southern Review*, with the *Partisan Review*, with other magazines, and many of them did not give us any kind of recognition, especially Phillip Roth and his gang.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was that, the *Partisan Review*?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: *Partisan Review*. So it was a blend of that. And the third reason is we had moved to New York from Westport where we started the magazine. And the problem of living in New York with the children, sending them to the downtown community school like we did my son and Lawrenceville [ph], like we did the second boy. And the first boy, I think, went to live with his father and got polio. And the second boy later got polio. They're in wheelchairs. The tragedy of those events, plus some of the tragedy of our own relationship. I felt also myself that the same opposition to the art world that she felt in the literary world. We were very disenchanted. So the idea to go to Rome to write—finish writing the book on Christina's flight to Rome, having [00:10:00] an academy there, and being in the Vatican, and buried in the Sistine—in the church.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the church in St. Peter's.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: St. Peter's, that's right. I was thinking [inaudible] that's the old one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That trip seemed like an antidote.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was. And there was also an opportunity to write so that Knopf would appreciate it. See, these things are complicated; they're not simple. They're not one-sentence events. And it's very hard. That's why I think that if I were to say this again, I would disagree with most of—with the primacy of some of the things. It's very hard to do. See, you've got a—

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] Doing interviews with John Stephan. Robert Brown the interviewer. Newport, Rhode Island. This is May 7, 1987.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: We talked about your publication with your wife Ruth, *Tiger's Eye*. And exhibitions in New York and the like. I thought we might begin today. Maybe you could describe and comment on your friendship with various people. For example, the filmmaker Robert Flaherty. You met him in New York.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. Robert Flaherty's daughter, whom I don't know the first name of, worked at Betty Parsons' gallery as an assistant. And she introduced us to her father Robert Flaherty. And Robert Flaherty then invited us to—that is, Ruth and I—to some of the Explorer Club dinners where we met Jacques Cousteau and quite a number of other people who were well known in the world of travel. And Flaherty became sick and his wife went back to their home in Vermont, their farm in Vermont or New Hampshire, I forget which it was. And so I ran into Robert Flaherty when he was trying to raise money to do another film, since the State Department canceled a contract to produce a film, I think in Hawaii, for the government. And Robert Flaherty [00:02:00] was in a way, penniless. At least, it was described so by himself, that he was—since the government broke that contract, he was now without any funds. So I thought I could offer him what funds I had to do a movie he wanted to do. And he said that wasn't enough. Uh, he said that in not a blunt way like we're talking. He was then staying in the--

ROBERT F. BROWN: What sort of film did he wish to do?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That I don't remember except that it was something he kept rather secret in his own mind. The government wanted him to do something after that, uh, Cinerama—he was commissioned to work on the Cinerama with the people that had invented the Cinerama twin, or triple camera.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, very wide screen.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Very wide screen. And I had, uh, a Graflex camera that I made into a telephoto lensed camera, with an English Delmar [ph] lens. Robert Flaherty saw it and said I'd like to take that to show to the Cinerama people, and maybe they could use a lens like that instead of the triple camera lens. And it didn't work. So he gave it back to me. But he was very—getting—he lived in the Chelsea Hotel, and was getting—he had shingles. And he was drinking a lot of scotch whiskey and not eating much. So I spent some weeks visiting with him, trying to cheer him up [00:04:00] and discussing all his life together. He was discussing it with me. And his shingles got so bad he went back to his farm either in Vermont or New Hampshire and then died. That was the last I saw of him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a very affable sort? How would you characterize him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well he was a wonderful person. He was a very—he was aware of his genius. He was very much interested in cinematography. He had become famous at the first documentaries, *Nanook of the North* and *Noa Noa* and *South Sea Island* movies. They were great successes and he was very knowledgeable about how to do such kinds of movies, documentaries.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But when you had met him he was sort of in decline.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He had finished *Louisiana Story* and expected this government contract to go through, which failed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was one person who's vivid in your mind. You also mentioned previously various European expatriate artists that you met. I think you mentioned Max Ernst and others. What about Ossip Zadkine, who was a very influential teacher of sculpture?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: My former wife Ruth knew a psychiatrist named Joseph Gollem, who was the uncle of Judy Holiday, who played on Broadway. And I met him through her when we moved east. [00:06:00] And Joe Gollem fought in the Lincoln Brigade and was disenchanted with the leftist movement, although he was a socialist at heart, by his own words. And he said I must have you meet Ossip Zadkine. Because he was a friend of Zadkine. Both of them were Russian Jewish people. And so he took me over and introduced me to Zadkine, and we asked Zadkine to come out to our house and spend the weekends, Joe did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Out to Westport, New York [sic]?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Westport. That way I got to know Zadkine and later, the summer soon after that, perhaps the first summer after meeting Zadkine, at Betty Parsons' gallery, Zadkine came, lived in the studio I had. I made a studio in the attic of our main house.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he came out to Westport?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Zadkine talked to Betty Parsons and influenced her to give me a show. I'm not quite positive of that, because I did mosaics at that time and might have met Betty Parsons before. But I think

Zadkine was influential in getting—that was when Betty Parsons worked for—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mortimer Brandt?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Brandt. Mortimer Brandt Gallery. And I had a show of my mosaics in the main gallery with Ossorio, Alfonso Ossorio showing his watercolors at the same time. Neither of us were well known, although Ossorio knew a lot of the artists that I didn't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:08:00] Did Betty Parsons do fairly well by your work?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, she showed me regularly, every year. But did not sell many paintings. A couple of paintings is all, in a matter of 47 to 50.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was she easy to talk to and work with?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Betty Parsons had worked at the Wakefield Gallery, a friend of hers, and she had a whole group of artists that were not the artists that were with her at the end. Like Kamrowski and—I'd have to look in *Tiger's Eye* to find the names of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: She moved from one kind of artist to another in the end.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: She got onto her interests without me knowing why, because I didn't live in New York, I lived in Westport. She started out with a few of the New York School artists. And I think Clyfford Still and Rothko showed with her at first, early. Newman was always present at her gallery as a spokesman. A self-assumed spokesman. Everybody liked Barney Newman, but none of us thought of him as being an artist. Apparently he led the art school in New York—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Art Students' League?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Art Students' League. And he knew all the artists, he knew everybody. Barney once ran for mayor of New York City! I don't think he got any recognition, but he did run for mayor. That is, I was told. [00:10:00] And Barney and I were really great friends until *The Tiger's Eye* got going and I asked Barney to become the editor of *The Tiger's Eye* because I thought he knew more of the artists than I did. And we had already been doing *The Tiger's Eye* and I don't think Barney particularly approved of some of the artists we chose. Nor did he necessarily approve of it not being a magazine dedicated to what he called "the group," that is his circle, or Betty Parsons, and Charlie Egan's, and Kootz's group of artist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He thought they were the avant-garde.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He thought they were the avant-garde—well they all thought they were the avant-garde. They were all the real ones, especially because the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art never paid any attention to them, never gave them shows. Might have given a few of them a show once in a while. But I don't think the Museum of Modern Art gave any attention to them. They were all dedicated to this, expatriate Europeans like the Surrealists, the Breton group, and the European expatriates.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Barney Newman was right in that respect?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Barney Newman was right in most respects. In that sense. He was a very intelligent person and a very nice person. I didn't understand Barney's suddenly taking a position, an antagonistic position, and can only interpret it that he did complain to me that I should only include the gang, what he called the gang. And he didn't like the idea that I had [00:12:00] Dürer and other artists, and didn't like Nicholas Calas, for instance, or Max Ernst, or many of the others that were European expatriates. Chagall. Later he might have—I don't know what he felt towards those people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did Barney Newman and others, by then, by the late '40s, would they have thought of you as part of the New York group?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was considered part of the group, although since I lived in Connecticut and, uh, was not a New Yorker. I was a newcomer. I was treated the same way New Yorkers treated all newcomers. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which was?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Which is, they thought of me more or less like a hillbilly. Naive. And some of that is true. I, I don't mind accepting that attitude because I didn't know de Kooning, or Franz Kline, or Mark Rothko except through Betty Parsons Gallery. Barney did take me around and introduced me to de Kooning and Franz Kline and a few others but I met most of them through Betty Parsons Gallery itself. It's where I met Clyfford Still, in fact.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find de Kooning and Kline and so forth that you all had a lot in common? Once you got to know them?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We thought we had a lot in common because we were all outspokenly antagonistic to the Museum of Modern Art's dedication to the Surrealist movement. And actually, the so-called group movement—which never was called the New York School until [00:14:00] much later—all of us got together at dinner after shows, went to each other's shows. We usually went to an Italian restaurant and sat and have dinner and talk about all of our attitudes towards these things that were going on in the art world. People like Clem Greenberg were hated, especially by Barney Newman, in the beginning.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because he wasn't paying—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Outspokenly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —sufficient attention.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Because Greenberg wasn't interested in these people. Well, Harold Rosenberg was much more one of the boys in the group movement. And he was more willing and friendly to them all, sympathetic to them. Although not necessarily sympathetic to the group at Betty's but sympathetic to Kline and maybe de Kooning, who I think at that time were in Kootz's gallery. If I remember right. Later, Sydney Janis convinced a lot of them to join his gallery and took away from Betty Parsons, a number of them. Like Mark Rothko and a number of others.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever have any dealings with Alfred Barr?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I knew him and I went to—when we did *The Tiger's Eye* I went to him to ask for permission to reprint Picasso's "Three Dancers."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, I think you mentioned that.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I mentioned it. And he sent me to—I can't remember the man's name—I'll remember it in the middle of the night. Who refused to give me permission. And as I said—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, you just telegraphed—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Telegraphed Sebartés, Jaime Sebartés. It came back [00:16:00] with telegram saying Picasso gladly gives you permission to publish "The Three Dancers."

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that was one of your dealings with Alfred Barr.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It wasn't with Alfred Barr so much as—would you turn that—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I think that you mentioned Clyfford Still first about 1947 that he was showing also at Betty Parsons.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was showing occasionally at Betty Parsons.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you get to know him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I got to know him because he appeared at the gallery. And then Barney was one of the first persons that I befriended, through—also through Ossip Zadkine, who was in Betty Parsons Gallery. And Barney Newman kept talking to me about how wonderful Still was with that white vertical line. And I had a painting that I later gave to Horace Gregory's daughter as a wedding present in Washington that had a white line around a diamond shape. And he said, "Clyfford Still does these things marvelously." So I knew Barney was very aware of Clyfford Still's vertical line and his—they all thought of Clyfford Still then as being the most brilliant person at that time. At the beginning of my entry into that group.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his personality like?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Clyfford Still?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Clyfford Still, at that time.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Clyfford Still—well, I didn't know him well then. It wasn't until quite a bit later, but perhaps in the [00:18:00] late '50s, middle or late '50s, did I get to know him when we moved into New York City

from Connecticut. *The Tiger's Eye* was finished and we came back from Italy. Then I got to know Clyfford Still because I had a studio within a few blocks of his place on—well first he had a place on Cooper Union Square and one of the houses, commercial buildings along the Bowery, I guess it was. And I'd go see him, and Clyfford and I got along very well together. We used to go over to McSorely's Tavern and have a corned beef sandwich and a glass of beer and talk.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find that you shared many interests and ideas?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: After doing *The Tiger's Eye* and hearing a lot of what the group thought about everything, a lot of it through Barney, a lot of it through Clyfford Still. I favored Clyfford Still above everyone else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why was that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Because first he was a very good friend of mine, and showed a great friendship for myself. Second, Barney and I had a somewhat assumed falling out. I never understood it because I wasn't there enough to understand why it was, but I even had Stamos say, "John, I am on Barney Newman's side," once. [00:20:00] And I realized that there was some contest. Then Barney accused me of being—I don't quite understand what it was, I don't want to call it anti-Semitic, but he said something that could be interpreted that way. And I said, Barney that is not true. He says, alright, meet me out in Brooklyn at a restaurant, a Jewish restaurant. We had lox and a roll, bagel, and coffee. What happened to Barney? I don't know because I wasn't there. There are a lot of people who do know the story of Barney, during that period.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When he would make accusations.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Against most people. And that's when he began showing his paintings as an artist himself. He did show in Betty Parsons occasionally, one painting or two paintings, and then had one man shows. But when I bought that painting from him he was my close friend and I was the first one to buy a painting from the gallery of his work. Which he thanked me for. Not that I paid anywhere near what it was worth, because I paid what they asked for it. But I also bought Clyfford Still's for very little money. And I could have bought some of these Pollocks that went to Australia. You could buy for \$3[000] or \$4,000 then, even. When Pollock had already become well known through Peggy Guggenheim and a few others. And of course, Peggy Guggenheim like Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko. I also knew Frederick Kiesler because I had a studio a half a block away from him and we got lunch together often. Before I [00:22:00] really became a good friend of Clyfford Still's.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you and Kiesler have in common?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Kiesler did, was an architect and he was a European expatriate. He knew everybody, and everybody knew him. And he had a brilliant idea of a house with no walls, with curved walls and no squared shapes. And he and his wife had us for tea, Ruth and I to tea, because we did *The Tiger's Eye*, I suppose, or because we were friends. And we lived two or three blocks from his place on Sixth Avenue just below 14th Street, in an apartment house. And of course Duchamp lived on 14th Street down the street, west a little bit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you see much of him?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I saw some of him. I saw more of Max Ernst and of course Zadkine, and Matta some.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Matta had some reputation at that time, didn't he?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes, Matta was a Surrealist. Bob Motherwell sort of straddled the line. He became a Surrealist after he showed at—this is my opinion, know that I wasn't a familiar person there in any real sense of the word.

ROBERT F. BROWN: After he'd shown?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He began hanging out with the Surrealists. Motherwell was seen a lot with them, especially Max Ernst. And—

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We used to walk by Genrenauld's [ph] basement [00:24:00] apartment and always see Bob Motherwell sitting with them, and so we never went in.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So in other words, Motherwell hung out with the European set.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know enough about it, because I also went with Clyfford Still, once, to Motherwell's apartment up somewhere on north of 57th Street, either Third Avenue or Second Avenue or

Madison or Lexington.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did his work impress you? And what did he think of yours?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't think so much of what I thought of Motherwell, so much as what everybody else thought of him as an artist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which was?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: There was a running feud between Kootz and Betty Parsons. We hated Betty Parsons' artists and they hated us, yet we were friends. [Laughs.] The story was quite different than the way historians write about it. There was terrible jealousies, terrible infighting and rough handling of each other verbally. But we were really friends.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But Clyfford Still became your special friend.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Clyfford Still became a special friend after I came back from Italy. When Barney Newman then obviously did not consider me as his friend. Or as a—he—which I didn't ever know the basis of. *Time Magazine* made a photograph of the group. I was back in New York and Betty Parsons, Newman, everybody that I went to see, clammed up. Not everybody, but those two especially. [00:26:00] And suddenly this picture came out, a picture of the group, Betty Parsons' group. And I wasn't there, wasn't told about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So they clammed up, they wouldn't tell you, they kept you away.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They didn't say a word, it was all in the dark. Later, I complained to Betty Parsons about it. She said, "Well, John, you never wrote us from Italy. We never heard from you, we thought you'd just walked out on us." Which wasn't the case. My problem was to be able to bring up a son in Italy. I didn't know the language. My wife Ruth was writing a book and doing research all over Rome and even from Sweden to Rome and although it was a period of two years, those two years made the difference. I didn't have a table to write on, actually.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think really lay at the base of Parsons' and Newman's shunning you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I can't answer that because Newman had a lot of other enemies.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about Betty Parsons, what do you suppose her reasons were?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think Betty Parsons probably had her own reasons. Maybe she didn't think much of my work and maybe had a reason to, because I had a style that had somewhat landscape implications, devices at a time when a two-dimensional painting was the actual issue.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Without associations or suggestions.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it that—you went to Rome principally so that your wife Ruth could get on Queen Christina [00:28:00] of Sweden—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think I mentioned that before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Knopf said that he would publish the paper according to the first two chapters that he read, but he didn't believe the book would sell. So therefore I said—she was in tears, very upset. I said let's go to Rome, to Sweden down to Rome, and you visit all the cities Christina went to, you can look in the archives of the towns, and probably find out things that nobody knows. And that she agreed to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you set out in 1950, I believe.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: 1950. And uh, when we got there, we had to spend enough time getting there from Sweden. But also not being able to speak Italian. And it was very difficult to find a school for John, my son, 10 years old.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Those were still pretty hard times in Italy, weren't they?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They were very hard times but very good for returns because the lira was 600 for a dollar. And everything was dirt-cheap, you could buy a suit for \$14, a linen or silk suit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you went over there also intending eventually to do some painting yourself?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I did find a studio finally, on the—oh gosh, I can't find the name of it, a studio, street. It was a big apartment room that was off the Veneto. And I had a show at the Galeria Zodiaco, which was a very nice gallery down on Via Romana, parallel to the Veneto, [00:30:00] three blocks away from the Veneto.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that attract quite a lot of attention, your exhibition?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I had many artists and galleries—I was invited to the Botteghe Oscure, my wife and I were invited, which was an intellectual salon of artists and writers. We got to know Moravia and [inaudible] Afro [ph] and many others, well-known artists. In fact, Matta moved there and we saw some of him as well as many of the Italian artists themselves. We knew a lot of Italian university professors from Florence and around Rome. We knew Mario Praz, who was a wonderful writer of the medieval world.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, he was—we met him through Italian friends. In fact, the daughter of Benedetto Croce, who married an Italian banker from the Banco di Roma. Had a salon and invited us all from there. And she introduced us to Mario Praz, and he lived on the Via Giulia, which is the old ghetto of Rome, or at least one of the streets bordering the Tiber. And Mario had one clubfoot and one walleye, so the Romans always thought he had an evil eye. So they warned us to always carry a key in your pocket, keep your hand on the key, and keep rubbing the key as you're looking at him. That will protect you from the demon. Well Mario invited us by ourselves to his place, and he had the most beautiful apartment [00:32:00] and library, an immense library of rare books, wonderful books. But he specialized in Empire furniture with Ormolu trimmings on it, gold, you know, bits of metal. And he had a wonderful collection of furniture in his apartment. But also he was a marvelous writer, as I remember—this was before—can you push—

[Audio break.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And every time we saw him we had a delightful time with him. But it seemed the general Romans avoided him because of this superstition with the evil eye.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which even extended to Roman intellectuals.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was one of the most intelligent authors. He was one of the most intelligent people to talk with. Because he knew everything about the medieval world. And of course, we'd all go down to—like any artist or writer that goes to Rome, we'd go--congregate at the Caffè Greco on the, I think, the Condotti. Or Corso, I guess the Condotti. Right by the Spanish Steps. And uh, there we met--sat at tables with nothing but writers and artists. And then we got to know people on the Via Margutta, where there--lots of artists had studios and a descendant from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a close descendant, had a salon. Had people come every Thursday or so and we got talking about everything. [00:34:00] And Ruth found out lots of things about Christina through those people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was lots of very well informed—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Because Christina had an academia in the 17th century, which still was up on the Gianicolo and there's a museum of hers in which she was very much interested in the cultural world, the Catholic world, at the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you developed rather rapidly a wide acquaintance. Were people, were Europeans at that time interested in what was going on in New York, in the New York art world? Or was it not quite ready?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, the Italians and the French in Paris, when we came through Paris on the way to Rome. We met in a cave Raymond Kano [ph] and Brion. Many of the writers had heard of *The Tiger's Eye* and we lived in the Pont Royal Hotel at the Left Bank near St. Germain. We met Rolls [ph] —and I can't even name all the artists that came to the cave to talk to us about *The Tiger's Eye*. It was more famous than it was in New York! We had higher subscription in Paris than in New York, which was amazing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did it ever tempt you to go back, to re-publish when you got back?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, we had an offer. Already this Japanese—

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean then at that time, did you and your wife think of starting over again?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't think I had enough—it was such hard work! Terribly hard. You had to read every manuscript, you had to go everywhere to look at photographs, you had to make choices of what to publish that would leave out people that [00:36:00] were very close to you. It doesn't mean you pick better things so

much as it means a book can only publish so many pages of photographs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Back to more or less what I was asking earlier, were the European artists, say painters and sculptors, somewhat curious about what was now going on in the United States or were they still fairly smug?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: At that time there was an inkling that things were happening in the United States. But that also related to them, there was Breton and the French Surrealists. And also there were—the Italians at that time, there was Chirico, and he sold very well in the United States.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So they—those people sometimes assumed that Breton or de Chirico had set these things in motion.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Chirico was a—considered a senile old man who was painting pretty pictures. That he'd lost his Surrealist allegiance.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But I mean, were they considered to have influenced the Americans? Is that what some of these Europeans thought?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, the Americans, the group were a radical break from the European tradition.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what did the Europeans know about them at that time? Very much?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: From what we talked about, they had read in the papers about a number of them. It's hard to say which ones they knew because that was 1950. Within two years they knew a lot more. So I can't place the date, because when I first went there I couldn't speak Italian! And although a lot of Italians could speak English, you never got into the situation. You have a lot of photographs of that show in Rome [00:38:00] I had.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, the Galeria—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Zodiaco.

ROBERT F. BROWN: From that did you have sales? Did you do fairly well?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I had one or two sales. I gave away a number of paintings, one to Bill Denby, who was a writer for the cinema Luce Cinecittà, the Hollywood of Italy. And he was well known and he married an Italian girl. He was a black boy, young man, a poet. There was also Gibson—I can't remember his first name—who ended up with Castro as a radical. He was sent to Russia, financed by some cultural group to go to Russia. Came back totally disillusioned, although he said Russians said they couldn't believe that he didn't hate America, because of all the propaganda they had. But Gibson I liked. And Ben Johnson [ph], also was another black poet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That you met in Rome?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Who we met in Rome and we saw a lot of. Because, first they were Americans and you could talk. Second, they knew *The Tiger's Eye*. And third, they were not too easily assimilated by the Italians. Then there was Milton Gendel, I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Heard of him, but—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And Walter Auerbach.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What relation did you have—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't know much about Gendel, in fact I shouldn't talk [00:40:00] about him because—although if I could go back to *The Tiger's Eye* days, I remember things in which he appeared in to the magazine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Rome was quite cosmopolitan and lively at that time.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was, except that I myself couldn't understand—neither could Ruth, much, because of the Italian. And the speaking of English—if you've ever heard Italians speak English, it's somewhat like the Italians in America speaking Italian. I mean, speaking English. It's a mixture that you think you're familiar with but you're not because the intellectual Italian is far more complicated than the ordinary Italian. It's got many more tenses, it's implications are subtle. It has an entirely different viewpoint of life.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think your painting in some ways, despite the fact that you were cut off by the language, that your painting flourished during those two years?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, there were too many problems.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did paint quite a bit though, didn't you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I painted quite a few. I have a few paintings. Ten, 15 paintings I did there in two years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your painting change a bit from what you'd been doing in New York just before that?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, paintings changed because previous to going to Italy I went to Peru. I took the family to Peru and we went and drove from Lima down to Arequipa and then took the train to Cuzco and stayed there. And that was when the Pan American Highway was just being constructed, and it was dangerous and ill advised to drive [00:42:00] on that highway. There were no railings. There's a thousand foot drop to the sea. We drove it at night where we didn't know what we were going through. When we came through and stayed at an inn, told them that we had just come down from Nazca, or Pisac, or one of these towns, they said, "How could you have driven that, it's impossible!" But it was, it was a single way drive: one day of the week you go south, the next you go north. Next you go south, relegated.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What had prompted you to take a trip to Peru?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, since childhood, the National Geographic pictures of the Inca temples and Pizarro's conquest of Peru by Prescott was a book that impressed me greatly. So one of the greatest tragedies, how by the fact that the Inca had no concept of fear, and first realized there was such a thing as fear, without having fear! He realized it. He stepped aside so the horse wouldn't run over him. He'd do that, but he'd never admit he was afraid. But the Inca and all his soldiers, when they saw the guards moving out of the way, suddenly realized the guards are cowards. It dawned on them. And the Incas said to Pizarro, when I saw your horseman gallop up to where I was, I suddenly realized there was something that we didn't understand. It was very tragic.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that kind of romantic, long remembered from boyhood led you to take this trip? Did you do any drawing?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I didn't read the Pizarro in boyhood, I read it [00:44:00] in high school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well that's boyhood. But did you do some painting and drawing down there as well?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't think I did any painting or drawing. We stayed three months or four months. We got dysentery. I went down on a freight boat during the Congress of Industrial Organization's union on the ships where the crew mutinied over and over again against the captain, who stayed drunk. Not a physical fight, but just disobedience, swearing. The lavatories were in six inches of water, flooded, clogged drains. Nobody took care of the ship. The captain stayed drunk in his cabin, didn't appear. The first mate was—I witnessed him on the decks a couple times having the crew threaten him. All because of the wonderful unions, leftist unions.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it was from there that you went to Rome. When you came back—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, we came back and then went to Rome after doing *The Tiger's Eye*. Went to Peru before doing *The Tiger's Eye*. In fact, that's how we got started at *The Tiger's Eye*—we had a Peru issue. And then later Ruth published a book by Arguedas called *The Singing Mountaineers*, which was written by a Peruvian Indian about the history of the songs and dances and plays put on by the Peruvians.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was a very captivating trip.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Beautiful trip. I saw walls of stonework that I never could believe could be done. Incredible.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, after you had been to Rome, then did you—you came back. [00:46:00] Where were you living then? Did you go to Greenwich, Connecticut?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: When we came back Ruth had gallbladder trouble. And she suffered considerably from it. So we decided to go out and live in Arizona.

[END OF TRACK.]

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: [00:00:00] —where Julio and all the artists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Back in Chicago. But in the—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Bronwen [ph] was there and Bohrod was there and everybody else. And she asked me to do some furniture for her, and to make a living I made furniture with Caleb Harrison.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this is in the 1950s you were living where?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I'm trying to say why we got to Arizona.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Help me out, why did you get there again?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: After doing some furniture, she said, "We have a ranch out in Phoenix, Arizona, in the desert. Will you go out and build it?" Because I showed her I could make furniture. And I was paid \$100 a month. And the expenses of building were paid for by her. So I built a ranch house for her physically, myself. Then later, she and the children came and stayed and later on she went back and divorced her husband.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you get back out there in the '50s?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Not because of me she divorced him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. But how did you get back out to Arizona in the 1950s?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Since we had that ranch house and sold it. Somebody's knocking at the door. We had this ranch house and sold it. She never left that nostalgia to go out there, thinking she'd be healthier there. For her sinus—she had [00:02:00] sinus trouble too. And she thought for her sinus and for just emotional reasons she wanted to go back and live in the west where her family always went to the west, went to Arizona and stayed at the Biltmore.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that a good time for you as well? When you went out—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, to do the ranch. And I have photographs of the place. It was a small building, but I put in plumbing. I put in a pump and all that to pump water to a tank, and give that tank water. There were bathrooms put in. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you do quite a lot of painting in the '50s when you—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I did a little bit of sketching of the rocks and the little river ways, little waterways that flowed down during the winter.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well I know you had one exhibition out there at the Rosenquist Gallery, yes. That might have been after going out there a couple of times.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was 1955, I believe. That was in Tucson. We built the ranch in Phoenix, but when we went back from Italy, we moved to Tucson because the ranch was sold.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of paintings were you doing at that time?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I've got one or two around here, to show. They were landscape extractions. Usually skeletal types of things with patches of color to penetrate.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there quite a lot of interest generated by this exhibition in Tucson?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well everybody came to it, but [laughs] that doesn't mean—I think I sold two or three paintings. Oils on paper, mostly. [00:04:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the 1950s were there quite a few people from the east or from Chicago wintering in Tucson?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: There were but we didn't socialize and didn't know them. We did know a few people that Ruth got acquainted with and brought into our house and all that. Got associated with. And Johnny went to the—I forget the name, Desert School or the Canyon School or something, which he liked very much. It was a little private school there. So I was a family man mostly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you feel being cut off from the city, was it a problem then or not really? You were pretty absorbed in your life in Arizona.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It's a hard question—I didn't suffer from the privations of not being an artist. Until the last. Then I began to realize that I was not doing anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How many years were you in Tucson?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Two years. Maybe one year? I don't know. That's a good question.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then you came back to New York?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Came back and we stayed down in the Village at Holly Chambers, I think. It was a little, nice hotel. There we saw Zadkine again. And got more acquainted with all the artists and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it then you got to further your—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Then I got to know Betty Parsons, around that time too. Now that sounds screwy, I'm saying that's when I came back from Peru, not from Italy. [00:06:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean now after you've come back from Arizona.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the late 1950s.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That was before Betty Parsons Gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you were at Betty Parsons in the '40s and now we're talking about the '50s.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The '50s. I was out of Betty Parsons then. That was the time I came back and Barney and Betty were indifferent to me. Betty later showed one of my paintings. And Betty talked friendly and still liked *The Tiger's Eye* but she didn't believe in it. She always hesitatingly gave us an ad, for instance. I don't think they paid for ads. I don't remember.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well when you came back from Tucson, let's say about 1956 or so, you lived in the Village then?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: For a short while. And then we got an apartment in the Village on 11th Street. That's where we met Max Eastman, I think through Joe Gollem.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was in the late 1950s now.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: 1950s. That'd be '52. Now wait a second, I've got to get that straightened out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay you've come back from Italy. Now before you went to Arizona—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We went to Arizona when we came back from Italy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So about 1953 or two?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. Then we stayed one year and moved back to New York. And then decided to live in Greenwich, Connecticut because Ruth had a number of friends, amongst them Harry Fischer, who was a publisher who published one of her early poems. And he was a great friend of hers. And he found us the house we got there in [00:08:00] Greenwich.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you happy living in Greenwich?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I was happy living, always. Until the last--until the last time. I don't say I was happy in adolescence. I mean like all kids—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you mean by the last? You mean towards the end—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I mean towards the end when Ruth and I separated. I realized that the uh, towards the late '50s, that I was getting nowhere as an artist. I don't mean getting nowhere so much as I wasn't painting what I wanted to paint. Because I painted in the attic of the house. There was a low ceiling. There was only a bay window or two. Now I'm not complaining because I could do work anywhere. But I was working an awful lot on the house. The house hadn't been worked on since 1929. I had to do all kinds of things to it. It was overgrown too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you felt you had to take steps to get back more and more into your painting.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yes. And when she decided she wanted to go to live in Japan for a while and I said no I can't go; then we decided to separate in a friendly way. And we drove together to Chicago and down to Mexico City to get the divorce and came back and she flew on to Japan and I came back and lived in New York.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you came back from New York, was that about the time you really developed your friendship with Clyfford Still?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well it developed more then, but Clyfford Still was a friend of ours because he came out to see Ruth and I in Kaplan Wood [ph] in Connecticut [00:10:00] often. He and Pat. We used to play baseball through catch ball, with gloves and all that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like? Was he a very high-spirited fellow?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Clyfford Still, I think, is one of the most—of most people, the most misunderstood person. He was a man of decided habits, of his own way of looking at things. But you couldn't fault those habits. They were true, they were real.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you give an example?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: What?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you give an example?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well his idea of museums, that they were just purveyors and exploiters. He wasn't a leftist, he was an anti-leftist. He had no use for the left. He thought that the artist should be free and should do what he believes. And should not work according to what other people expected of him. Which is very hard to understand if said point blank. But if you lived through it, well, you'd see what was meant by that. He thought that museums were really out to destroy art, and it turned out to be correct. He said that years before the Pop artists came in. Tomato soup cans came on and the museums went wild over it. That was his great irritation, great hatred of the integrity of the museums.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so by destroying art, what did he mean?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, that is one example.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That the selections—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That the artist [00:12:00] had enough in his life to merely pursue and develop what he believed and what he thought. And to keep it clean and pure and sincere. Now, I don't think—he might not have realized that maybe Warhol, for instance as one, was a perfectly sincere guy. But he couldn't believe anybody that painted a can of Campbell's soup could be a sincere artist. Paint it no different than the label itself. Now there was all kinds of reasons and skullbuttle [ph] out of his paintings. Plus a lot of other people. And thought it was a wonderful satire and comment on civilization, on our culture. He had no use for it because he believed man, to go through this life was something to really take quite seriously. He had a wonderful sense of humor that people didn't realize.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you give an example?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well he would talk about baseball games he went to see. The Yankees usually, and Yogi Berra, and Skowron. And Bobby Richardson and many of the others, how they would be photographed in the newspapers as if they were ballet dancers, you know. Flying through the air and saying how much it was a real struggle of man, suddenly stands up on the base and either hits it or he's defeated. And it's up to him, the challenge was a perfect symbol of living, life. You have your chance to stand up and you either flop or you succeed. In fact, everybody [00:14:00] including Barney Newman began to be interested in baseball, at least talk about it, after Clyfford Still gave these symbols for people to think about. So I used to go to Yankee Stadium often with Clyfford. Most of the other guys went to the Giants stadium—the Dodgers, rather, in Brooklyn. Because the Dodgers represented Social Realism too, you know. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was Still very talkative? Would he talk quite a lot at this time?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: You could spend the whole afternoon talking to Still if he had the time to give. And if you had the time to spend.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he worked hard, he worked at his—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Clyfford Still worked in the timbered attic roof of a flat on 23rd Street or a room that was quite dark on Cooper Square, when I knew him. And I think I knew him in one or two other places that he had apartments. Or a studio, rather. He usually lived alone. Pat was out working as a comptometrist, getting jobs all over the country to help support raising his children. He had divorced, I think, Louise, I think her name was, who I met in San Francisco. Pat was dedicated to Clyfford. And Pat had a lovely voice and could sing beautifully. She could, still can maybe. I don't know if she's living still. She is because we got a Christmas card from her.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is the, uh, but your closeness to Clyfford was rather exceptional by the '60s, let's say? Most people he—[00:16:00] he had to hold off a good many people.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Many people opposed him. Because, for instance, a lot of that group compromised themselves and went along with—I was going to say Clem Greenberg. I don't know anything about Clem Greenberg [laughs] except what I heard through Barney. And Barney never had a good—and Clyfford.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They didn't have anything good to say?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They had no good word for him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why? What did they say then?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Because—I'm getting off beyond what I was familiar with at that time. Clem Greenberg wrote for *The Commonwealth* magazine, I think it was called. And then became an art critic. And my only long away memory [ph], I would say that everybody felt that Greenberg didn't know a thing about art. Like Katherine Kuh didn't know a thing about art either at a certain time. She sure brushed up on it! And became well known and did a good job, maybe, of her life with it. But it was amazing for one who'd gone through this period. Harold Rosenberg was a friend of most artists. But I don't think Clyfford ever liked art critics. Neither did I. Like in *The Tiger's Eye*, we said the role of the art critic and the artist are two separate worlds with nothing in common. That's what I said in *The Tiger's Eye*. Now I didn't get that from Clyfford Still because I didn't know him well enough then to ever know what he thought [00:18:00] in a broad way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did Still's integrity and habit of working hard, did that inspire you when you came back from Arizona and were back in New York after your divorce? Did—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I lived on 19th Street and he lived on 23rd Street at that time. We saw each other for lunch quite regularly at the Peacock Grill, it was on 23rd and Sixth Avenue. It was a corned beef and cabbage sandwich place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The two of you kind of helped energize the other?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know whether you want to think of it that way. I'm sure he energized me! What I did for him is beyond my knowing except that he showed a real warm friendship. A desire and willingness to get together quite often.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But did you find you began painting more? Your output increased? Because you'd suggested that—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I don't think my output increased much until I got up here. These paintings I painted in New York, those big things. All these disc things I suddenly got into as soon as I came up here. I worked much harder on discs in the last 10 years than I've ever worked before. Well, I had a good studio here. In New York on 19th Street I had no heat, I was on the top floor of an unheated building. I had just a toilet with a swinging door and one sink with cold water. I'd just moved from Greenwich, Connecticut and the most beautiful colonial mansion you ever saw [laughs] where I had servants. [00:20:00] So—wait, I've said something I don't really mean. Because I was very happy to be able to live there like that. Now that doesn't mean I just slung paint all over the place because I was happy. I was happy in a quieter way. I also got a job teaching at Fairleigh Dickenson then, as soon as I left—I got the job just before we left Greenwich, we broke up. And I stayed on for a while and then quit when all my friends in the English department decided to protest some of the things that Sammartino and Haverly instigated into the place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were they?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was the president of Fairleigh Dickenson, who knew nothing about it. The museum, the university was started on a veteran's bill, you know. And they had people there who couldn't even write a sentence! Going to college!

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you teach there?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I taught art, painting. I had charge of the art department. Nicolas Calas got my job afterwards.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you enjoy it?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I not only enjoyed it—because it was exciting. There were no easels. Everybody painted on the floor. I made easels in the carpenter's shop and brought them into the room. I made racks for the people to set their paintings so they can get the next class. Because the oil paints were all wet. I tried to get the library to build books and I got my mother-in-law, my former mother-in-law donated a large sum of money for the school to have books. [00:22:00] She did that without my knowing it. Then the president called me he said, "Oh, you belong to that family, do you?" And in front of everybody said, "You're a rich man, then." I was so

embittered and angry at that bastard for not treating me as an artist, but for talking in that--in those terms.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He thought you were a potential—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: So I quit. But I was all ready to quit because Jerry Wilhelm was talking--teaching at Hunter, and Victor Reed who also taught at Hunter in the English department, who taught out at Fairleigh Dickenson when I was there. He got me the job. And I did a good--I did a very good job there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They too had quit, is that right?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They too. We all quit at the same time as a protest to what Sammartino did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which was what?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Which was getting all sorts of teachers that had no background. Phony teachers. Now this is a little off record because these are the things I heard.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now I think it's fairly well known, though.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well they wouldn't do anything for me in the art department.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did teach—was it just a bit after that—at Hunter College.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Hunter College. Because then Jerry, my friend Jerry Wilhelm, he had a doctorate in language, English. And got the job teaching there and influenced Eugene Goossens to give me a job there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now what was Eugene Goossens' position?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: He was head of the art department. He was fairly well known as a writer on art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get along quite well there?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I got along well with him, but I have another [00:24:00] nasty story to tell. [Laughs.] One more. He warned me that a certain student there, girl student, would try to break up the class. She was well known. He said, be careful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you mean, she might agitate or—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I mean only what I said. She didn't get up and say anything, but she always acted and put herself forward in the class. And I gave a list of about 15 words, art terms that I wanted every student to be able to write about as a final test. Besides, Goossen said show piles of slides, all the slides you can get at the Metropolitan, show them. From the Lascaux caves to Picassos and Monet and everybody else, Surrealists, everything. I did that, but I also expected to have some kind of conversation and talk and dialogue on art's meanings. Meanings of terms and the evolution of the term art. The origin of the word "beauty," the origin of the word "content" and "form," what it philosophically stood for. The students all agreed at the final test they would have to answer at least some of those 15 words. That girl didn't write a thing. It was just blank. So I canned her. So Eugene, after I gave her a failing test at the end of the year. Eugene Goossens called me up and said, "John, I want to ask you something. It's hard to ask you—" I forget the girl's name. [00:26:00] Her mother came in and said she's ward of that area, political ward. And she threatened Hunter, threatened Goossens with what they could do if they didn't pass her daughter. And Goossens said, "Will you please change her grade to a passing grade?" I said, "Eugene, I would never do a thing like that. She didn't do a thing, you warned me against her." I said, "I won't do it." I said, "I quit." I did quit, I didn't like the job anyway. Very much, I mean. Because teaching art in a college of—many students would take art for no reason whatsoever. It's awfully hard for me and my background, to have enough problem trying to paint my own pictures, then to try to convince a bunch of young kids—that I didn't find one student there that I thought wanted to be an artist anyway. Or even were serious about it. They gave me the title of my classes, "Modes of Expression and Painting." So I had to talk about all the Impressionists, Expressionists, the Fauvs, Surrealists, the Lauscaux cave painters. The Renaissance, the Medievalists, the Orient. All in one semester.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you felt that this was more trouble than you needed, right?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well the salary was awfully low. And I was also suffering from my divorce, of course. Really, I mean. I don't mean maybe.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were, you were feeling lonely and—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well no, not lonely. Not sentimentally so. But had a terrible sense of defeat, [00:28:00]

which every human being feels at some times. I feel it now even, because I'm not painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you, about that time, were you beginning to think of moving out of New York?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Then I moved from 19th Street. I was looking around for a studio and somebody told me to go to 222 Central Park South. There was a studio building and there was an apartment owned by some—not an artist but a city planner, if I remember right. And he had to sell the apartment. And he sold the cooperative apartment very cheap to me. It was just a huge room, about the size of this, looking out over Central Park. And had one bathroom and a tiny bedroom, half the size of this space. And a tub.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see, you mean 6 by 10.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, but very nice. Very clean, modern, had a doorman, elevators, everything. I could stand it for about a year and then I couldn't stand myself. So I decided to come up—to go to Maine to look for a—because I'd heard so many artists talk about Maine. Like—who's this artist who paints all these—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You said you went to Maine, you wanted to look up a theater, Will Barnett.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I heard about the different places along the Maine coast.

ROBERT F. BROWN: From Will Barnett.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And I had seen the Maine coast years before in the 1930s. One time I came to New York and drove up along the Maine coast and took—in fact, took Ruth and her children before we married with a governess up [00:30:00] up along the Maine coast from Chicago and back.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes you mentioned that. So this time you go up once more.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: At the time I wanted to. And I want to get out of New York because I was out of the art world. I still feel myself not in the art world.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You kept up some of your older friendships, but uh--

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Clyfford Still, uh, the others—a few in the Ten Four [ph] Gallery. George Bronnish [ph], and, uh, a number of those artists. And of course, once in a while I saw Raymond Breinin, who was back from Chicago days. And Aaron Bohrod, I hadn't seen Bohrod because he was in Madison, Wisconsin. University of Madison, Wisconsin.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So did you in fact go to Maine?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I came and by the time I got to Newport, I ran into a storm and I stayed in the Viking Hotel and it was a late fall and this blizzard came up. I had the window open and I heard the buoy bells in the harbor. I said, this is the place I like. And I stayed. I just didn't go any farther.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now when was that, the mid-'60s?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Sixty-one, probably. Or '62.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you were able to find this place.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't find this place. I tried to get a place down at Brenton Point and contracted for it, down the other end of Ocean Drive. I had an old carriage house with slate masonry and wood shingle sides. Beautifully built, deserted for many years, and I went into a contract with Chartier. [00:32:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was the developer?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, who owned a lot of land around here. He was a French Canadian, who owns the Pope house, owned the Pope house last.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Waves.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: The Waves and the Stanford White house here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why didn't you follow through with—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I didn't follow through that because the lawyer that I hired here told me look, that

house will never—you cannot build that house. Because it crossed a street line, a street that was never put in but was already set in the maps of this town. Steven Avenue. E-N instead of A-N. It was amazing, I mean the thing was too close. He said the state is going to buy that land up for a state park. And the state did buy up, but didn't buy all of it. Didn't buy the part I would have had. Now a lot of it is developed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So then you turned to this property here?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: So I came back here and looked around and was about to give up when the bank, Mr. Taylor of the bank here, told me to go and see Charlie West. He called up Charlie West, I met Charlie West, and Charlie West showed me this place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was Charlie West?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Charlie West was one of the syndicate men that owned this land. Or rather, was promoting the land, developing it. And they offered it to me for \$8,000 and I bought it. Then I cancelled it because Charlie West told me, "Look, you can build right from the barn"—I mean from the garage—"continuous, the house just the way," I said, "Can you do that?" [00:34:00] He said yes. I took it down to—I don't know who, somebody in town. The real estate man or something. And found out the law was you couldn't build a house within 50 feet of the road. So I hired a—I started discussing building the house with Adutra [ph]. Adutra knows all of the politicians, he's an architect here. Rather old-fashioned one. And I said they won't allow me to have a permit to build because it's close. And he said, "I'll get you a permit." I said, "If you get me a permit I'll give you 175 bucks." So he went out and he came back with a permit to build, so I built. The bank said to go to Timothy Dwyer, this Irishman. He came out and he said you can start building right away. I took that drawing board and set it up in the garage. Because I hadn't put a roof, the garage had no roof. Cement the floor, put water in it and I started drawing up the house. We started building the foundation. I staked out the foundations and we built. And we built it before the drawings were made, finished. Started building it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you lived here alone then for a while, did you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I lived alone, yes. Until 1966, my stepson and my son asked me to come to Japan. Then I met Ineko and I moved back.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they students in Japan?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, John had already gotten his doctorate, I think. [00:36:00] He did go to a Japanese university also, but I think as an afterthought. He was studying at St. Anthony's College in Cambridge. Or is it Oxford or Cambridge?

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you went to Japan just to visit?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: And came back with Ineko.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you meet, you and Ineko?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We met at my stepson's house. She worked in his company. Three days after we walked around Tokyo together a little bit. I said, "Come on back to the United States with me. Get married." And she couldn't understand what I was saying, but they translated back and forth and my son said, "Dad are you sure you know what you're doing?" [Laughs.] It was crazy. I don't think I could have done better. Not in the least.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well about that time, is that when you move into your paintings, the other kinds of paintings? The ones we see here, these targets or whatever you call them?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: These paintings here, have actually a disc in the center, rough outlined disc. The big paintings that I did down in New York. I've got a photograph—you've got a photograph. That great big one with the round, rough shape. There were a couple of them. Not on that one brochure but that came from an idea I've had for many years of something like this Nagel's book on philosophy. How to look at life, is it possible to look at life objectively? The only way to look at it objectively is to be outside of it looking into it. [00:38:00] That's what I had in my mind all the time. If I could go outside of this world and come back and look at it I could understand what it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And is that the process that is lying behind these paintings?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It's a process that, modified by the idea of nothingness, modified by an idea of the perfection, a concept of perfection. That there is such a thing, there is a thing called perfect. Something else is imperfect. It's a very strange comparison without being valid, necessarily. Because what is perfect? What isn't perfect? You can't—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, and how do you suppose you arrived at the discs?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, I say, from that hole that you go out of, go through. I painted a number of pictures with perfect rings around them, of that idea. Having nothing to do with the moon, stars, or sun, or had a locomotive headlight or anything. That's what they accused me of doing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But do you feel, or think of this great center, this disc, as a sort of an entryway?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't think of yourself moving in terms of the painting, either by mind or by that. I think the painting itself, you look at it as a strange object distinct from yourself. And then you contemplate—I'm afraid I don't want to get into what you'd call a big session on thought. But, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you made one important point. The painting is a distinct, even strange [00:40:00] object. It's a discrete thing unto itself. You don't look at associations with other things and life or—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't compare the New York School artists or anything else. I'm not trying to paint a single flat surface, necessarily. Nor am I trying to paint the illusion of depth, although the tonality of it might look like you see through a brick wall. It has a hole. But even that concept is valid. Because it includes the idea that I've always suspected that one, if they knew how, understood structures, one could walk through a brick wall without being touched. I've always contemplated that thing. Without being scratched. It's the concepts that I'm interested in rather than pretending that I am facing that problem. There's no reality in the thing in the sense of representation. The colors are perhaps ill conceived because they're pretty in some ways. You know, they look subtle and I don't want them to look subtle so much as I like what subtlety expresses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Extremely refined aren't they? I mean, in the best sense.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They're refined because of my way of painting them. Charlie Egan once wanted to give me a show of these paintings. Not these particular ones, but before that. He said, "John, the thing that I can't quite sympathize with is that there's no sense of your painting it, [00:42:00] you're taking a brush and doing it." I said that "The paintings themselves mean to me no expression of myself." In fact, I don't sign them—more purposefully I don't sign them because they don't have anything to do with promoting the concept of the artist doing it. That's a hard thing to accept in the contemporary art world where everybody's known by their name. They're an artist because they have a name.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you want your work to be known as it, as itself.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't want my work to be known particularly, except that I want to paint it. I've had a long, lot of talks with people. In fact, the other day a lawyer came in, New York lawyer friend of the father-in-law of this girl that you saw with the bicycle and the boy. He's a lawyer and he said, "Why do you paint the rings different colors? It's the same thing over and over." He said, "You intended to paint this painting." I said, "No, I didn't intend to paint this painting. This painting happened." But I didn't intend to do anything so much as I had in the back of my mind a problem of realization and how symbolically I could paint it. I wasn't even interested in the form, in that the form is just drawn with a compass. The form is perfect; the form has nothing to do with me. The circle is in nature, and, uh, if you look at the moon, it's round, or the sun. Uh, and then if you read Oriental philosophy and Chinese concepts of circles, which I happened to read some things [00:44:00] about, mostly when I started doing these things, that the perfection of finding outside—to rig up a thing that I could draw with a compass and paint precisely. Chinese idea, just a statement, once a circle is started, the unique thing is that it completes itself. And I thought that was a wonderful thought. Not so much that the fact that it happened, so much as it's such an unbelievable declaration. Because every other form you have to decide which way to go and I didn't want any decisions. Every other form is imperfect. It means you change your course. Unless it's a perfect circle. So there were a lot of things that you think about along with the time you're painting these, but I—if I got out some of my other paintings, they're just simple disc and a simple background color. And they're more powerful than these in some ways. And least Portia Harcus liked a couple of them. She gave me the first shows of this when she was at Parker Street Gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, in 1970 or so.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah. I think I failed with them. I think if I did them again—I've been studying this one. This was returned from the Mechanic's Bank in Wooster, Mass. They bought a bunch of paintings from what they saw at the show in Cordova Gallery. And then they decided to get rid of all their artist paintings. They're a bank that's not going to have any paintings, apparently. So I drove up there a couple of weeks ago to Wooster with Ineko and rented a truck and brought it back. It was dirty [00:46:00] as the Dickens. It's been handled and kicked around. But they gave it back to me for practically nothing. I don't like it now.

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] So how would you change this painting which has got a yellow disc in the center and the dark blue background?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, now [inaudible] if I could get back to painting and not suffer from the acrylic fumes or the smell of turpentine and could—my back felt good enough so I could stand in front of these, because you can't sit down and paint. And took myself seriously enough to give up trying to write a story of philosophy by a hillbilly, I would like to paint these without any of the influence of all these ideas of what is modern or what is the correct way of interpreting anything. Or painting anything, or—without fear of painting perspective or no perspective or pretty colors or ugly colors. Without being afraid using a compass or without feeling that you should show brush strokes or you should show your own hand drawings of things. Without any of the fears, draw it from purely the concept. Abstract as metaphysical concept. And I think I would arrange the colors—I would paint with different colors and perhaps with more of an awareness of what I want the colors to do. I think these colors do not convey [00:02:00] the relationships I would like. Some of them do—there's outside purple, green, and brownish yellow, and then gray, blue, I'd like very much if nothing else was there. But then you come to orange and that terrible bright red and the rather strong pure blue and the strange gray-purple. It doesn't appeal to me. The background is too dark. I'm trying to say either-or too much. Either light or dark. I would not be afraid to paint them more closely together. Which most of my early paintings were, without that stronger contrast. Because the suggestion is only one to contemplate perfection or a situation in which the limits are perfect, you accept them as being perfect. And by perfect, that doesn't mean superior to anybody else. It means there's a strange thing that a person does think of life as being—one has to believe in life before they can disbelieve in it. [Laughs.] And even though life can be totally absurd and actually is totally meaningless and absurd in one sense, to live it with enthusiasm is much better than to live it with indifference and disappointment and disillusionment.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's much better.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Much better to believe in it. In other words, a dog doesn't say, "What's the matter with me? Although I'm a puppy, why shouldn't I chase that rabbit?" He doesn't say, "Well, it doesn't mean anything [00:04:00] so there, I might as well sit on my butt and wait 'til dinnertime." The complaints of people, which I can understand from a physical disability. The complaints though, in terms of art, there is something that is magnificent about art. And that's why I oppose Pop and the general modern terms of art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Because they are first considered the right of anybody to paint whatever they feel like. Now I think that's as true for other people as it is for me. But the same time, I would never want to admit to myself that after 80 years, that I would accept the idea that I'm painting simply because I have a right to. I'm painting because I have a certain response to experience that I'm dedicated towards, or committed to. And I've got to always be aware of that issue, of what I sincerely feel rather than how I can do something that will succeed or sell or—I don't even want to use the word sell. I don't accuse Pop artists of wanting to sell. The fact that they did sell. If I don't care if Dick Tracy is used by Lichtenstein to make a very great set of paintings that are considered wonderful. Or Rosenquist, or anybody else. Or Oldenburg with the lipstick, those things are not in my field and my field isn't in the art world's field anymore so I'm a non-person. [00:06:00] In a real sense, I'm a non-person.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is that a freeing thing for you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well I mean, a non-person said—like they accused certain people in Russia of being made into non-persons simply because the Communist Party wipes them out. They don't exist. The history is over-written.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you don't speak of yourself meaning that, though.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I do mean that, that I am a non-person. Especially now that I'm not painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: For how long have you not been painting?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh, three, four years. Now it sounds like I'm trying to say that I'm a total failure. I don't think I'm any more a failure than anybody else [laughs] is a failure. Any man that goes through life and raises a family and turns out a couple of good children is not a failure, because the essence of life is to go through it in the way nature has made the human race survive. That's why I can't also embrace all the liberal ideas of promiscuity. I'm not a Puritan. I don't believe Gary Hart made any mistake, necessarily. Because he did choose a very handsome girl. One can't deny that. And not knowing either his wife or the girl, one has to sympathize with his choice of the moment, at the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you don't in your art mind being a non-person.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't mind now because I'm 80. I'm very well aware that I'm a way down the hill. [00:08:00] I don't feel sad about it. If I could only tell my sons the thoughts that have gone through my mind now, without involving him in the pathos of it, I would do so. I feel tragic that I cannot say the things to him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The way you really feel?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: That I think life is totally meaningless. Now I don't think it's totally meaningless. You see, you can believe one thing and at the same time the exact opposite without contradiction. But a person trained in rational thinking says that's a contradiction. I say one side of the page is totally meaningless. The other side, it has been a wonderful experience to watch birds or watch the garden grow. Or to attempt to paint a picture that you believe in. But, I don't believe in painting pictures just for the hell of it. Unless I was a cartoonist and wanted to make some fancy remarks, and was sort of cocky. I think there is a meaning to art that is real and not just individual. I think every individual artist who is a true artist is a creative person whose total expression and total work is, comes from some place within himself that is honest and real to him. Now, I think there's a harmony and a fellowship amongst artists that is real. I think in today's world, anybody does anything if it looks screwy enough to people who want that type of thing. [00:10:00] And I'm not saying that these screwy things are screwy. It's very hard to say something without meaning anything, very hard. And in today's world, the art world is in the hands of the purveyors of the public.

ROBERT F. BROWN: To a much greater extent than it was, let's say, when you came to New York.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It was greater because we were fighting the Surrealists. We were trying to break away from the European tradition of three-dimensional painting. As a fetish, we wanted to get rid of it. As something we thought was always assumed to be necessary. And also there was in Mark Tobey's work and Pollock's work, there's a certain chaos there that was really meaningful to the world that fit in with the disenchantment of the last wars, of the awful things that are going on in the world, of the possibility of the atom bomb blowing it all up to pieces, to nothing. There's a confrontation, does man have any legitimate right to go on living? It's absurd, Camus and the existentialists were right. Life is an absurdity, an insult to our intelligence. Even Robert Frost said "God forgive me for doing this to you, as I forgive you for doing what you did to me." It's a marvelous thought.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But at the same time you have tried to surmount that early feeling by moving toward a perfection.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I haven't climbed any hill. I'm not Sisyphus.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, but you do try to add a perfection [00:12:00] in your canvases.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I tried to see whether I did know. And I think I failed. I'm surprised at myself, I had a good opinion of myself once. Now I don't have much of a good opinion of myself. And I think that maybe the fact that nobody seems interested in my painting anymore. [Laughs.] Thanks for coming over. I don't mean that I paint for other people so much as if I am painting to a world of people who are going in another direction, somewhere else, I think not only that, I should stop shaming, making a fool of myself and stop painting. I really feel that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But isn't there perhaps a greater multiplicity of tastes now than there used to be?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think there must be. I've tried to—I had an argument with Portia, saying that—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Portia Harcus, your dealer in Boston.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Portia Harcus. I said that a lot of, that she has sold quite a few of my paintings. All, most all of the paintings that I thought highly of, she sold. She gave me three or four exhibitions of my work and I sold quite a few out of each one. And some collectors bought them, and some people that I have high regard for from what I've heard about them, their interests. I've never met one of them. None of them ever wanted to meet me. Now, I don't paint so I'll get known, I'm not a girl that's trying to shake her butt all over the street and then when somebody comes around [00:14:00] and pays interest it succeeds. I don't mean that. I'm just overwhelmed—I do have a few people in New York that constantly write to me and ask me to come in, they love the painting. I've had those experiences in New York, but I've never had them in Boston.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd like that connection.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I wouldn't like it. I expect it. Because when I was in New York showing at Betty's gallery, I met all kinds of people that were interested in the arts.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now they seem to buy your work say, out of the Boston gallery—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well they don't buy it in the sense of everybody's buying it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well some are.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Some are.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But those people don't then come back and further relate to you, or get in touch with you.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Yeah, more or less. It's not quite as rationalistic as you're saying it. In other words, it isn't that I expect it or want it. But without it, I know a certain conclusion comes that's different from what you're thinking. It's not that I'm disappointed, but it's that—that I am going to write philosophy or play music because I can do that by myself and if I don't play well I can try to find out from somebody that plays better how I should play it. I'll learn how to phrase and articulate music and then learn how to express the waltz well. It would be a wonderful thing without anybody listening to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But with your paintings someone else is going to be looking at them and it won't just begin and end with you. That's what you're saying.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I'm saying that, without any emotions, I'm going to [00:16:00] not live much longer. What the hell's going to happen to all this junk? How are you going to have a truck haul it away and dump it? Nobody's going to want these things. Believe me, I've known it because—you know, you talked about Fairfield Porter. Some gallery has a lot of his paintings and they want to sell it. Nobody wants them. But the publicity is on and on and on through different places to try and get rid of his paintings. The same thing happens with lots of paintings. Clyfford Still packed a house full of his paintings! One of the greatest painters of the time. But the Pop movement has drawn the integrities, the dedications, the commitments, down to such a level. Now I'm not saying it's worse. Clyfford Still, the Christian ceremony by the minister was in a little, tiny room. Done in the winter. Not even in his house. Andy Warhol's was in St. Patrick's Cathedral. And every great person went to it. So, a can of Campbell's Soup or marrying [ph] 10 pictures of Marilyn Monroe with a little lipstick here and there, or whatever means, or any of these things, are far more what the public wants. In fact, art probably doesn't want anything with integrity. Art probably wants to finagle everything through. Politically, in terms of—lookit [ph], here you have, here you have all these things you read in the paper. Killings. Bombing. Take for instance the bombing of that Philadelphia city, that was on TV. This little black neighborhood that one guy [00:18:00] had a fortress there. He had guns. The city, the people, his neighbors, the same race, objected to him. Asked the city over and over to do something about it. Now, I never expect a policeman or a fireman or anything to be a great artist or a great philosopher or a great thinker. They are Joe Dopes like everybody, like myself. How do you fight a thing like that? Now it was awful and nobody has praise for the police for bombing the place. But they used it on TV for a propaganda thing, to make white people feel guilty of doing an evil and ugly thing to a man who simply was just—had rather rough views of life. Who was not a very nice guy. I'm not saying, I remember the blacks really wanted something done. How could you do it? The guy was armed! Is a policeman who has kids at home supposed to take a rifle and walk up to the door and knock on it and get shot? Five or six of them before they bomb it? To make everybody realize it was serious? And then they bring out a perfectly innocent kid from it, and the guy who—was only in prison for a short while. Well Manson the same way, he's still in prison and Hinckley's writing to him. This is the thing our public likes. The papers are full of this. They're working on this Iran thing forever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you're saying that on the other hand they don't care for things that have integrity, that are working towards perfection.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I'm not saying that I have integrity and they don't.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, but you've indicated—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Warhol has all the integrity [00:20:00] you need. I don't say that. I say what the public wants for their spiritual food is not these things. And that's true. Now I'm not disillusioned or disappointed in it so much—because I'm very happy to play this darn, awful machine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But also time will pass and tastes—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I don't because I think always the Oriental idea of nothingness, which is included in this. And the old medieval idea of Father—this old medieval priest, they used to discuss that God is a point within a circle that is nowhere, and the circle that is everywhere.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And these ideas—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, these ideas—naturally, I read. I've read about the circle as much as I can. About the disc, and the circle. After all, you've got a whole bunch of them up there at night if you want to look [laughs] at them. And they show them in the paper and a lot of it now because they're really trying to find out if there's anything beyond. Well I happen to be a person who actually basically believes that the human mind creates its

own realities. That its choices of how to look at reality as something objective or outside that could be demonstrated over and over again as being true. It has nothing to do with the reality of the human being, which is based on illusion and deception. Deception means that you have to evolve, you have to abandon the faulty concept [00:22:00] that is no longer valid and time is the only thing that makes it non-valid. So I say that the whole pursuit of science has only brought on these things that are destroying the world. Not only polluting it, but blowing it to pieces, maintaining left and right positions. Either-or positions. Not one other—and the churches, full of hypocrites [laughs]. Who's this guy that's caught in bed with another preacher? And they make a stink out of it? I don't care what he does. But why did I have to enter—why do I have to read that stuff in the paper? My mind—I have to be told in the newspaper the ugliness of everything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd rather be told none of that.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No. Not quite. I'd rather that they do not spend their time telling only that. I don't mean leave some out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So what, then?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, in my life, I've read the life of Cézanne. I've read the life of—was it Hawthorne has written lots of books and so has Washington Irving about life in this world. I've read lots of books about the Russian-Japanese War, how they pursued it. You do hear of horror, the kill and all that. But you hear of purpose of something. Now I don't mean the purposes are better than any other purpose, but I don't want to hear of this problem of Goetz. Because I don't think there's any solution to it. I was talking to New York [00:24:00] people, they said they had screwdrivers, these pointed screwdrivers, which is the perfect weapon to commit these threats and hold ups. Not a gun but a screwdriver. Nobody mentions it in the paper. Why? I'm not on Goetz's side, I think Goetz was a creep carrying a gun. But maybe people living in New York are terrified and the black people must be terrified because they get killed more than the whites by the blacks.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you'd like to see people turning their attention to purposeful things as well.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I would like the newspaper to have the atmosphere in it of showing all kinds of people, some of the most underprivileged people, things that they could do that would bring them great self-satisfaction. I would give anything if I could go down to the library and read all the time. I used to do that as a kid, go down and look at so many books. You know every person here poor or not has a chance to go and do that at some time. They don't—they want to sit out in front of a jukebox place and make a lot of noise and shake their butt around and not take baths.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Since you have been very privileged to seek self-expression and to work that way, working purposefully. You've had a fairly optimistic, or forward—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I don't know optimistic. Do you want to hear about the past?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Forward-looking. I mean, you've had a life with some momentum to it, haven't you?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I'm a total failure. I'm a failure because I believed in myself and painted some pictures [00:26:00] that, in the real run of—I call it society, of people, there's no place for them except a few, a very few. And I don't think those people will ever be interested. I think all these paintings of forms that I've done that I've done are really paintings of chaos. Of my recognition of all chaos. After all, I had a wife that committed suicide. She divorced me and married somebody else, but I couldn't stand the failure of that marriage. I'm not serious any more than I'm un-serious, but it's terribly serious in a real sense. I worked on the railroad and I worked on farms. I really loved the roads to walk on in the sunlight. To hike 30 miles and then camp with a pack on your back. Walked through Missouri one time. I ran a printing press. I'll show you the first scout paper I printed at 14 years of age, or 18 years of age it was, handset type. There are so many things that are wonderful to do. Today's world, there's nothing wonderful to do. Because wonderfulness is out of the question, and Oldenberg shows that. What a fraud to put a lipstick at the center of the entrance of Yale University. Or a flashlight. He's saying the same thing I'm saying as an artist. I'm saying I would rather have respect for the human being. I would rather [00:28:00] believe in things than not believe in them. I think that, that this idea of spending—I have to get into this Reagan thing, it's the only thing I can. Spending six months to prove a man lied, uh, is not worth it. Because if you're looking at political parties, Ted Kennedy lied and lied and lied at Chappaquiddick. And they've taken all his documents out of the files and have disappeared. What would happen if Reagan did that? Do you ever think—do you know nothing was said of Kennedy except revealed a little bit about that? But how that man lied! He got into the hotel saying he was never near the water. Called up his lawyer and told him what can I do? Can you get anybody else to take the place of me in that car? The lawyer said you go and tell. Wait a second, that isn't the only one. When you come politically to look at it, it's a violation of everything, politically. I remember Stalin, to all the artist friends, Stalin was a great, great man. Look what he did! Look what they did—look at how hard it was for Khrushchev to say it and how shameful Khrushchev was that, he said all along that he knew what was going on and he disapproved of Stalin but what could he do? He

should have been man enough to go say, "Stalin, kill me too." Or go take a pot shot at him. That's the thing that's integrity. Today's world, the guy who takes a pot shot or the guy who does something he believes in [00:30:00] is humiliated by all the devices that discredit, that have no integrity.

[Audio break.]

—has a substance. There is something that is true about art, just like I think love is true. I'm not saying I love, and the song lyrics, but I think within the human psyche, the inner human self, there are things that are hard to ignore. That you finally, if you break faith in them, they are painful. I suffered a couple years after that divorce. I built this house just to build something. I remember that, I remember mentally. So—wait a second, I'm talking as if I did something. I mean, the art world should have that because Mark Rothko committed suicide. For why, I don't know. Pollock tried to commit suicide. Clyfford Still suffered miserably in his life. A lot of these men reached fame before they died, but they never received anywhere near the value from the public or from the people that wanted art, and expressions of value while they were living. Never. And those that are doing it now, I think, are second rate. Not all of them, but some. [00:32:00]

Did you go to Museum of Fine Arts and see that show about a year ago in the new wing, the Pei Wing? They put in Rothkos and Still and all those things amongst the crummiest stuff. Now wait, I have to realize that I'm criticizing something because I'm ignorant. If you take a bunch of paper, some bricks, throw them in the middle of the floor and stack them some way, or if you do anything. A couple of iron beams, or make a big sheet steel wall across the street down there, you might be proving something. It's possible. But I don't think that's in the realm of art. I think the realm of art is not to pounce upon the public view, to impose anything. It's something to show that you have discovered it. And your rather modest presentation to the public rather than showing them what a terrible, sincere effort to produce it.

Now I think I failed on these. Not that I'm not a good artist, but I think that the thing I sought, I did not achieve. And that's why I'm quite willing to stop painting. I've tried to explain that to Ineko, she can't see it. She'll argue me black in the face [00:34:00] that I've no right to say that, to do that, to take that viewpoint. But I don't think my art has placed itself clearly, for what I should have found. I don't think I succeeded in finding what I should have found. All because I worked with my hands too much. I was too much of a carpenter and too much of a draftsman, too much of a house builder.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You know what you should have done.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: An artist is like Proust, you know. You can soon bet all your life and you can write some beautiful things because you see something. Well I've done too much physical—I don't mean physical but I've done too much rational—I'm building, that thing is going to hold. That chair, you see how that goes?

ROBERT F. BROWN: You think that is a dissipation of your concentration on your art?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I've given up because my sinus knocked me out and my rheumatism.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But even earlier, you said you were a house builder, carpenter, so forth. Do you think that you frittered away your energy? Is that what you were trying to say?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: No, I think when you live life, no matter how you live it, as long as you do not have to go through Auschwitz or anything like that, you're pretty lucky. I think a lot of people have suffered terribly. I think life to most people has been horrifying. Most people die of cancer in misery and most people realize at the end that they didn't exist in the first place, except for a moment. [00:36:00] And others, we don't exist. We aren't real. Science might think it's real, and the real things are the things that are going to destroy us. I mean, the, the perception of things as real. Now that isn't—that can be argued back and forth and somebody with a better mind than mine can totally wipe out my thinking. I agree with that, a scientist. But I think what the human world, the human creature is a phenomenon. This earth, you know, its mileage and mathematics and computing and evolution and speed an all that, is meaningless to the human being. Human being wants to live. And this other stuff makes him want to die, sure, he's going to die from it. Excuse me.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The other New York School, you wanted to talk about art itself.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: We used to go out to dinner with the dealers and all that, or talk with each other. They would talk about art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They wouldn't enlarge it to include life.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: They wouldn't be wasting their time talking about this nonsense. Because everything's

real too. You think I could convince my dog that the fox is a teddy bear? [Laughs.] The human being, you can't—Gary Hart did what comes naturally. That's the main thing about what he did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But that old crowd in New York mainly just wanted to talk about art, is that what you just said?

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: I think that's what they got together for because that's what—they totally were [00:38:00] not interested in talking about human philosophy in the sense of individual person. I think the social idea that everybody has a right to paint is a deception to everybody rather than a right to everybody. It deceives people to think that they can paint. Because is it good to paint badly? In some ways like I do. Is it good to paint badly or should you have the humility to do something that you can do well and let somebody else paint? And then any artist that comes up with any type of thing because he's got an idea, is that valid? Is art just an idea? You know, somebody took a bunch of bricks and laid it on the floor and that was a work of art. Or a coil of rope at the Cooper Gallery. Or Alexander Liberman put up those pipes, white colored, big tubes cut at angles. You know, Liberman's thing. Is that, it had nothing to do with being here. Or art. Because in the realm of the landscape, the landscape was far more aesthetic without an artist around there to do it. And this guy, who imposes geometrics in his plumbing accumulation—I'm not saying there wasn't art in the museum! But I'm saying it doesn't fit here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean in a [00:40:00] museum it might work.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: In a museum everybody has a right to—I believe in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in the landscape you feel that something like Liberman's pipes is a—

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Well, they took it out I think, I don't know, maybe it's still there. I haven't looked. [Laughs.] I don't think it's there. But I'm not trying to pick up on Liberman so much as I'm talking about the idea that those arbiters of art have seen fit to elevate art into something that it is not. Art is not something that—that—it is like a mason. There are very few masons that can lay a decent brick wall today. Now, not that a brick wall is a work of art, but a mason really has to know what he's doing. And, uh, I'm not saying an artist has to learn—like when I went to school at the Art Institute, take charcoal on a piece of paper and copy a mask of Napoleon, or the Venus de Milo, or Balzac or anybody else. And then the teacher come around, "Look that shadow around that nostril is like this. The jawbone goes like this." Art isn't a matter of a craft so much as a matter of—creativity itself is actually something that comes out of nowhere. Out of a place that's indefinable, unlocatable. I'm not saying that every artist has to be a great artist. But that there should be some substance to it, [00:42:00] like a belief in truth. The truth doesn't exist today. They're not telling the truth in anything in this paper. Did you study what the armament, what Russia has been producing? Certainly because they can produce all the rubles they want, and build anything they can produce they can do it without costing one penny to their government. And that is why they're out producing us in armament. But they haven't got enough labor to go ahead and also do it in the fields.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's been a misapplication of resources.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: It's totally flawed, it's fraudulent. They could have succeeded 100 times, like when Mondrian and—not Mondrian, who am I talking about, these Russian abstractionists. There's so many of them. Malevich and all the rest were going to teach in schools and suddenly the party got in and stopped them. But if there was actually freedom, and the real thing that they died for, the idealists died for, there would have been a wonderful society. But it's because half of man is really, really evil and ugly and mean and vicious. And he's not the guys they report about so much as he's right around amongst the picture takers and guys who's talking in the articles. I won't say they're evil, but I say that they are not honest. Can't be. Stalin was not honest.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you've seen similar things in the so-called art world.

JOHN WALTER STEPHAN: Oh yes, I say the flashlight [00:44:00] in front of the university is not honest. The flashlight put down somewhere where the people got around and bought it and said put it there, let them put it there. But to be put there so that it labels a university as being a work of art in irony or in farce or in absurdity, is not to be located where young people go to college to learn something. Because then everything they learn is absurd. They say, "Oh this absurd thing. We go in and our teachers are absurd." The thing goes in harmony with itself.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or it should.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]