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**Oral history interview with John Humphrey,  
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# Transcript

## Interview

**JH:** JOHN HUMPHREY

**PK:** PAUL KARLSTROM

**PK:** Well, John, you've been associated with the San Francisco Museum of Art for a long time — probably longer than anybody else who's still around — and I believe you go back to the opening of the museum. On this tape, we'll be talking quite a bit about the growth of the museum as you've observed it. And also, of course, you've been in a good position to observe just what has happened in the Bay Area in terms of the art scene. Could you give us a little bit of your own background and just how you came to be associated with the museum?

**JH:** Well, as a matter of fact, I'm actually a disappointed painter who decided that painting was not for him, and so, in terms of the problem of assuring enough beans on the table, I joined the staff right at the beginning of the museum.

**PK:** What year was that?

**JH:** That was 1935, and at the time, I actually was a packer and an unpacker of exhibitions that were being sent in from elsewhere. I helped put them on the wall and acted as one of the guards, so that I began in a very unacademic way in the arts here in the area. But right from the start, a major portion of our exhibition policy was aimed at art of the Bay Area — that is, exposing and showing art for the Bay Area. So, inevitably, it meant seeing and knowing about a good deal of the art that was being produced during those years in the museum, or for the museum, so that actually is the impetus and the nature of my knowing about the arts of the Bay Area.

**PK:** Did you grow up in this area or are you, like most Californians, an import?

**JH:** I'm an import, but from California. I was raised and educated down around Fresno, Hanford, to be exact, and came up to the Bay Area to go to art school.

**PK:** Was that the California School of Fine Arts?

**JH:** At the California School of Fine Arts, and one year before that at Arts and Crafts, and all of those years and all of those experiences were very valuable to me. For instance, while I was at the Oakland Museum, in 1929 I think it was . . . .

**PK:** You actually worked at the Oakland Museum?

**JH:** I actually worked at the Oakland Museum for a while, and that was why I was going to school at Arts & Crafts at that time. But, just an example of what was happening at the time during those years, the Oakland Museum was storing the Galka Scheyer Collection of the Blue Four — the German Expressionists — the Kandinsky's, the Jawlensky's, the Paul Klee's, the Franz Marc's that Galka Scheyer brought across from Europe and that probably was a greater, richer experience for me than anything I could have picked up at art school at that time, so that it was a very exciting thing.

**PK:** This is interesting. We were talking about the Galka Scheyer Collection at lunch recently, and what was news to me, or what at least I didn't fully realize, was that Galka Scheyer came to San

Francisco and spent some time here. The collection, I gather, was stored at that time at Oakland, was this correct?

**JH:** That's correct.

**PK:** And then, ultimately, she moved it down south. So this is the history of it.

**JH:** This was the early history of that collection's presence in the United States. They were being stored in the back rooms of the Oakland Museum where I was involved working, and I could sneak my looks through the collection.

**PK:** Were you one of the people associated with the museum who were among the few actually to see these pictures? Were some of them put on exhibition, were they available to the public, to artists?

**JH:** I don't remember their ever being put on display in the museum. What happened was that Galka was promoting interest, developing interest in the collection and in the artists at the time, and she would show the collection to the people — the collectors — interested in this group and in their work, contemporary art from Europe. So it would be my job, for instance, to carry works from the storeroom out to the people who were coming in to see the collection.

**PK:** And was she selling, actually selling this work?

**JH:** She was selling.

**PK:** Operating as a representative or a dealer.

**JH:** Right, she was operating as a dealer for these artists at the time. And a perfect example was a whole afternoon showing work after work to Diego Rivera who came in and sat in a chair and had these works brought before him by me. Galka would explain where and when these particular works were done, what they meant to the whole picture of their development as she knew it. Rivera would sit there and nod or not nod, and he was just one of many who came through and came up to the museum specifically for the purpose of seeing the collection.

**PK:** But the paintings themselves wouldn't have exerted in the Bay Area, an influence on many of the contemporary artists. I mean, they weren't available to be seen.

**JH:** Not so much to the younger generation but among those who did see the works while they were here were a number of the artist friends of the director of the museum, Mr. Flack [phon. sp.] at that time. For instance, all the members of The Six which has just had an exhibition had an exposure to the works of the Blue Four, so that while it doesn't seem a direct influence in its nature. It was indirectly of considerable importance, not only that way, but because they were brand new in their total structure, the painting structure; they were conversational material of tremendous importance.

**PK:** I am trying to recall publications, periodicals from that period. I'm just trying to figure if these artists would have been — these German artists — widely reproduced. In other words, if these images would have had a certain let's say, shock effect, that here is something really new.

**JH:** I don't think you can deny the fact that it did. Now it's only one of many kinds of such things the artists were exposed to at that time, and you have to remember that the artists who were getting back and forth between here and New York, here and Chicago, here and other places, had seen

examples of these men's work, and there was enough appearing in periodicals about them to make it very exciting.

**PK:** . . . to stimulate some interest.

**JH:** But the thing I really wanted to say was that at that time along with the great activity here in the Bay Region, we were exhibiting constantly works brought out from the East and brought out from a great many places that gave the artist element in the community a pretty grand idea of contemporary art as it was being produced during the thirties.

**PK:** Were these shows out of New York?

**JH:** Shows out of New York, out of Chicago, out of Washington, the Corcoran Museum. Shows were being made up as public museum policies of these eastern museums. They were made up of very important works of both European artists and American artists. Between the artists' exposure by going back and forth to the East Coast and to the Middle West and so forth, and what they would see out here, they all were afforded quite a sophisticated picture of contemporary art as it was being produced in the thirties.

**PK:** So San Francisco wasn't really all that isolated, even in the twenties.

**JH:** No, no. One example of the extent of sophistication was a fact I ran across not too long ago. The 1915 Exposition, for instance, had a section of the Italian Futurists, and the catalogue of paintings included Matisse, Picasso, Renoir and a whole raft of people that we normally wouldn't think of.

**PK:** They were part of the Futurists?

**JH:** They were a part of the future.

**PK:** Using it in a very general sense.

**JH:** Right: — a double meaning. So that while San Francisco certainly is isolated in the national sense of the word, and the East Coast does have exposure to a good deal more in a quantitative sense, there was a considerable amount that artists and the art-interested part of the community could observe and take issue with.

**PK:** I thought that this might be a good opportunity to in some sort of a systematic way, maybe almost a chronological overview, to talk about the development of art in this area, and we mentioned the availability or accessibility of advanced art back in the twenties, even earlier (you mentioned the Panama Pacific Exposition, the Futurist display there). How did local artists draw upon — or did they draw upon the advanced art that they saw in this area? Was it, as one would expect, a conservative response, or can you actually see in the work produced by artists of that time some echoes of cubism, expressionism?

**JH:** I think you can see echoes all through it, but it was a conservative display of the feedback of more advanced ideas. All through the late twenties and early thirties the art scene was really determined by the Midwest thing.

**PK:** Regionalism, landscape?

**JH:** Regionalism, the American Scene, the landscape and its people and their activities.

**PK:** Who were some of the most prominent local figures? Well, let's pick a decade, say the twenties, or whenever you want to start.

**JH:** Well for me, it would have to be the thirties, during my time at the Art Institute (California School of Fine Arts). We had as visiting instructor Maurice Sterne who at that time was a national figure and is still considered a national figure on a conservative level. We had Arnold Blanch. It was at that time that the terrific excitement about fresco painting, mural painting, generated by Rivera and Orozco who were just being digested by artists. Rivera was just finishing up his murals when I got to the school in the 1930's, and the artists in town were very much involved with Rivera and the production of that fresco and the other frescos that Rivera was doing in the area here — there were several in the area.

**PK:** What about Maynard Dixon? Was he a prominent factor in the art scene during those years?

**JH:** No, Maynard had had his prominence earlier, in the late twenties, and men like Maynard, Gottardo Piazzoni, Henry Varnum Poor.

**PK:** Did Poor work out here?

**JH:** Yes, I think he was a visiting instructor and worked for awhile out here. Several others, whose names escape me at the moment, were showing signs of having assimilated an art form which went beyond the local scene and landscape or that kind of thing. For instance, quite a number of The Six were perfectly aware in many ways of the Fauve painters of France in 1907 and 1908. They were, even in their time — in the twenties — concerned with pure color, for instance, and the handling and distribution of color on the canvas as an abstract space-making device of its own kind.

**PK:** Using color in an arbitrary. . .

**JH:** Using color in an apparently arbitrary way, but seeing it as a device for making it much more of a painterly expression than a descriptive form.

**PK:** Would you view the members of the Society of The Six — I believe that was what it was called — as the most progressive element in the thirties?

**JH:** Certainly one of the most progressive. There were other individuals during the thirties. For instance, there was quite an element of the American abstract painters association working here.

**PK:** Did this take the form of geometric abstraction?

**JH:** This took the form of geometric art: art as architectonic expression. As I was saying, you can't deny its presence in this area, even though it was treated rather carefully, and in other areas, they were farther ahead with these particular devices or in particular attitudes.

**PK:** Two questions. You mentioned the sort of geometric aspects of the period which, of course, appear elsewhere, no question about it. Now who were some of the artists involved? Are there any prominent names that come to your mind that worked in this style?

**JH:** I can't think of any, I can't think of one who was really prominent on a national level. Of course, they were all prominent within the community and winning prizes in the annuals and in the group ventures that they insisted on promoting. But I think it should come out that they were, while not terribly strong in their own way, cognizant of what was being done in other areas and why it was being done this way and were believers in the nature of the product that they were producing, and

that had its effect. A man like Clay Spohn, for instance, who comes into some prominence in the forties, had his beginnings in the thirties and his art clearly reflects a decided interest in this kind of image-making. Another name I'm trying to think of, Dixon . . . .

**PK:** James Budd?

**JH:** James Budd Dixon was another one whose art does this. Hassel Smith is still another figure whose work comes out very clearly now, in perspective, with its characteristics that we think of as representative of them. It had its structural facts, developed earlier by these exposures.

**PK:** Certainly one would associate them with the 1940's and the California School of Fine Arts, and I guess I might forget that they were working much earlier than that.

**JH:** I think so. I think this is what happens so often with history making. The tendency is to go to the final image which does spell out the most representative aspects of them.

**PK:** We've established that there were a number of artists working in very contemporary modes during the 1930's. What about the local reception of their work? What about the commercial success, gallery outlets, exhibition possibilities which are all important factors to an artist?

**JH:** That doesn't come about until the later forties actually, but you must remember that all during that time the Art Association Annuals, the juried exhibitions, were going on, and they were tremendously important activities for the community, and everybody felt that they had to come and see the annuals. Now at that time, in the later thirties, there were sometimes three of those annuals during a year's period and each one in turn . . . .

**PK:** There's a contradiction in terms.

**JH:** It certainly would seem so, because they made it possible by dividing it up into a sculpture annual and a painting annual and a graphics annual. Each one, in turn, had its own procedures separate from the other, and each one was an open competition to everybody that was on the mailing list that the artists made up. That meant invitations sent out for the exhibition, and then, all of that input was juried by somebody brought into the area primarily for the . . .

**PK:** You mean for the awarding of prizes?

**JH:** . . . the awarding of prizes, and the shows were juried because it was physically necessary. We would get thirteen hundred or fifteen hundred works in and perhaps ten percent of that was shown, could be exhibited in the space available. Not only was it a local affair, but invitations were sent out to centers in Chicago, New York, the South asking for names and inviting artists of other communities.

**PK:** So it was a national invitational.

**JH:** Yes, it was a national invitational and at that time also, there was a much greater possibility for this museum to show works by really contemporary artists because these exhibitions were being made up by other institutions. Now, we at that time were in no position to instigate shows, so artists here could show elsewhere. They all managed to.

**PK:** What about the commercial gallery situation in the thirties?

**JH:** That was and still is something of a problem. It's much better now than it was at any time in the

past, but there were a few galleries that opened all during those years. Courvoisier, for instance, was occasionally showing local work. Most of the time he was showing works he brought in from the East Coast. The East/West Gallery was another one.

**PK:** Now when did East/West open up? I'm unsure of that.

**JH:** There were two East/West's, actually. There was an East/West Gallery which was actually developed as a gallery run by artists and friends of the artists. And then there was a later East/West Gallery that had a little more official, commercial backing.

**PK:** Different locations?

**JH:** And different locations, too. The first one was on Geary Street, right across from the City of Paris and then the later one was up in what is now the Marine Club rooms. And there may have even been a third.

**PK:** It seems to me there was one on Fillmore.

**JH:** That was East and West — slightly different. Now that was in the forties, and this was still in the thirties. Also several of the bookstores had galleries on their second floors: Newbegins was one of them, I remember, and they were really concerned with the local art scene. Thomas Albright, I think, was one of the heads of the bookstore who was also a painter on Sundays and was very interested in the arts.

**PK:** Have you ever heard of a place called the Vallejo Library?

**JH:** No.

**PK:** Supposedly there was a little gallery that showed mostly contemporary art in the thirties called the Vallejo Library Gallery or something like this and was run by a woman named Maude Hager. Let's see, where are we?

**JH:** We're still in the thirties. It was the artist really talking to himself and his friends, and nobody outside the artist element was really convinced that this was important enough to be really excited about. So the artists were not selling, and it was not possible for the artist to make a living, that is, in his declared profession, by being an artist.

**PK:** Unless he painted landscapes, and the American Scene type thing, I imagine such artists were more successful and could probably sell locally.

**JH:** He would be selling a bit, but still he would not be making a living at his painting.

**PK:** Few other artists during the thirties were . . . .

**JH:** Nelson Poole, Rinaldo Cuneo, names always escape me there, Otis Oldfield, another one, all taught or they worked as decorators for the bigger stores, doing the windows and setting up their promotional enterprises. They were doing anything that was possible for them to do so that they could, in effect, be painters. One of the most exciting of the period, of the late thirties, was a bricklayer by trade and all during the week he'd carry bricks and hold up ladders and so forth and then go home to paint.

**PK:** This, of course was the WPA period, and I was wondering if you had any observations about

that. I know there was a lot of activity in San Francisco.

**JH:** That took the place, in the later thirties, of the little galleries. The artist was able, during those few years to really focus on his painting, and we have a lot of products from that period with its particular focus in the town, still. The Coit Tower, for instance.

**PK:** Now, did Walter Heil direct that program? Wasn't he responsible for the Coit Tower?

**JH:** You have Lloyd Rollins who was director for a while at the de Young Museum — this is during the early thirties — and the Legion both, and Rollins was an extremely alert and sophisticated museum mind who was instrumental in bringing to the San Francisco public a high level program of the arts which included the most exciting Bay region painters. He was far ahead of the mentality of his times in many ways, and he was much more inclined to an international attitude to the arts, rather than the more usual thing. Exhibitions of Chagall, exhibitions of Russian Icons. He was one of the first to see the significance of the F64 bunch and their photographic revolution. Many things that he instigated and put before us have subsequently become international.

**PK:** So he was farsighted.

**JH:** He was pretty farsighted.

**PK:** And then his successor was Walter Heil.

**JH:** Yes, his successor was Walter Heil. I don't remember exactly when Walter Heil came to San Francisco.

**PK:** 1936 or 38.

**JH:** Was it as early as that? Because I know all through the early thirties Rollins was there, and during Rollins' tenure, Tommy Howe was part of the museum picture, a curator, perhaps, I don't know for sure. But he very shortly took over the Legion after Rollins left, and Heil, I think, then was brought in to take on the de Young.

**PK:** Yes, and for a while they were combined again.

**JH:** Yes.

**PK:** This leads me to an important question. You mentioned the invitational, large exhibitions that were held, but as you look back at it, would you say that any of the museums, were particularly receptive or sensitive to — obviously Rollins was — to the advanced art? Could you make a general statement that this was the case in San Francisco?

**JH:** As I've said, this museum was, in its own way, because we were constantly showing Bay Area work of the more advanced kind, all through the thirties and all through the early forties, all during the war years. For instance, the museum had a very strong part of its program, exhibiting what the directors or personnel felt was the strongest from the area.

**PK:** So, you would say that the museums actually did a pretty good job of presenting . . . ?

**JH:** I would think so.

**PK:** Well, do you feel that it's time to talk about the forties? I hate to treat the thirties as just



background.

**JH:** Yes, but I suspect we have to, and I think that's it is national.

**PK:** You're right. We're not forcing it on the local situation.

**JH:** I think that situation which developed allowing the artist element to surface and to be a living part of the community in this country doesn't really happen until the late forties. It's difficult, because we tend to categorize, to say that which is good and is international in scope only happened in the forties or really became important to the world in the forties. Whereas I'm inclined to the fact of the American scene being of equal significance and equally exploratory in its own way, and for the moment, lost in importance, but existing for future generations to pick up. So it's like that. But to go on, during the war years when a good many artists were involved in the war, there were always those who were not involved in the war activities. They were sort of filling in for the absent ones so that at the Legion of Honor, the exhibitions during that period were alive with excellent Bay Area art. We were, even though we had to move from this building to downtown.

**PK:** Tell me a little bit about that.

**JH:** Well, we were run out of the building by the United Nations Charter Building program, both the Opera House and this building itself were just taken over by the whole federal project, you see. Once it was decided that San Francisco was the place where the United Nations would be built and constructed here, then the whole machinery of producing the charter for the United Nations had to go on here. And that involved quite a number of years in the latter part of the war.

**PK:** And where was the San Francisco Museum of Art located then?

**JH:** The museum, in having to move, took over a building very near the St. Francis Hotel. It was on Post Street about three buildings of the St. Francis Hotel. They were — I was not around at the time — able to lock up the place here and store everything that they had to and then practically take over the whole building down there. So for a short time, the San Francisco Museum had a downtown presence that many people remember as one of the most exciting parts of the museum's life.

**PK:** Just for the record — of course, this information appears elsewhere — when did you move back to the present location?

**JH:** They moved back immediately after the United Nations activity cleared out, so that put the museum back here in this building in, I think, 1945, 1946, I'm not sure. I think you'll find it's right at the end of the war — it may have been early 1946 or late 1945 that we moved back here. The museum from that time on became more and more interested in the Bay Area artists and their products. At the same time the school, the Art Institute, and for that matter, Arts and Crafts, and the Berkeley University Art Department were filled with returning artists.

**PK:** Who were enrolling on the GI bill.

**JH:** For a short while they took advantage of that GI bill.

**PK:** Well I wanted to ask you — I suppose this is the time — your view of the importance of the various schools in the Bay Area. A lot is made, of course, of the California School of Fine Arts and abstract expressionism. I'd just be curious to get your view of this situation and maybe characterize the different schools, I guess the three most important Bay Area schools that you mention,

including Berkeley which had an active program.

**JH:** I think you have to include Berkeley, Arts and Crafts and the Institute, and I think Stanford and San Francisco State.

**PK:** You don't hear as much about them, you hear mainly about the California School of Fine Arts.

**JH:** You don't hear as much about them, that's about the size of it. Because of this, I think, strange attitude toward the arts that has become synonymous with the Institute's policy. I think really they, more than any of the other schools or training places, were concerned with creating artists rather than painters or sculptors or teachers of these things. This made them somehow unique in the minds of the artists and the community who saw the romantic side of the picture. Because for me, for instance, raised down in the Valley (the San Joaquin Valley) where art was looked at by the community as some very, very strange dangerous thing for any youngster to want to deal with as a life work. Even so, the first dialogue I had from my teachers in high school was that if you want to go to art school, you'd better think of going to the Art Institute. Now you can go to Arts and Crafts, or you can go to Berkeley, or you can go to these others, sure, but if you really seriously want to be an artist, then you've got to be at the Art Institute.

**PK:** That's interesting.

**JH:** And that was the general attitude, even in the late twenties.

**PK:** Well, does that have to do with what you mentioned, a policy of producing artists rather than professional painters and teachers?

**JH:** I have to think so.

**PK:** Or did it also have something to do with the faculty?

**JH:** It had to do with all these factors that are pertinent to its image. I use that way of describing it purposely in recent years when I've had to talk to artists about the art situation and asking, for instance, about Clyfford Still or asking about others who were brought in from the East. "What do they mean to you", in effect, and I get the vaguest feedback from those people which spells out no interest in a method of producing painters as such. They went to school, and they were allowed to do anything, they were encouraged to do anything, and none of the teachers wanted to direct them to do a certain thing. In fact, they were afraid to impose their own personality on these youngsters as a part of their policy, as a part of their thinking about their job. So that their job was really to inspire the artist to be enthusiastic about art, about the contemporary way of doing it, but not to make that person reflect the instructors.

**PK:** And yet, the California School of Fine Arts, at least from our point of view now, identified almost exclusively with gestural painting. Clyfford Still equals abstract expressionism, and this was a great contribution to this area by the California School of Fine Arts. This would suggest on the face of it a method, a mode of working. How do you feel about it?

**JH:** But I feel there, for instance, the very nature of what grew up is the kind that emphasizes personality, personal commitment to gesture. The whole idea of abstract expressionism grew up here in the Bay Area as primarily that rather than a method of looking at the painted object and seeing its abstract qualities as being a product of defining their job of expressing themselves with paint. In effect, it means that color was of no consideration as color, drawing as drawing, or drawing as descriptive method. It was, from its beginning, a gesture which made a by-product of brush and

hand and that brush loaded with pigment. The important thing was that it could gather inspiration to create gesture on the canvas. So that's what you get out of students' reaction to the teachers.

**PK:** Well, what about the other schools? We started out talking the nature of the importance of schools in the Bay Area, and of course the California School of Fine Arts figures prominently, but you emphasized that one can't exclude Arts and Crafts, Berkeley, etc. I'm not sure exactly what I'm asking you, but perhaps it has something to do with the differences in approaches, and I'm curious what kind of impact the different schools had.

**JH:** The other schools did attempt in their instructional policies and methods to train the students as painters and sculptors and they did show them that color, for instance, was hue, and that there were laws of these things devised to aid the student in dealing with these elements. There was form to be developed, either descriptively or in an abstract sense in terms of the picture plane, and that the personality of the artist was something that could come out later if they were diligent about their training in school. Now I think, also, the fact that the other schools were, by policy, aimed at producing teachers of art as much as they were to produce artists had something to do with it. The schools were artist community centers where the involvement was with artists, about art, on art being created in studios, about art that was being exhibited in museums and elsewhere across the country, and what was being printed in the periodicals at the time. All of these actually had as much influence, as much to do with the form that developed as the contributions of any single teacher or personality that was a part of the community or came from elsewhere. But you can't deny the importance of these figures. Hofmann, for instance, was one of the new foreign figures brought to Berkeley and Mills College for a while. And undeniably, he had a mind that stimulated the students, and made them think, and made them reflect on what they were doing and how effective it was. The same, I'm sure, with Clyfford Still, and there were other figures, like Charles Howard, and Bob Howard. Charles Howard was a sophisticated mind who'd been for years exposed to the European situation in England as a painter and as a teacher. And during those war years, he was here teaching at the Art Institute, and the range of his knowledge and his ability to communicate to the artist was tremendous. But along with that was all the inter-communication between the artists themselves and their struggles expressed over a glass beer in a bar or wherever, and it was the prime subject of conversation — not so much who was selling what, when and for how much, but what they were doing and the challenges of this nature. This was all pretty new to them, and it had to be digested. It had to be discussed to be digested.

**PK:** I guess we're talking about the immediate post-war years now, that there really was an active artistic community and intellectual exchange and discussion of ideas, something similar perhaps to the Cedar Bar in New York City.

**JH:** Right. But it didn't have perhaps that focus. I suspect that the focus there is also a little false in that as much went on in the studios and during the daytime as went on in the evening at the Cedar Bar.

**PK:** Was there any sort of an organization here that would be equivalent to the abstract expressionists who were in New York?

**JH:** Again, you'll have to admit the organization we think of is something that has come about . . . .

**PK:** After the fact.

**JH:** Way after the fact. Because it was not an organization until, or even at the time of this second generation of artists called the 10th Street Group. For instance, they were hardly actually an

organization as we know organizations. I think it's a device.

**PK:** What about Motherwell's pronouncements?

**JH:** There is pretty much a supporting dialogue for what I'm saying. Motherwell, with all of his contributions in the publications, was endeavoring to deal with the subject on his own. His endeavor spread because of dialogue with other artists, other individuals like himself, you see, who were trying to deal with the problem, and there was no truly official position for this.

**PK:** Well, I guess I'm actually leading us a little bit astray. I suppose one of the reasons I evoked the New York situation is because of the this comparison between New York and San Francisco in terms of the emergence of abstract expressionism, gestural painting. As much as anything, I was curious in determining the basis for — which I don't think we can do right now anyway — but I was interested in knowing if there was a dialogue between artists and the intellectual exchange of valves, talking about painting, about philosophy?

**JH:** You have heard of Hassel Smith's little gatherings — first at his home, I think up on Billy Goat Hill, and then later down in his studio in the Embarcadero. There was a group of perhaps ten or twelve artists, students and post-graduate students like Hassel himself, who gathered in the evenings or during the day and would exchange ideas. Also, the Art Institute and Arts and Crafts are two places I know that have evenings for what you might call symposiums or long table discussion groups which the artists and the other part of the community, probably could attend.

**PK:** I didn't know that.

**JH:** And these were a regular part of their program all during the fifties, and I think earlier. Douglas MacAgy I think instigated them, and I think they were carried on by those that followed Douglas. Just because there was this terrific unknown that could only be given voice by inter-artist discussion.

**PK:** Well, I certainly don't want to dwell — plenty of other people have done it — upon abstract expressionism and the role of the California School of Fine Arts, although I do get the feeling in talking with a number of people that it could use a little reevaluation of its true impact or influence on the broader art scene in the Bay Area. Some people would have us think that all of a sudden Clyfford Still arrived, and they started teaching abstract expressionism, and then everybody had to paint in this manner which makes it nice for a good clear-cut art historical treatment but this usually is misleading.

**JH:** It's somewhat misleading because it lasted I think as a primary concern for perhaps two years — or maybe a little more than that say, four years, '46 to 1950, as the prime direction that the artist element was concerned with.

**PK:** But most of the artists were, in fact, during those years affected.

**JH:** Very much. And even those who followed in the years immediately following were affected. But you find, I think, from say 1950 on, a great deal of interest in really questioning this as the most valid form for the painter to take. And in those subsequent years you find the artists developing concerns for, say, anti-art and a great interest in dadaism, a European thing that had happened ten years before, you see, and surrealism as very vague but very exciting and stimulating things, voices, that were being expressed through paint.

**PK:** How do you suppose this happened?

**JH:** I just don't know, really. I've talked to Frank Lobdell, for instance, who claims the abstract expressionist format for his thinking, and he comes off kind of disgusted with the establishment, the Korean war, and the Vietnam thing. All of these young fellows in those years had been — or most of them — had been a part of the Second World War which was the war to end all wars, like the one before it, you know, and what happens immediately when the world gets in trouble again, the establishment gets in trouble again. "Why should we be so concerned about belonging to a society and our thinking that is just concerned with power, power moves and so forth?"

**PK:** Are you suggesting then in the early fifties there evolved an anti-establishment tendency with San Francisco artists?

**JH:** I am.

**PK:** This is very interesting because that would correspond then in time with the emergence of something quite distinctive. I'd love to have you talk about it a little more.

**JH:** Well, you know, these things grow up really as a kind of magic that you can never actually pin down or pinpoint nicely. In dealing with the artists over the years, almost all of them, in a good part of their thinking, were perfectly aware from the fifties on that they were also part of society and that the product they were working with was a social product. It, in itself, is an attitude on the part of the artist that makes him rather self-conscious. And he is perhaps the first generation in this modern time who can consider himself a part of the social structure. Particularly in this area, I guess, (I'm not familiar enough with other areas to know the facts there) but before then, the artist accepted himself as just some freaky fellow who loved the landscape, and who loved the visual world around him. What he chose to spend his life doing was his own affair and if somebody liked it, that was fine, but it wasn't terribly important that they did. The generation of the fifties was much more alert, much more aware of the fact that they were a part of the society, or they were counter-society and that their gestures, their movements would declare them either for or against the establishment in this situation.

**PK:** Well, let's see if I can sort this out. Specifically, which individuals would you . . . ?

**JH:** Wally Hedrick, Julius Wasserstein, here in this museum is another, David Simpson, with a different attitude.

**PK:** When did Bruce Conner come on?

**JH:** Bruce Conner is really one who's much more alert than most of these that I've brought up. From the start of his coming to this area, he was aware that he was capable of saying some extraordinary things to society. In other words, he knew from the beginning, apparently, that what he was doing with his art activity was social commentary, and was capable of moving society in the way he wanted it to move. And in disillusionment, perhaps, he's retired more and more from the public scene and is doing other things. Does that make sense?

**PK:** Yes it does, with what we are talking about. It seems to me it's the birth of something that has been called Funk Art.

**JH:** But also we're talking about something which I feel is rather new to America.

**PK:** Well, it's not art-for-art's sake.

**JH:** And it was a common factor in Europe all through the century even up to the time of Duchamp.

**PK:** Well, what about Wally Hedrick? Which figure would you point out as crucial or seminal to the realization — in terms of works of art — of this sensibility?

**JH:** It's pretty near impossible to actually spell that out, or to say that this figure or that figure is, but certainly Wally's mind, I think, more than the product he wound up as representing himself, is of primary significance in this way. I think he's much more a preconceptualist than perhaps any of the others. The products, the paintings, and the objects that he created are really more expressions of an idea that he had to start with and then gave form to, than any of the others I can think of.

**PK:** Like the spirit paintings and the junk constructions?

**JH:** The black series, you can almost divide them up into series with Wally just because of the concentrated focus that he gives at each change in period.

**PK:** Do you see any precedent or any background for this development in the Bay Area? It seems that it sprung up all by itself.

**JH:** But it didn't. There was during the war years or during the years very shortly after the war, the artists like Jim McCrae, Ed Corbett, Dixon, were discussing these factors and injecting them into their paintings, into their public doings. A man like David Simpson, for instance, decided that he wanted to be essentially a painter, and the things he does as a painter he definitely and clearly considered an expression that was marketable, that is acceptable to society.

**PK:** So he didn't feel or bring any of his personal or social views into the work of art, is this what you're saying?

**JH:** I think so. But in reverse of being anti-social, he made up his mind that he wanted to be a member of society. Now whether he's ever spelled it out just that simply is a separate case, I'm sure. In talking with him, I've been able to discuss his painting as painting and color as color and these things without the social commentary being the primary issue, you see.

**PK:** Well if this development became an important part of the Bay Area art scene, the characteristic part, where does that leave the so-called Bay Area Figurative School? Those artists, Diebenkorn, Park, supposedly grew out of a gestural background. Yet I think it would be pretty hard to say that like Wally Hedrick or Bruce Conner there's much social consciousness in their work. How does that fit into the picture — do you see a parallel?

**JH:** I really think it is another counter expression to the anti-social, in which they set themselves on that side of the issue knowingly. They wanted to be painters first and their products to be a representation of their ability to paint. I think it had its origins in the period of the thirties when the American Scene and the meaning of the American scene imagery was most important. It was a little self-conscious on their part. They were going counter to abstract expressionism, and they went by choice and by group discussion. Their deciding to paint figuratively was to paint images that they and their non-painter friends could take issue with and see more directly. It was not possible for that wide a public to become involved with the other forms, with the abstract form, for instance.

**PK:** In other words, you feel, and I assume that this is based on conversations with some of the artists involved, that they were consciously endeavoring to make the images more accessible to wider audience?

**JH:** In a sense, yes. Really in knowing that a figure painted on canvas could be picked up and felt directly by an audience. Now I know for a fact that it was not for commercial reasons that they were

doing this. It was an aesthetic position that they were taking and a philosophic position. They felt in a way that they were just like everybody else and that what they were doing should be important to everybody else and should be enjoyed or studied by direct experience.

**PK:** In a way, it was an aesthetic decision with the so called Bay Area Figurative School, they were concerned with esthetics, with art, and an audience.

**JH:** As a part of an audience.

**PK:** Whereas the "Funk" artists, Hedrick, Conner and so forth, their decision was not primarily an aesthetic one, an aesthetic reaction. In both cases it was something of a reaction against what had gone before, establishment art — I don't want to over-simplify this but, you have an aesthetic movement on the part of the Bay Area Figurative painters, but you can't really say that about the Funk.

**JH:** I think you can.

**PK:** Good.

**JH:** I think you can in terms of anti-aesthetic. It's the opposite of an established aesthetic, and its very deep nature as anti-aesthetic gives it a very strong aesthetic position in the end. That makes it very real, just as the Dada movement in Europe in its beginnings could not really be looked at as having any aesthetic convictions. Very shortly after it had developed, the rest of the world took issue with it on an aesthetic basis.

**PK:** Right. But still it seems there's an added element in the work of Bruce Conner and related souls. The element of social commentary is very explicit in some of Bruce Conner's work, no question about it. Even with Wally Hedrick.

**JH:** You're talking about that hot thing we've just accepted of Bruce's for the collection, one of his fetish bags.

**PK:** But there's that added element it seems to me with Wally Hedrick, say with the beer cans, there's a conservation concern in much of Hedrick's work.

**JH:** Hedrick was not concerned with conserving beer cans.

**PK:** No, no. But an interest in the trash of civilization, the debris, and implicit, it seems to me, is again a social statement — but I want to choose my words carefully — there's a statement about the world, about life, and most painting is something like this. What I'm trying to do is draw a line between Diebenkorn and that group . . . .

**JH:** But the need here is for a broader picture of aesthetic values. Art is a product of the society, at no time can it be considered from purely an aesthetic position, distinct from social commentary. I think it's only the nature of the emphasis at a particular time that makes this occur. Your description of Wally's idea of the best Funk Art, which did not come out in the exhibition at the Legion, I think, puts it right out in front, you know. It is in its very self-conscious avoidance of all the references to art, to an object of worth, of social acceptance, that you could possibly contrive. That imaginary object, if I'd known about it I would have wanted to show it instead of the Christmas tree that I found so delightful.

**PK:** He talked about that, by the way.

**JH:** He did?

**PK:** He said it attacked some woman at the reception, is that right?

**JH:** It attacked some woman's child because the child started reaching into the mechanism, and it was for real, you know.

**PK:** That's certainly anti-social, there's no question about that.

**JH:** Very much so. Aggressively so. But I think what I'm getting at is that this damn country we live in is, and has been for years, of such a nature that the forms of value and aesthetic consideration of the past are really no longer valid today. In this country, we're structured in such a way that anybody can talk and should talk, should voice their opinions of worth. That means from the most idiotic persons to those who are considered geniuses. All these voices and these thoughts and these gestural activities have to be the form that this civilization has to deal with aesthetically. That which is most deeply concerned with formal abstraction is a product of this culture and this civilization, but I think as time goes on, we must realize that that does not represent anything but a very small portion of the important voices and attitudes of a country. I'm really taking a sort of Whitmanesque position, I know, and a Whitmanesque picture is a monster in its implications, but I suspect only such a form of idea is truly valid to an aesthetic that can be a product of this country.

**PK:** And you see both the funk artists and the Bay Area Figurative painters as fitting into this phenomenon as you describe it.

**JH:** This extraordinary phenomena is just now being spelled out.

**PK:** I gather then that we've established two concurrent tendencies in the fifties growing out of the dominant abstract expressionism of the late forties. Maybe the thing to do trace how these developed during the fifties, the changes that took place, and especially those aspects that seem somehow to be characteristic to the Bay Area, to San Francisco: what you feel were the important strains and then some of the individuals involved as well.

**JH:** I wish I were better with dates. If I sit down and get enough literature about me I can usually construct a chronology.

**PK:** Well, we can plug some dates in.

**JH:** Yet dates and people and their activities together can be of value to a thing like this. But without that , . . .

**PK:** Well, perhaps a loose, general . . . .

**JH:** It has to be very loose and very general. You do know that in the middle fifties, a number of the artists found gallery representation in the community, and in that sense then, their work began to become important to communities outside of the Bay Area: the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, and Irving Blum and Walter Hopps, coming up to the Bay Area because they'd been hearing rumors about the wild things that were going on here and that this was the intellectual center for the artists of the West. And what was happening during those years that made this interesting whisper campaign occur was that the Art Institute had instructors like Hedrick, Fred Martin, Roy De Forest . . . Who else? David Simpson, Julius Wasserstein, people who were instructors at the school and at the same time were exhibiting constantly in galleries, here in the museum and in galleries such as the East and West Gallery on Fillmore, a gallery called The Six, King Ubu Gallery, a little later, the



New Mission Gallery. They were really devised as spaces for the artists to show their work, but they were also places for the galleries to capture an audience for an evening; a good deal of discussion and dialogue could occur in those places. At the same time, what was being discussed would be seen on the walls. Hassel Smith was another one. The thing, I think, that was most exciting was not a very eloquent discussion but a very heated, emotional involvement through words, where they could sit in front of an audience and swear at each other and say "You're awful", and the other one could come back and say, "The hell I am, you're even worse", and so forth. It was an emotionally tense thing that everybody got excited about and it became quite apparent that these were vital people and artists expressing themselves directly and in an involved way, in spite of the simplicity with which I spelled it out, about the meaning of what they were doing. It gave the atmosphere in the middle fifties a bigger quality than the inter-artist communication of the periods before. It was a semi-public expression, or display, where people like Bill Rolfe, the collector, could come for an evening and be entertained by the activity.

**PK:** It still must have been a rather limited audience, though, I can't imagine people walking in off the street.

**JH:** It was, but by comparison to other periods, you see, it was a wider audience.

**PK:** Did you go to some of them?

**JH:** I went to some of them, yes, both those at the galleries and the ones that were going on at the school during those years. I think another factor that moved things along constantly were these annuals that became bigger and bigger and more involved with each year. The artists themselves became aware of the importance of this annual event, which by this time had resolved to one annual event that included all the mediums. So they began to produce things just for the annuals, you see.

**PK:** That sounds like the Academy in France.

**JH:** Exactly, it develops in the same way, and they knew damn well what they presented for that exhibition was going to be discussion material for the community for the next year, and so those were contributing factors. Now, again, the schools, and I think it has to be not just the Art Institute, but the University of California and San Francisco State, had on their staffs these people who had grown up out of that first movement and were bent on projecting it — the atmosphere, at least, its character — to the generations and so a person like Seymour Locke was very effective with a group of youngsters who began to turn out works that were challenging in this way, really by Seymour Locke's promotional drive, his interest in it and his ability to communicate to other artists and to the community. Things that happened in the schools were very important. The Bay Area grew larger in those years from the middle fifties on. Figures like Roy De Forest were winding up in Davis after a short trip to his home country. He comes back and winds up in Davis, teaching. David Simpson leaves the area and goes to a little college up around Sacramento, and then begins to create a group of students up there who are inspired by him. What had started from a relatively small focal center, gets spread out to a wider area and the very fact of its vitality creates . . . .

**PK:** Let me try to pin you down again, one more time. Are we still talking basically about an art form that could be somehow associated with Funk?

**JH:** No. Not exclusively, because I think it would be wrong to say that Bay Area art was just that, that everything that was produced was of this nature and important because it was. I think the form, if you can say that an area has a form, is much wider and more involved than if you're talking

about just the Funk thing as the significant movement. A painting of Roy De Forest, for instance, certainly shows itself to be a product of a great many influences: funk art, funk thinking, of long-lived concerns for other factors. Who's another one who's prominent today?

**PK:** William Wiley.

**JH:** A man like William Wiley is, I think, significant today for the same reason. His work contains elements that in many ways are anti-funk. They're constructively conceptual in character. We have to think of funk art as a protest art first, in its origins, and protest in the wildest form imaginable, so that what lives today as valid Bay Area art is really much more involved, more alive than just protest.

**PK:** Is there a shared concern, something in common, if there is such a thing, which would distinguish art of this area — does it have a special stamp?

**JH:** It seems to have a very special quality that I can only give form to by relating it to people art rather than an exclusive art.

**PK:** Well, it's certainly not formalism.

**JH:** No. It's not minimalist, it's not aimed at a section of society that is superior to any other section of the country, or class of people, or what will you. It comes near to being aimed at John Doe and Harry Smith.

**PK:** It's a democratic art, I suppose.

**JH:** It's a democratic art, maybe you could put it that way.

**PK:** And what about the literary quality that it seems to have so often, even the use of words and letters?

**JH:** Right. The use of things like that in Cubism, in 1910 and '11, had something of the same significance, but in the art here, it goes even further. Graffiti on public walls is as often as not part of the image. That sort of popular expression has a context in the paintings that can be looked at as folk art, as a product based on folk art. Now, there again, I think we'll find that that kind of art does feature the literary connection: the word connected to the art form that makes it understandable and readable to a less specialized group. I think that's the only form I could give of that nature. But I suspect most of the artists object to simplifications.

**PK:** Well, of course, that's understandable. Another question, when did the artists of the local art community develop an awareness that what was being done here was a greater than regional significance, of national or international significance? Do you have any observations on that?

**JH:** I think you only have to look back about ten years, about the middle of the sixties to find this occurring. It occurred as part of the annuals. I remember seeing it first in works by youngsters who had just begun to mature.

**PK:** Do you have a couple of names?

**JH:** One of them I was trying to recall. One of them, of course, quite prominent, is Alvin Light.

**PK:** Alvin Light.

**JH:** Another one is a fellow who I haven't had contact with for quite some time, Molitor, who was a part of the Jim Newman, Dilexi Gallery, stable.

**PK:** As an aside, did the Dilexi have something to do with focusing . . . .

**JH:** It was very important. Very, very much so, because anybody who came to town felt they, from the very beginning, had to go to find out what was going on at the Dilexi Gallery, and Jim couldn't pay the rent from all of this. With his prominence, his gallery was absolutely recognized nationally at least, and to some small degree, internationally, as a very important place to see what was going on. Another figure who is not here, as far as I know, Anderson, not Jeremy Anderson but another Anderson. He came up from the south . . . .

[END OF INTERVIEW]