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Oral history interview with Larry Rivers, 1968
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Larry Rivers on November 2, 1968. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: Paul Cummings talking to Larry Rivers. Why don't we just . . . You can talk about growing up in New York.

LARRY RIVERS: Growing up in New York?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, some family background. Are there other children besides you?

LARRY RIVERS: There are two sisters who live in New York, also. I think that from the point of view of are any of the other kids at home like you. . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they're obviously not like you.

LARRY RIVERS: Are they in the arts or anything? Not at all. They like the idea that I do this, or that people see my work, or that every so often they see my work. But I somehow realize that I don't have any interest in that. I don't see them very much although they live here. When I see them, I like them. It isn't so bad. I don't know what that has to do with our subject.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're really kind of independent of them?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes, I suppose so. I mean you can't really have a certain kind of conversation with them. Until recently, as a matter of fact, everything to them sounded like criticism. Perhaps I was hard. I don't know. But they really are a very small part of my life now. I don't know what talking about them will do. I like them. When I was a kid, I liked them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your parents still live in the Bronx?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. My father died the other day on 49th Street. It sounds funny, but he died on the sidewalk. I was on 48th Street about 20 minutes before that. So then I had to choose the casket and clothes. By the time I went down to sort of the cellar of this funeral parlor, I had gotten so sort of hilarious about the whole thing I started asking the people if I could get into the coffin to test if it was comfortable enough for my father.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It must have shaken them up a little bit.

LARRY RIVERS: It's entirely irregular here. And I just didn't . . . But I mean it was funny being down there. Actually I found myself choosing a casket which . . . There's a certain kind of wood that, if you put umber oil paint on it . . . I remember sometimes I used to strip my own paintings; and, when I put umber and then rubbed it with a rag, it was like that. So I found myself choosing a casket that looked like that. I thought it was curious.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you got into the music thing very, very, very early, didn't you?

LARRY RIVERS: I played piano when I was seven, and I started the saxophone when I was 12.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were the kids in the neighborhood interested in music?

LARRY RIVERS: I don't know how it was. It's hard to define, some pressure of being . . . It's hard to characterize now because practically as far back as I remember, I was playing saxophone. I played with the high school marching bands and all that. And I remember that when I was a kid, there were still -- like they used the word "hot lick." Do you remember that term? When I was in this marching band, I remember I had a "hot lick" that I used to play for all the guys; and they all used to come around and say, "Hey, play the 'hot lick' for Tonio". But I kept playing, and I got jobs in the Catskills and all that kind of thing. I think that was probably instrumental in my being thrown in with black guys and becoming curious about them. That's been something that's been in my life in a way that it hasn't been for a lot of people I know. I mean they don't know on a personal social level any blacks. But the thing is that I think I was thrown off. I think that the music and jazz thing attracted certain blacks, too, who weren't very much like all other blacks. And so I think that most people, let's say artists, who have met blacks have met that kind of jazzy nightclub-oriented . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: More show biz.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. I think that what has happened recently and has kind of shocked the white person who thinks he has an impeccable record as far as that's concerned is that the communication he thought existed with that kind of chatter is really very superficial. I mean it didn't really range out into the black community to the degree that he thought. I mean it didn't have that much in common with blacks, and he didn't identify with them as much as he thought he did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it was a kind of musical thing where everybody met.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes, or something. It's funny that, if you have some kind of attraction no matter what alterations take place to your idea of something, something keeps you at it. I don't know what it is. It still hasn't stopped.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you still play around, don't you?

LARRY RIVERS: I still play. Also I suppose that drugs also are some sort of connection. The blacks who were interested in jazz and things like that -- interested in drugs -- enter the white situation somewhere along the line.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. That's true.

LARRY RIVERS: Recently I met quite a few black artists, and it's kind of oblate. It really gets to be hard to know exactly what is black about the situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, it does.

LARRY RIVERS: Suddenly I felt baffled. I spent seven months in Africa and came back saying there isn't anything you can say about black people that you couldn't say about, say, pink people except that they're black.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They're still people.

LARRY RIVERS: Well, yes, but I mean it's skin. That's really quite strong. I was thinking that, if you were a painter . . . I always used to put down those ideas which many painters have that there is something different about an artist -- that he had a certain kind of mind or he had a certain way of behaving. I sort of thought it was hogwash. But I was just thinking that there must be something about what looking at things does to you. In other words, we look at that silver can. I look at it. I now am beginning to believe that I'm not a painter just by mistake. There must be something about my "looking" that has an effect on me more totally than other people. And so I was thinking that black skin has a certain effect on me. It isn't as if it's just that one has black skin. There's brown skin; there's blue skin. It reaches . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: It turns something on.

LARRY RIVERS: I don't know what it is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. But do you find the same kind of relationship with music as you do with visual things?

LARRY RIVERS: No. It's more physical. It's more effective at the moment and then you don't think about it so much. Whereas, painting is like a milder physical sensation which seems to leave you more in the mood to think about it when you're not even doing it -- like the relationships between the work and the world or the work and other artists or the work and other people in painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. So the music really is more direct and more emotional.

LARRY RIVERS: More like sex.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sometimes before.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. A few times.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get into Juilliard . . . because you were kind of young, weren't you, when you went?

LARRY RIVERS: I was a musician, right? And I'd never even thought about art. I was the first sort of soldier . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. You'd been in the . . .

LARRY RIVERS: Public Law 16 was a little different than the GI Bill of Rights. It's a rehabilitation program. I was supposed to have been ruined physically by my experience in the Army.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you?

LARRY RIVERS: I don't think so. It was like a routine signature. I was being discharged from the Army. There was a girl at a desk typing who was about to hand you your papers, and you'd go through a gate and you were out. And she said, "Do you want to sign up for a pension?" I said, "Well, do you think I should?" She said, "Well, why not. It won't do you any harm." I said, "Okay." The next thing I know, I'm getting this 50% disability. I mean it was determined that I was 50% ruined, you know, or something. And they gave me a pension. That's the cover of a little poetry by Kenneth Koch that I made.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that's going to be published, right?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were in what? The Army Air Force?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. I was in the Army Air Force. First I was in the band at Fort Dix. I hung around because I was a musician. I went to see guys in the band. Some guy got sick at Tenafly. See, they sent me home. I had a pass. About two days after I got in the Army, I got sent home. So I got my saxophone. That means like, I have a pass. My parents see me. "What are you doing here?" So I played with them for about a month. Then the reason for joining had to be met. I took tests and all that. I seemed to be assigned to a communications school. So I took radar and Morse code. Actually, I got to a point where I could accept 25 words a minute, you know, a certain speed. It was unbelievable. I was out in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where there was nothing to do but to try and get what they had in mind for you. There were days -- I'm not exaggerating -- when it was 40 degrees below zero.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, I know. The winter out there is terrible.

LARRY RIVERS: Below zero, 40 degrees! We used to go around with towels on our head.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the disability thing come along?

LARRY RIVERS: I guess they didn't notice that I had a tremor or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

LARRY RIVERS: But, at any rate, it didn't matter. They took on the responsibility. I sort of had a tremor. They didn't know exactly what was wrong with me. I had many signs which pointed to a certain rather serious disease -- it was multiple sclerosis, actually. And considering that, when I finally entered school at Hofmann's, there were guys in the class who had multiple sclerosis who in about two or three years were in a wheelchair; and obviously after two or three years I seemed to be holding up rather well, at least physically. So they altered it after a while. But at first they really thought I had multiple sclerosis. And here I am still on this earth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Working away. What did you study at Juilliard? That was your first professional musical training, wasn't it?

LARRY RIVERS: Oh, I studied composition. I even learned how to listen to music and write down what I heard, which is quite tough, very tough.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you written any music? Have you composed anything?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes, little things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you like it?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. It's fun. I still play the piano. But it's like anything else; it's limited. I didn't really go into it in such a way that I couldn't get out of it and somehow was able to think to myself that painting was more important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, after Juilliard for a couple of years before you went to Hofmann. How did you start painting with all this music activity?

LARRY RIVERS: I tell you I went on the road with a band. Actually, I quit Juilliard at the end of the year because I was offered . . . I guess I was 20 or 21. I got offered a job to play. So I thought that was really what I wanted to do. So I went on the road with bands. There was a guy in the band who turned out to be sort of my best friend. (Interruption for phone)

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were saying about a job after Juilliard and you were on the road.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes, I was offered this job with a band. I took it. And I went on the road. As I say, I met this man

who was a pianist, whose wife was an artist. There came one point in our travels where the members of the band were able to invite . . . It was in a certain part of Maine and close enough to New York -- where we were playing -- so the members of the orchestra could invite up whom they wanted. Well, this guy's wife came along. She was sort of an artist. I mean she wasn't that much; she was just a young girl. But she and I used to go for walks because the guys used to play cards, which was a very boring idea of how to spend an afternoon. And she talked about art. The three of us, she and her husband and myself, used to sit down sometimes and start to draw and try different things. I had some very funny idea of what modern art was -- some sort of Indian design. I'm sorry I don't have those first things; they're quite funny. It was like, say, shaped like that. There'd be a color, and something that looked like something that you'd recognize, some symbol like maybe an Indian or I don't know what, and then another color. They never separated; they were all in the same flat. But then, when I came to New York after this engagement, she kept coming around. And it became she and I on another level. She told me how her life had changed, how she thought she could no longer continue with her husband. So she came to see me quite a bit. That's how I decided to go to Hofmann. I think she did, too. What I mean to say is, on the one hand, she kind of opened up things for me, which in a way was not so much what she was up to but what she was experienced with. In other words, she had thought about art. She had done some painting but had been neglecting it on the basis of, I guess, of being a wife. But then, when she saw that their life was falling apart, she began to feel that it was a possible start again. So we both went to Hofmann. It was quite exciting for me. And that's what happened. So that's how I started at Hofmann. That's what you were asking me, isn't it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Right.

LARRY RIVERS: It was a combination of everything in a way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She was really the beginning of . . .

LARRY RIVERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was she? Is she still around? Does she paint?

LARRY RIVERS: She's a painter. Actually, she's Jane Freilicher. She's now married to another man. She has exhibitions at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Great work. Great, great work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find the Hofmann classes? I've talked to a couple of other people who were in them, and they said they were usually jammed.

LARRY RIVERS: Well, don't forget it was right after the war. It was quite funny. My musician's world outfits were still part of . . . I used to come to school with these big pants I used to wear. In those days, they were called zoot suits. So it was quite funny. I mean no one understood exactly what was going on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you were younger than most of the other students, too, weren't you?

LARRY RIVERS: Well, yes. No. I guess I was 23 at the time. So that wasn't so young. Up to a point not too long ago, I used to see some of the people I knew at the Hofmann school. Like Nick Carone was one of the students, I think. I kept seeing them for a few years. But then somehow, not that I kept up . . . I mean it wasn't a thing like I kept going to parties or things like that. It's just that I would run into them. Now I don't even see them. I don't even know where they are. There are guys I know who went out West.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, some guys change. It comes and goes.

LARRY RIVERS: Well, surely you'll have to say something more interesting than that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you study with Hofmann?

LARRY RIVERS: What do you mean, what?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I mean you had no formal art training before that of any kind, and some of the other people going there had, I gather. So did you find it difficult?

LARRY RIVERS: I don't think it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It didn't make any difference?

LARRY RIVERS: I didn't even think about it. Actually, there was no way of knowing that anybody had any formal art training. I mean, it was hard to know from four blobs if anybody had some formal art training, at least from my point of view. So, I didn't think about it. I sort of got the message rather quickly that it was about a lot of different things. So I tried a lot of different things. And finally I got to a point where somehow I began drawing naturalistically. I sort of thought, oh, well, somehow an artist, if he wants to draw . . . And so it was like an

identification with an older form, I guess, which gave me the how to go on. In other words, even though I may have been wrong, which is perhaps . . . Really by that time, it was all over -- that idea of an artist being someone who could draw. I went ahead and did it. I don't know what constitutes an artist. This is some sort of activity that I had to do. But, I was wrong. But, so what?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you study drawing with Hofmann?

LARRY RIVERS: No. How could you study drawing with him? I mean, his thing was not about that. He never discouraged me, though. As a matter of fact, I know that he thought I was something. You know what I mean? He had some kind of grudging respect that someone would do things like that in his class. I used to meet him and go for long walks. He liked me. And I liked him. There still was that kind of thing where there is a teacher, but somehow I think it was very sentimental. The feeling now is that the student is as good as the professor. I don't believe that. He was different. Maybe I'm wrong.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you study drawing with anyone?

LARRY RIVERS: No, I didn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You taught yourself?

LARRY RIVERS: I taught myself if one wants to think . . . Some people think it's something. It's very funny that I'm thought of as a person who has technical ability. I don't know where it comes from. I don't even know what they're talking about. Because each drawing that I do still is nothing that I have gone through which really convinces me that I'm going to get it. A lot of times I think to myself . . . I know I got in the past a lot and was able to draw something I was looking at. But then I don't know. It seems to me that. . . Now maybe no one knows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Maybe it's just a talent.

LARRY RIVERS: It's something. I'm accused of being slick. People think that I sit around all day long and try to figure out technical innovations. I have no interest in that at all. As a matter of fact now, for the last five or six years, I project images. I don't know. I've proved to myself I can draw.

PAUL CUMMINGS: About the drawing. . . Did you do drawings from casts ever and all that sort of thing, or illustrations, or models?

LARRY RIVERS: No. I never liked that. It just seemed too boring. Whatever I did

PAUL CUMMINGS: . . . out of your head?

LARRY RIVERS: Well, no. I can't draw out of my head. I cannot draw a thing out of my head. Always I have to look at something. I can't make it up. I can make up a dumb face like this. But even that is sort of something I don't like to do. I wish I don't believe it. Now, looking doesn't mean that I just go for what I see but it provides the kind of complication that makes my way of thinking more fit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It gets you going.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. Otherwise, I can't. That's absolutely true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've done an awful lot of traveling.

LARRY RIVERS: Where?

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Europe and Africa.

LARRY RIVERS: In my day, well, oh yes, Africa. Do you think for the average life it's a lot? I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I don't know. I guess the world is made up of a small group of travelers. And then people stay at home sometimes. How did you get involved with the \$64,000 Question thing?

LARRY RIVERS: I was just asked. I think that the TV people asked the Museum of Modern Art to suggest a number of people. And I think they suggested me considering, I suppose, having seen me at parties; and, in general, the way I behaved, they probably figured that fellow certainly isn't scared of people. It certainly was a big show. So they suggested me, and I think they suggested other people. And those people went. And those people tried to be on it. Maybe Phil Guston was one. But I think that quality of, shall we say, bull shit, talk, or entertainment, or something. . . Maybe because I was a musician, I really think I sort of relaxed in front of people. At any rate, they chose me; and I went on the program. It was something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Lots of fun?

LARRY RIVERS: Well, it certainly changed a lot of things for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did it change things?

LARRY RIVERS: Well, I suddenly went from having something like \$2000 in the bank to something like \$40,000. And it's ruining at the same time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It made a lot of things possible, though.

LARRY RIVERS: No, I didn't change very much. I mean all it did was whatever I thought I needed for my work. I know it sounds like a lot of very homey kind of talk, but I never would allow myself. . . I would indulge myself to the point of insanity with the work, like I would buy five of everything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So really, it all sort of went right back into the studio then?

LARRY RIVERS: I don't see how it changed me. I don't know. Maybe I could buy people in a way that I couldn't before, which was nice. I wish I could buy more people. I mean I think that my life with women improved.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the notoriety always attracts them.

LARRY RIVERS: Well, that kind of thing, yes. But, actually, I could do things for people. I could give somebody a hundred bucks, and it could make such a difference. You could get an apartment. In those days, if you gave someone a hundred dollars, you really could do something for them. Well then, they're going to do something for you, I suppose.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true.

LARRY RIVERS: So, I suppose that's what happened. I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where along the line did you pick up all the art information? Did you study? Or read?

LARRY RIVERS: I studied, yes. I took time out to really try to get it. And they gave more or less the areas in which there would be questions and all that. Now it had a strange thing. I didn't know that there was another guy who was getting the answers. So, my thing was a combination of fantastic luck which is too boring to go into. I mean I could show you what happened. But then the second time I was on I got so cynical that I didn't care. I just said, "Listen, if you don't give me the answers, I'm not going to go on." I called them up sort of the day before. So they wouldn't. They would think, oh, Larry is disgusting. You know, actually, Lenny Bernstein's sister was the director of the thing. What are we going to go on to now?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you mentioned Nell Blaine as one of the early art people you know.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She was teaching somewhere, wasn't she?

LARRY RIVERS: Oh, not that I know of. But, why did you bring that up?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, she just mentioned that one time to me.

LARRY RIVERS: Where she met me?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

LARRY RIVERS: Oh, no. I met her years ago in a completely different situation. It was during the days when I was still a musician. This girl, Jane Freilicher, was visiting her. We were between jobs, and so I went with her and her husband. And that's what it really is about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. It's a social thing.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. She was in a way the first artist I knew. She was fantastic, you know. On top of it, she was sort of queer. So I thought there was some connection between when you're in the art world or something like that, maybe you're queer -- like you'd have to be queer. I don't know, but it didn't matter. The first inkling that I got that that's what it was, I accepted it -- thought it was very good. Then, I think in 1948, I went to Provincetown and she had a place up there. She was already a rather advanced painter in relation to myself -- like she had a style. She was a lot like Leger and Helion. She used to paint every day, which was unheard of. I then met people like Hyde Solomon, Al Kresch. They were very sweet but pale for some reason. I didn't think

about it too much when I was younger -- like these are my friends. They paint. We'd go around and see each other's work. And then in about 1949, I met John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch; and in 1950 I met Frank O'Hara. That was sort of the beginning of another much more sexy, more groovy situation. They had more energy. They had more sexuality. They had more ego, drive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: More flamboyant.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. They seemed to be more equal to my notion of what things should be about. I didn't even formulate it. I realize now that that's what it was about. But you continue to see other people on the basis of sentimentality. Then the poetry became more important to me. I used to read their work. I even began to try to write poetry. I'd see Frank O'Hara every day, walk around and talk. It was at that stage where, if I went away for a little while, we'd send seven or eight letters. It was like an excuse to write letters. Our lives seemed to be a combination of . . . well, life was. . . But then it became a lot of literature like we do things, you know.

(Interruption for phone]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You knew Edwin Denby, too?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was he earlier?

LARRY RIVERS: He was earlier, because I met him through Rudy Burckhardt. That's when I met Kenneth Koch. He was like a very sweet Swiss. I don't know what I thought he did. I think I thought of him as a photographer, but he also made films. He made a film which I was in, also John Ashbery and Jane Freilicher. It was called Mounting Tension. I'm an artist. A girl wanders into my studio. She thought it was a dry cleaning establishment. I think I was 26, no 29, I believe. So she came in. I have been painting, but I'm playing my saxophone sort of. So it had everything that still continues to be thought about me. It's really very funny. You can't drop anything; I mean it's wild. I'm painting, and I'm looking at my work. I walk back to my easel and, of course, it ends up Picasso. She comes in and I try to grab her and I talk to her. But she runs away. I'm searching all over the city for her. We actually went through the city. I got behind some perfectly strange girls and did very funny things. They turned around and yelled. She meanwhile has a boy friend and tells this boy friend about art. He doesn't like art; he likes baseball. Of course, it's John Ashbery, which is quite funny. There's a scene in which he's swinging a bat in the Museum of Modern Art and a guard tells him, "Hey, stop that." And there's a confrontation. She finally winds her way back to my studio. I think I have gone to a psychiatrist to tell her I'm so disturbed by this girl. And the final outcome is a fight between myself and her boy friend. Then everything gets settled. The psychiatrist goes with this guy who likes to play baseball, and he's painting her in Brooklyn -- in the park in Brooklyn. What's the name of that park?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Prospect Park.

LARRY RIVERS: Prospect Park. I'm in a boat with this girl playing my saxophone -- in a rowboat. Then I see them. He's painting her on the shore, and I wave to them. And I fall in the water. I mean, we did it with all our clothes on. That's the end. And that's what Rudy wants me. . . I liked it, and I liked the idea. I liked also his idea that everything else was pretentious, but he was unpretentious. Then I thought that, well, there's something nice about pretension, too. So I think that I moved somewhere else with Frank O'Hara probably being the most important intellectual influence in the sense of his opinions being very important to me -- in a way almost too important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How so -- too important?

LARRY RIVERS: Well, I mean he could really almost intimidate me with things he would say. Actually, he had a certain kind of maniacal brain and a certain way of flashing anger and withdrawing that made him quite something to deal with. He was very upsetting and, at the same time, very exciting. We'd go for walks. We'd go to the museums in those days. Then, of course, other people began paying attention to us. We had the admiration of our close friends. Then suddenly there were other people who were admiring. But it didn't matter because I think he understood that his opinions and my relationship with him was really probably the most important. But, you know, life goes its way. But we were close right up to the time he died actually. As a matter of fact, I think that the reason I was very upset about his death, aside from the sort of idiotic way he went, was that, as you become more and more sort of known or your work is -- I don't say that my work is accepted -- but that my presence in the art world is like maybe a painter. . . They ask a lot of people why I'm here, and there's nothing they can do about it. You really have fewer and fewer meaningful individuals seeing what you're doing. He remained right to the end someone who'd come over. He'd say, "What are you doing?" I'd say, "Why don't you come over?" So he would come over. And it wasn't out of an official relationship with the Museum of Modern Art. It was his relationship to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. And we collaborated. He also depended on my opinions in some way--my response to his poetry -- I think perhaps not to the degree that I relied on his. He was less apt to be preoccupied about himself in public, whereas wherever I am I can suddenly react by myself. So the main topic of conversation, I suppose, at the beginning of any visit would be my work. I did take his opinions rather seriously. I remember one that I took that I kind of regret. In about 1962, there was that rather decisive break in the hold that certain abstract work, certain men had over the other painters. Though it may sound as if I'm bragging, I think I may have had quite a bit to do with that. I knew them. At the same time, their influence was not as decisive at that point. And, actually, with things like George Washington and also when I began to do playing cards and automobiles and cigarette packs, which you see a lot. Then, I think that slowly their influence was now a silent thing which entered the work of other artists but now so much verbally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The immediacy.

LARRY RIVERS: Yes. And Rauschenberg and I were closer also at this time. I remember he suggested that the playing cards that I had made be put in one room called the card room. Frank, being more oriented to romantic paintings like the abstract painting where each work is like a certain thing, felt that that would then mean that I really had a thematic schematic and that the intention of the work would lie outside of the way it was done, which was true. But I didn't understand so much of what was going on in my work. Frank said, "No, don't put them in one room." I also had done a lamp (?) that I wanted outside the gallery downstairs. He couldn't understand that. Now, when you think about what people are doing like that, it seems silly. So I rejected Rauschenberg's advice and accepted Frank's, since I suppose in some way our relationship was also involved. I mean, it would be bad if he suggested it and I went against him. He was much more influential than Bob. Now actually I keep thinking about that decision. I think that it would have been quite important because in a way Bob seemed to understand the theater of an opening night, the theater aspect of it. Whereas, Frank still thought it was just about the work, and he was wrong, really, in a way. It has come to be. . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's an event now.

LARRY RIVERS: It's an event, yes. But then, in the long run, you could also think that having failed to establish a certain very clear, but perhaps limited identity, I may have saved myself a lot of serious chagrin. I don't know. As the years go on now, it seems I don't know where my work is to be placed or anything like that. People whose work had been able to be placed seemed to bog down in some kind of conflict about whether to give up this identity. I've never been identified even to myself, so there's nothing to hang on to. I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You just keep charging along.

LARRY RIVERS: I don't know what to hang on to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Keep growing. That's interesting. Do you want to stop here?

LARRY RIVERS: Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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