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Oral history interview with David Barr, 1982
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Transcript

Interview

LA: LINDA ABRAMSKY

DB: DAVID BARR

LA: This is an interview with David Barr on December 28, 1982 for the Archives of American Art. David, can you talk a little bit about your childhood? Where you were born and where you grew up.

DB: Yes, well, I've had a typical mid-western kind of life. I grew up on the East side of Detroit. The street we lived on had about three houses on it when we moved in. It's all completely suburbs now. One of my big memories is that there were fields and pheasants and a creek with spawning pike in it. There was a lot of room to play, also there were not many other kids, so I was alone a lot of the early years. My father was an engineer at Chrysler's. My mother was a secretary in the public library, before that she had been a legal secretary. I'd say it was a happy childhood. I had an older sister, Robin, who was five years older than I. We were a close, supportive, healthy kind of family. There was never very much money, but I was never very aware of that. It was a cheerful household for the most part. My mother was an enlightened woman. I grew up with the concepts of feminism. I loved literature and reading. Throughout all my childhood we all read a lot. I didn't see television until I

[Break in taping]

DB:... and concern

LA: When did you show an interest in art?

DB: Not till college. In the fifties as children, boys my age were either going to be a doctor, maybe a lawyer or an engineer. So I was supposed to be an engineer. I went to Wayne University in Detroit. I had constant headaches and felt like I was tossed on a foreign beach some place because I couldn't relate to anything that was going on there.

LA: Well, let's just back up a little bit. Before that, in high school and elementary school, you didn't show any kind of interest at all in art?

DB: Not especially. Not especially. I did, I think, in elementary. I had one teacher that probably the most important teacher outside of probably one or two in high school, was my first and second grade teacher, Miss Segala, who I do remember very fondly. I was short anyway, so I was this little tiny guy who was never chosen on any of the teams or never did very well in the beginning things in school. I remember her encouraging me to make things out of clay, and make sculptures and make things. That gave me great satisfaction. And again, I can't remember really being other than an occasional few drawings and things, but never really getting any art classes at all until years later.

LA: Was that because you were in a program that you didn't

DB: Yes, I didn't know that there was such a thing as an artist or what they would do or what went on. I was very naive about the whole thing. And when I got to Wayne I happened to meet somebody and they mentioned the art building which I didn't know where it was, but I walked through the building and I remember just sort of vibrating because when I got out of the building I made up my mind to take classes in that building. I didn't even know what classes to take. I went to a counselor and said, "I want to be in there, get me in there." I know my people were in there. I knew that's what I wanted to do. I saw them doing things that just made my heart skip.

LA: You must have been courageous in college, not having taken a course at all in high school.

DB: Yes, except I was so miserable. I don't think it takes a lot of courage to do something when you're that miserable.

LA: You were miserable at that point.

DB: Yes. Well, I was hitchhiking you know, fifteen miles to school every day. I was going ten and fifteen miles to school. I remember all I really enjoyed doing was playing basketball and hanging around the gym a lot not getting very good grades. So I did switch into art where I was among the worst in every class I was in for about two years. I'd say things started to change after that where I started to not be the worst, started to really touch some creative channels in myself.

LA: Well, having persevered....

DB: Yes, I knew it was like there wasn't any alternative. I mean I would rather be the worst artist alive and be alive and feel alive than be good at something I hated.

LA: Being an engineer.

DB: Well, I just couldn't relate to it, you know. Everyone had a slide rule on his belt and they all seemed very tense to me and very cold. I'm sure that's not true. But that's the way it was. That it just wasn't something I wanted to do. The questions that I would ask in class were things where I tended to be at that point in my career always seemed so off the wall to everybody else.

LA: Were you in engineering for a while? How long did you study it?

DB: Yes. I guess I was in the program for a year, but I started by that time to take some art classes and I got out. So that was pretty upsetting to my parents. What was an artist and what would become of me and all that, there was really no hope in any of that. However they were not negative to it. They were concerned. The message definitely was that ultimately you had to do what seemed important for you to do and in that sense they were encouraging. Now there was one example of other artists in my life. I had a cousin and an aunt, my father's sister, had done some drawings and etchings. She had very fine control in etchings. Her husband was knighted by King George of England and she has a title and all the rest of it, she was an upper-middle class British woman, very skillful in what she did. And her daughter, Val Mackintosh, whom I adore, is probably the brightest member of our entire family. She was in Cambridge when she was sixteen years old. She's an actress and has read everything and is also an artist and paints and draws. And I had two different visits with them when I was a kid, extended visits, one when I was about fifteen and before I got into art, another when I was eighteen right around the turning point when I was getting involved and both of those stays during the summer had a big effect on me, in encouraging me.

LA: Because of your adoration?

DB: Yes, and it was like they represented to me, and they still do, what a civilized human being can be, you know, what they were interested in, their conversation, their capacity for world concerns.

LA: What were they?

DB: Well, he's a nuclear scientist. So he's in the ironic position of devoting his life at one point, you know, spending years and years and years as a serious nuclear scientist convinced that he was serving mankind to then find himself viewed as a villain. Which is very, very sad and very inappropriate because he is a good human being. They live in Deep River, Ontario. As I've said, I spent a couple of boyhood summers up there. Their neighbors would have three PhD's and yet would drive a motorcycle and go trout fishing with me and things. It was just tremendously stimulating.

LA: You mentioned nature being very important to you as a child.

DB: Yes.

LA: How did you interact with nature as a young child before it became important to you?

DB: Well, let me say this, I think there's an observation that isn't the nucleus of the observation really came from Elizabeth Wilmot who is a structuralist living in Canada. She said that she noticed an interesting thing, that all of the American structuralists were born in the mid-west. Which is true. They've all fanned out not to different parts of the world but Charles Biederman, Roy Borenstein, Liz Wilmot, and people born in Cleveland and Michigan and the whole general region because there's an interesting interface that takes place in the Midwest. And if you look at it in terms of architecture that the major architecture of North America has been generated out of the mid-west with people like Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and Chicago of course, is still the center of a lot of it. And I think the reason for that is that since you've got the interface between industrialization and nature and it really takes place. New York is where people can see it, they talk about it, it's business. It's abstract, it's management. The mid-west is where they do it. Where they make it. And the typical mid-western stereotype, I'm afraid, is that the guy who works in a factory and has a camper and gets out as fast as he can, you know, he's out of his house, goes up north and fishes and hunts and does other things has a different kind of behavior than somebody who lives in New York City or somebody who lives in Boston.

LA: Are you a doer?

DB: Yes. I think that I represent that. Somebody who isn't terrified of industry. I'm not terrified of machines, but I don't find industrialization a blight on the world. It's potentially a blight, but I don't find it a blight. And it seems appropriate to work with what's at hand and yet at the same time, wanting a preserve, you know, some of the feelings about nature, that which surrounds us, and I think that's quite different than we find in the Far West and

other parts of the country. So it is a unique kind of thing and I think that's what structuralist art represents, that blend.

LA: As a child did you play a lot in the fields and study those?

DB: Yes, go for most of the day. I don't say I studied in any intelligent way, but certainly it was much more natural. It was just always there. I loved to fish, loved doing things I don't care much about right now. I loved being out in it and all of that.

LA: We were at the point in your career at college after two years when you became more confident.

DB: Somewhat more confident. I started to have a few things that, that focused on a few modest successes and I do remember the first pieces that I created, not the first thing I was doing in class. I was doing projects at home. But I remember the sense of thrill when I made the first thing that, at least to my mind, never existed before. You know, that I made something that wasn't like anything I had ever seen.

LA: Was that a relief?

DB: No, it was a full sculpture made out of pieces I had turned on a lathe and kind of resembles the crankshaft of a car. I guess that's what people called it. But I didn't think it was that at all. It was a piece of geometry. That was a sensation, that was the most intense narcotic I've ever had in my life, and that realization that I could have that again and again because I had started. The program that the counselor had thrown me into was industrial design and I think he thought, well here this guy comes from engineering and it will be perfect. And it was okay. It was the idea then that it was more tolerable both to me, middle-class me, and my parents too, in a sense that somebody could be employed as an artist. Well, within short order after my first sculpture class all I was doing was making sculptures. I was doing my projects and my other work, but in every spare minute I was making pieces of sculpture. No one then called it sculpture. I mean I was making things that didn't fit in any category. Even when I was in sculpture classes their geometric constructions and all kinds of things that within a few years I was having things accepted in Michigan shows and a national show that I couldn't get into the student show. In the fifties the art that was going on in the colleges was mostly abstract expressionist sort of thing and what I was doing was considered, they thought it was all passe and dead since 1930 so I was considered somewhat of a joke because of what I was interested in.

LA: That must have been difficult.

DB: Yes, it was. However, I was on fire by that time and to me it didn't matter I felt so strongly about that.

LA: And you made that first piece of sculpture you really knew that you were an artist.

DB: Yes, that was when I knew what I was going to be no matter what the cost. And that was when, there have been two or three times in my life where I felt anger being useful and that was one of them. I was so angry at my frustration that I was going to do what I had to do whatever it cost sort of thing. And that was one of those moments and one of those times. It that meant that the girl I was seeing wouldn't marry me, then she wouldn't marry me. If that meant that I was going to be hungry a lot in my life, then that's what it would mean, you know. It was just knowing, seeing the prices that I had to kind of pay virtually any price to do the work. I was supported, there were several people who were supportive in my life at that time as an artist. A man named Sherman Handy who wasn't a teacher at Wayne, but was employed there and who was and is a brilliant guy and who exposed me to the ideas of everything from Bertolt Brecht to E.E. Cummings, to....

LA: Who was this?

DB: Sherman Handy. He worked in the art department kind of as a technical advisor I think was his position. But he was the first one that gave me the books of Charles Biederman and some people. Not because I wasn't doing that, but because he could see where I was going anyway. And that I didn't even know. I didn't even know that there were such things as the Russian Constructivists. I was doing constructivist works without knowing, consciously at least, that they existed. And since my children were indifferent to what I was doing, and I was indifferent to them being indifferent, he gave me some books and things which really were important. Yes. A lot of those ideas and I was sort of felling a connection with the past. He, it was just the right touch. He wasn't overbearing, he himself had been a constructivist artist. A wonderful one, a very pliable one.

LA: So this was still while you were an undergraduate.

DB: Yes. Right.

LA: Can you, this is a big one, can you talk about constructivism for you personally? I mean in a historical sense how it developed, how you became affiliated.

DB: Okay, well, the kind of thing I was doing at that time was mostly out of constructivist orientation.

LA: What was it?

DB: I was most encouraged, I mean I was most interested in the work of Gabo Pevsner and the Russians in particular.

LA: What was it about their work that interested you?

DB: Well, I think that they were, they saw the machine as something that could liberate rather than something that necessarily had to enslave. Certainly it is capable of both things but that the machine could produce work that could liberate art. The constructivists were the first people to use plastics, metals, and different kinds of materials to produce art. That interested me. They were interested in a kind of democracy of art which does continue to interest me, too. That is, that artists are capable of working with materials, media, machines, that are at hand in such a way that the art can be available to more people. And everything I did and everything I've done throughout has been capable, it could be reproduced in the future. You know, ten of them could be made in the future. And I like that idea. I like that idea. To me that's the significance of photography, that's the significance of the printing press. The significance of a lot of things is that it's allowed a democracy of the arts. It's allowed it to reach out and touch a lot of people.

LA: So.

DB: Yes. That's it's the hand of the artists that's always been valued. To me it's the mind of the artist, the perception of the artist, the sensitivity of the artist. The hand of the artist is secondary. So the kinds of things I was doing was constructivist space, that is I was working with certain kinds of geometrics, a rational way of working, a way that I could explain everything I was doing and why. That kind of attitude. And I felt at that time pretty surrounded by people who were working off emotional levels and things that they definitely wanted not to explain. So it was quite alien in that way. Then I started reading the books of Biederman and was kind of put off by them. I was quite the opposite of being thrilled by them. I was interested, but I was far from being persuaded.

LA: Why were you put off by him.

DB: His tone is one of dismissing almost everybody that doesn't agree with him and attacking them pretty, almost violently. You know, the first artists I was interested in before I even got into the constructivist element were Giacometti or people you wouldn't think, you know, Arp and Giacometti, I remember liking their work or Paul Klee or somebody like that and....

LA: You responded to their work because....

DB: Well, as an early student, you know it was something I think I could understand. I think we all move through things, it's not that there are levels of sophistication and we demand more and more from them. So I was moving through them at the time. Well, to see all of that just thrown into a bucket was hard for me to take, you know, a lot of people that I respected very much. So I was confused by that I'm sure. But I began corresponding with Charles Biederman.

LA: What was it about his work that you admired so much that you would begin corresponding with him?

DB: Well, I think it was certainly, he was raising questions about nature and that was important to me and it had interested me. And the constructivists had pretty well abandoned nature. You see, their idea was that art had to emerge from the highest plane, the highest intellect of the human shouldn't be familiar or recognizable in any way. That it shouldn't be an imitation of the world in any way. Well, in that process people like Gabo and those for a long period of time and Mondrian was a neo-classicist, they discarded nature entirely. Mondrian wouldn't sit in a room with a window where he could see outside. He reached a point where he said "If I wear white pants and walk across a field the reflection of the green stains my pants." He never used green in his paintings, never, anything reminiscent of nature. The constructivists too, became, I think it's part revolution of spirit that they had in order to free themselves from what they considered the bondage of art before-hand, which was always rooted in nature. It's understandable that for a while they turned away from it. I think it's also the reason that their work got more and more minimally involving. Once Mondrian totally abandoned nature for the next twenty years his work was virtually without significance, in my opinion, without significant evolution. His last pieces which more people love Boogie Woogie and Broadway Boogie Woogie and New York City to me are interesting but also hysterical, you know, they're the act of somebody who cannot find a new insight, a new road to work in, and to me it's a sign of whatever happens in art when people lose touch with the ultimate source, which is nature, that it has to be there. We are nature, it's the ultimate reference.

LA: Is this what you also derived from Biederman's book?

DB: Some of them, some are certainly involved, some are my own ideas about it. Then the thing that happened is that after a number of years I went to a Biederman show. I had never seen a Biederman show, I had never seen the actual work. And I was still doing constructivist things and not calling it structuralist at all. I went to a show which was in Minneapolis. I remember driving up with a friend of mine, we had car trouble, we had all kinds of aggravations. I was working and couldn't even get time off. I had to go there on a weekend leaving on a Friday night to try to see the show. It was closed when we got there and the show was coming down. I remember I was very upset, of course, having driven all that way. I had this sensation, this strange sensation that Biederman was still in the museum. I just knew he was in the museum. I walked up to a stranger on the street and said, "Do you know Charles Biederman." And he said, "Yes." I said, "Is he in that building?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Can you get me in that building? I've driven all the way from Detroit." He said, "I'll see what I can do." He walked in, oh, it turned out he was a guard. I didn't know at the time that he was a guard because he was in street clothes. He went into the building and he came out in his guard uniform and said, "Mr. Biederman said to let you in." So I went in and saw the show. Actually it turned out to be one of these wonderful things because the show was completely deserted and Charles was there. And I walked around with him because we had been corresponding at this time.

LA: This was the first time you ever met him?

DB: It was the first time I had ever met him and the first time I had ever seen his work in person. Oh, it was very moving for me. It was like the time I went into the art building and came out of it. Having seen the show I came out a different person.

LA: What was....

DB: Well, the idea, my reservations, my reservations about his work had been that I was reading a lot of things and it was a lot of rhetoric, high-powered rhetoric. And you know, none of that matters when you're confronted with the work. That's what speaks, that's what signs. And his work did. It was wonderful. It was just a moving, wonderful experience and I have great admiration for him. And my reservations about so much of what he had been saying, I could see for the first time the use of color and his attitude about nature being realized in a really powerful way. And I made up my mind I know consciously or unconsciously the kind of a switch in concerns of what I was going to do. And I spent a day with Biederman.

LA: What did his book express to you when you walked away from him at the museum?

DB: Well, probably unlike what I think his life is, it was very joyful, very positive, very joyful, truly reverent toward nature and trying to extrapolate from it that which was positive and powerful. Biederman's main influence is Cezanne I would say. One distinction I would make is for me. I find myself, while I certainly admire Cezanne, I've always found myself relating more for the painters to Monet. There's a different imperative, I think, in that Cezanne, well, that's getting into something altogether different, but....

LA: Go ahead.

DB: I think Cezanne is an appeal of the intellect, a strong appeal of the intellect and obviously a significant one. And I'm impressed by that. Monet for me was a certain. The quote about Cezanne's about Monet was "He was only an eye, but what an eye." And it certainly was that. I also think he was a good eye and a good painter, and I think he was revolutionary for his time, that his way of working, his way of seeing was extremely revolutionary. And just because his subject matter is comfortable people tend not to see that, to see what else he was about.

LA: His concept of time?

DB: His time exactly. The haystack paintings, the cathedral painting, all of that. That way of thinking is to me so exciting it leads to film making, leads to all kinds of sequential thought. It leads to a way of thinking about time and space that's quite different that I found in Cezanne. And the thing I've noticed different about myself than all the other structuralist as far as I know is that they all approach structuralist art from early training as painters. And I approach it as a sculptor, I've always thought of myself as a sculptor. I'd say that when I began structuralist art I knew nothing very much about color. I had a few classes and they were probably good classes, but I had to really train myself about color, how to handle it, how to use it. And I began very simply. On the other hand, I've always felt very freely in three dimensions. I've never been comfortable with illusions. I don't know if it has something to do with the fact that as a kid I did magic or not, but drawing and working on two-dimensional surfaces have a stiffness about it for me. I freeze up when I have to draw and do other things. I always become kind of paralyzed. Something always remained fake about it for me. It wasn't real and I think of myself as a realist, you know, that I'm dealing with reality. I've always felt I was dealing with reality. I've always felt I was looking at reality. I've always been creating things that are real, touch, smell, move around them, seeing them in a way that they exist in the world as other real things exist in the world. Yes, and that for me, as soon as I knew for the first time I picked up a mallet and chisel and other things that are involved I knew that was for me. That was there, it was for real.

LA: Is that what you would say is the distinguishing quality about yourself as opposed to the other structuralists?

DB: That's one of them, yes.

LA: That you see yourself as a sculptor?

DB: Right. I think that's certainly one. I think one of the other ones is, it's only been showing itself in the last ten years, more it is that I see the other structuralists with the exception of one or two people that I know, structuralists that I'm personally fairly close to right now, and most of them I'm not personally close to, though I have respect for all of them, is Tony Macauley. Because like myself, I think he is taking the vocabulary, the structuralist vocabulary, the structuralist concepts that have been shared, after all, by a lot of people and then modified by a lot of people and taking them to the world in a very dynamic way. He's exploring a variety of expressions with that vocabulary. Whereas I see a lot of the other structuralists narrowing you know, they remind me of Mondrian. It imposes, it turns in on them and they begin examining something in a narrower and narrower framework. Whereas for me structuralists work is something, the Four Corners Project, it's involved me in full pieces of sculpture. It's involved me in conceptual pieces, it's involved me all, I think the philosophy of all of it is still there, you know, the foundation.

LA: Nature.

DB: The interest, the invisible structure is in nature, that which you cannot....

LA: Can we back up a little? Can we talk about the structuralist in terms of, it's sort of loosely defined thing isn't it?

DB: Yes.

LA: Can we talk about how it evolved and how you got interested and how you became affiliated? You know, we've talked about it being a commitment rather than a group or a school or anything. Can you talk a little bit how that evolved and how you became, and what it's all about?

DB: Yes. Well, all I know is I was, I can't quite say how it happened. I don't know how it happened for other people. But I began making reliefs and the rationale for reliefs was that if art history had been dominated for maybe five hundred years primarily by painting that the vitality would have to come out of that two-dimensional surface. But it seemed that if you're trying to create something totally new, which structuralist art is trying to do, trying to create a completely new art, not a variant of an old art at all. Then a number of things had to take place. That you worked with a vocabulary that could be understood, that you worked therefore, the only simple form that can reproduce itself on being divided is a square or a rectangle, that if you cut it in half and you produce another square or rectangle. If you cut a circle in half and you don't get that, and so on, with other shapes you start producing all those other things. And if it's looking at the legacy of Monet, Cezanne, the impressionists and the legacy of the neo-classicists Mondrian, Von Doesburg and other constructivists, Gabo and Rodchenko and people like that, then what you see it seemed natural to work in a certain kind of work with machines, you work kind of combining all of those elements plus nature in a way. That is the way the structuralists had perceived so many of the other developments, surrealism, Dada, abstract expressionism, pop, or whatever as very self-indulgent, that these are people concerned with, that this is art that is concerned with ego gratification, ego resolution, than it is with extending man's vision.

LA: And that would be....

DB: Yes.

LA: Extending vision.

DB: Yes. Extending the way of perceiving the world. Understanding what's there in a very healthy constructive way. I think the worlds are all meant, whether its constructivists or structuralist I don't think the words mean, are necessary at all, but the art I think stands for health really. Stands for constructive, positive element of being a human being as opposed to the negative or decadent or neurotic side of human beings.

LA: Is there an underlying concern that you have in your reliefs?

DB: Yes, I think it's, well, when I look at nature, if I look at a flower or a tree or anything else, I see a color and I see a form and they are revealed to me through light and space and time. And those elements are present in everything I do. The actualities of those elements. In the actual relief work I think what I'm interested in are all those concepts of growth, decay and regeneration. If one element or one aspect of the work is flowering and the other element of it is decaying and another is, those things are always present, and these things are only to be seen and verbalized, I think, in retrospect, I see polarities, the opposites all the time in my work now, that both

things are present. You know, if a relief has elements that are warm it also has elements that are tearing down. That seems to express a threat throughout my life and in my life as an artist, that the two elements are always there.

LA: And these are aspects of nature?

DB: Yes, I see those certainly as fundamental to nature. In other words, there isn't life without death.

LA: You made this quote, "Color, form, light, space are a creative reality. Awareness, consciousness, memory are my vision through the window." Can you elaborate exactly what you mean by "Color, form, light, space are a creative reality."

DB: Well, if you try to perceive what it is to be a human being what are realities and what is our experience of them. How do we achieve an experience of any kind? It seems to me that these elements are there, that they're going by, that we are seeing them and yet I can't remove one element without altering it. Time is crucial to that. They've found by accidentally severing parts of the human mind that if you cut out parts in which people remember the intelligence is still there, the perceptions are still there, the sensibilities are still there, but they have meaning only because time gives them form. And the parade can be resurrected, put by again, in various ways and that it's impossible to have an experience without time. So it's a way of looking at that. Then of course, the next thing that happens is that we have an experience it means one thing at one time in your life and that exact same experience means something else ten years later when we look back at it. At one time it was the future, at one time it hadn't happened yet and it was only an anticipation. So it's impossible to have the experience without time and that time itself modifies it. So it's....

LA: How do you translate all those philosophical....

DB: Well, a relief or a sculpture, the kind of thing that I make, I hope you cannot digest simply by confronting the image.

[Break in taping]

LA: This is a continuation of an oral interview with David Barr for the Archives of American Art. David, we were talking about the concept of space and time and how that's translated visually in your work.

DB: Right, well if so much art has been a painting or an illusionary kind of experience there's an image that you take in, obviously you can search through that image and that can take time and it can even be a depiction in some way of time. I think artists have often dealt with that. We've talked about Monet's cathedrals and things of that sort. I'm talking about something a little different, I think. A relief, the kind of relief that I'm trying to do at least, requires that you move past it and that light falls on it. That the light source itself can change in each installation or even within the installation by sunlight and also therefore it's modified by the quality of that light, winter light, summer light, morning light, and that sort of thing. All of those are elements of time. And the full pieces of sculpture as well I think are meant to be experienced in that way as well as being metaphors of time. That there are things in which.... For instance, the Sunset Cube piece that I did out at Meadow Brook, for me the phrase I had during the entire time I was working on it is that I wanted it to have the dignity of an ancient ruin, that it's both something obviously new and yet its reference is old and that it's about time and that the shadows that are formed on it and move across it are really keyed to sun movement. It ends up facing the sunsets. That's why it's called that. So that's another part of it. What I'm interested in as an artist and what I hope my work does is it reveals itself slowly. I find that the people that mean the most to me, the art that means the most to me, the literature that means the most to me, the music that means the most to me are all things that continue to reveal and that all that is there isn't instantly revealed, that time alone continues to provide. Some of my greatest satisfactions about my work have been that there have been several occasions where years later people will call or write who are moved in some way by the work to tell me that they just now had seen something they hadn't seen before. That's what I hope is there, that I bury things into the work that are not immediately apparent in my mind that are there later.

LA: That are revealed to you later?

DB: Yes. I think so. Things that I don't see. An example of that is that when the work first left a very harmonious kind of chord where things were. I could see a theme in my earlier work in which things were trying to avoid conflict. The forms and shapes and color that were there were deliberately harmonious, were deliberately free of any kind of inner conflict. As I began to be more aware of my own inner conflicts emotionally and intellectually in various ways. And I do feel my work is very emotional even though I also feel it's working with ideas and the mind, I think it can't help, but reflect who you are and expressing that. I went through a divorce, for instance, and I went through all kind of inner turmoil about emotions and how I was trying to establish relationships. I've run through a period of self-contempt and other kinds of things. I can see it now in my work. I couldn't see it at the time. I mean I was convincing myself at the time that everything that I was doing was intellectual. But now I

can see that that can never be true, that we aren't only that, and that it always shows up in your work in some way or other.

LA: It's just unconscious.

DB: Yes. It's just unconscious. But that doesn't diminish the intellectual parts of it. It just sort of enriches it. I just sort of adds to it because, after all, you get into a "which came first kind of thing" why are you attracted to that kind of image and so on. But I could see that the work was really a blatant kind of image for somebody sort of breaking up, sort of interior shattering that was going on. It was really evident in the work. It probably would have been transparent to somebody outside of me, you know. People knowing me could probably notice it faster than I did what was going on. And I think that continues to be true when I look at it. But I can't understand it myself until time gives me a reference back and then I see it, you know, a year or two later. When I'm working I have far more ideas than I ever have time to do. If I had a staff of ten I couldn't do all my ideas now. And when people ask me what I think about anything in a particular show or anything, I'm not sure, I mean they're all, I'm fond of them all and I often like the one that gave me the most trouble. The one that may be the most unresolved in some way is the one I'm the most linked to. But years later I can tell, you know, then I can tell what was important and what wasn't. What was necessary for me to go through and what wasn't.

LA: Can we go back a little bit and again talk about the visual vocabulary? You were talking about the balance maybe between emotional aspects versus the intellectual aspect. Can you talk specifically about what those things are in your work and maybe discuss a little bit the visual vocabulary?

DB: Okay. Well, maybe also I think it might be useful to make some distinctions between my work and some of the other structurists. One of the things I felt that the structurists development tended to be for pretty nearly everybody working in it was to begin with the simple and move to the complex because in that way you can understand what you were doing. Which I still believe in for anybody studying anything that, you know, that's the way to go. So the early reliefs were very simple kinds of geometries, very simple kinds of arrangements as you began to get command of what you were doing. It was new. You didn't have ten thousand years of visual art in back of you to work with with that kind of imagery the way a figurative painter does, for instance. They can learn quickly from the past through a whole lot of other reference. If you're trying to create something new it's as though you're trying to explore outer space for the first time. You have to proceed very cautiously and slowly. So I worked with that. And then color for everybody you just about started out in a very simple way with primary colors and slowly gained command over that. I hope that the work is equally complex in its use of color and form. I don't think that's always true. I don't think it's true for anybody. One thing will overwhelm at one time and something else will overwhelm at another. But I felt where I was something probably chastised by somebody like Biederman would be that a sort of accelerating rate at which I wanted to work, not being content to work within this very narrow vocabulary, not willing for four years to produce real similar kind of thing. That to me, while I have great respect for someone like Mondrian, the idea of spending one's entire life virtually making variants of the same kind of thing is not what I'm interested in. On the other hand, I'm not interested in the kind of career of somebody like, I'm interested in not attempting it, the career of someone like Picasso who seemed to have an almost schizophrenic change of character every couple of years, a completely different way of working, always with brilliance and zest and talent of course. But I'm not interested in that for myself. I'm interested in a series of ideas and slowly evolving them, but not too slowly.

LA: But would you say that the range showed itself basically in color, the exploration of color?

DB: I think in color I was certainly one of the first ones to get into it. Biederman still uses primary color or virtually primary color. And Borenstein did until quite recently. When I look at most of the other artists their colors are quite different than mine. But also the forms, they stayed within a very, what I consider a very formal and almost narrow concept of what structurists really had to be. And I think that in itself was also based on a kind of timidity. They felt, after all, you've started something new and no one knows what it's supposed to look like. And then after it no longer is new, after five years then it has become formal and now we know what it's supposed to look like. So that is something always to fight against. So I'm cautious about that and try to reach out from that and do something else.

LA: What does color mean to you in your work?

DB: Well, both color and form are, I think, expressive elements.

LA: Can you separate the two? Or can't you?

DB: No, I seem not to be able to. Whenever I've had to work with one over the other in some way I've always felt pretty handicapped, I've always felt weakened. It's not really what I want to do.

LA: So you can't talk about one without....

DB: I tend not to be able to more and more. I see it as a color form, I see it as a rock that I break open and there's color on the outside and a slightly different color on the inside, or as a branch or a piece of fruit or whatever. I see it all as something going right through. The sensation that I try to produce in the work is that the color is completely through it, that if you broke it, sawed it in half that it's not a skin. That, by the way, is what I sense in most of the relief makers and a lot of the other work is that it is a skin, that you sense it adhering to a surface. And I try to have mine, the sensation I want is that it permeates the surface, that it is, that there isn't a difference, that the color is the form, goes right through it. In actuality of course, that isn't true. But I like the sensation you know, to feel that way.

LA: Do you feel that the direction, though, is what separates you from the other structuralists?

DB: I'd say so, one of the things and the fact that conceptually I seem to be exploring some other kinds of things. I'm not saying that in any way critically of them, by the way. I mean I'm sure that they would turn that into their virtue just as I'm turning my way into my virtue. They would say, you know, "Well we're adhering to this principle and following it through very deliberately." And I think that's fine.

LA: Can we talk about the area of growth, birth, decay, regeneration?

DB: Okay, I think it was typical of me as a younger artist the way young people in general in their twenties to be interested in the aspect of growth to the exclusion of everything else. It's synonymous with their own position. And that the most beautiful thing is a fresh flower. Well, to me stretch marks are beautiful now. You know, stretch marks are really poetic images because they represent the force of life, the urgency of life and they leave a trace on a human, they leave of trace of time, of effort, of strain, of miracle. That's such a different perception as somebody saying, "Growth is beautiful." And seeing all that as being necessary and required, it's just a bigger image of it. And I remember I'd been doing what I call growth sequence reliefs, a whole lot of things that were really, oh, references to making buds and flowers an thing opening up, things that are blooming in various ways, and then suddenly realizing how incomplete that was. And experiencing the death of people that were important to me and caring about and trying to understand that. And realizing how we are all living off of death, not just in terms of what we eat, food or anything else. But I am not the same person because Rembrandt was alive, because Bach was alive, because Shakespeare and so on. I'm living off their deaths. We are touched by so many other things in so many ways. So I'm trying to incorporate that in some way in my work.

LA: How?

DB: I think setting up systems, setting up visual systems of arcs. The spiral is to me great image for expanding life, something that isn't a circle in terms of you're returning to a starting point, but something that has evolved and opened and grown. And all my works, I shouldn't say all, but the great majority of my reliefs certainly contain spirals as an understructure. But then going beyond a simple demonstration of that spiral for an example of it and instead using that as a subterranean structure and shattering part of it. Introducing conflict, instead of avoiding it, introducing it, working with it, surviving it. Which I feel is what we have to do as human beings. We cannot control the world, we cannot control other people, we cannot control everything that happens. We can only control our own response to it. We can control it to some extent and we can control how we are going to interpret it. And so my reliefs, I think, are a kind of metaphor for accepting the fact harshness, destruction, conflict occur and that there is a way to positively evolve out of that.

LA: Is that how life....

DB: I hope so. I hope so. I hope that's the way it is. I think there's been a great, when I look around and see people having, what they interpret as passion and what I interpret as passion are often quite different things. I think for a long time it was easy for people to interpret the abstract expressionists as being passionate because there was that explosion of raw energy in a Jackson Pollock painting or something. I now see a commitment to an idea that might last for fifty years as being passionate. I mean that to me is a tremendous passion. And sculptors learn that very quickly, that they may have to work a year on one project or ten years on one project, and to sustain that passion for that length of time takes an enormous act of will. And that's quite different than the act of will or passion that takes thirty minutes to explode on a canvas. So that's how we want to look at those things and how we want to talk about them. And because something isn't obvious doesn't mean it isn't there. I mean, you know, it isn't present.

LA: So would you in your work?

DB: Yes, I think so. Oh, yes, yes. As I say, every since that time when I created those first things, that narcotic has still been alive in me, and it's always been trying to regain it, to retouch it in some way. Which I feel I do from time to time. I can't make it happen, but it does happen now and then and that as what I'm always working for, that's what sustains me, I think, more than anything.

LA: How do you want people to respond to your work? Do you want them to respond?

DB: I can only say what I guess I would hope to be true. I hope positively in the sense that they feel lifted up in some way, I think they're celebrations, I try to celebrate the fact that I've been alive and I hope that for people who for various reasons aren't expressing things in their life that it touches them, that I'm touching what is silent in them or dormant in them, that gives vision to them, too, that they maybe can see something, notice something and feel enriched by something that otherwise they wouldn't have seen. I guess it would want that first of all. You know, I feel that one of the polarities is that artists work with what is extremely unique in themselves and what is extremely unique in the world and also what is very ordinary in themselves and what is very ordinary in the world. And I think it's important to be working with that polarity. And if you work with only what is unique in yourself you may also be a mad person, you know, you may not be touching anything in other people. If, on the other hand, you are working with what is only common in yourself then you're really bored, then you're only boring other people. So it's the two things, the two elements and it's giving form to that which didn't have form before but is also possible to communicate to other human beings.

LA: What is unique about that? Is that a hard question?

DB: I don't know that I can answer that or not. Alan Watts says "trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth." You know, it's really impossible to know, you have to escape yourself to know yourself. I don't know. I think if I had to say what qualities I have, if I look at my life they tell me something, I mean I can't say day by day. I'd say I have stamina. And I love to work hard. I love it. I never get, you know, as a kid, I didn't much like to work hard, I had a lot of energy, I liked to play a lot more than, but now I like to work, I enjoy.... A day that I don't work, a day that I've had social engagements or in various ways I'm pulled into doing things that I don't want to do I'm tense at the end of the day and I don't really feel good. I feel good when I work hard, I feel good about myself. And it's a variety of ways, it might be working, mostly it's working on my work, but sometimes it's working hard in the garden all day.

LA: Or working on the house.

DB: Or working on the house or building something but feeling, certainly I feel addicted to the idea that I look back on any day and I like that I got that done and I feel good about it whatever it was.

LA: Is there anything important that you wanted to express that we haven't touched on in terms of your goals, your work?

DB: Well, I feel about influences I get off the track a little bit. Sherman Handy I feel is very important to me in the school situation. Several friends that I met there, Bob Caskey, an artist, I met there at Wayne, who used to be my friend, has been some influence though he doesn't do the same kind of work. Jim Pallas is of significance to me, but not directly in my art although we're also real close friends because our work is really one of those polarities and is quite different in character and intent. And I think that's one of the reasons I'm real close friends with them is that these two guys are doing quite different work, we're not competitive in that way, and we've been able to experience what's going on with the other person in a real healthy way.

LA: Supportive.

DB: Yes, and the same for Susan Hauptman, who is a friend of mine, a good artist. Her work, too, is so different it just doesn't enter into it. There was another guy back at Wayne when I was there who floats in and out of my life. Bob and Jim knew him too. His name is Cowley, that's the only name he really goes by. He's a very strange guy. He was around Wayne the whole time I was there. He's older, he's about ten years older than I am. I think he was in Germany and Korea and got swept up in the wars. He's one of those marginal people who has great impact on you. He's really a conceptual artists and has no public profile at all. Refuses to exhibit, refuses to cooperate in any way. He's influenced a lot of people, went out East and I know influenced a lot of the conceptualists and people out there, too. He sort of drifts and floats and turns up again now and then. But I just want to mention it because the strength of his work was like pure ideas, things that he would do that were just pure ideas and the fact that he would do, come and tell you about them or in some way you'd see it or participate in it in some way. Then he'd just leave it, build something in the upper peninsula and just leave it out in the woods some place.

LA: So, just persisted on following through with an idea?

DB: Yes. And absolutely uninterested in what the public or the media or anybody else was doing, a very pure kind of conceptualism, good ideas and a real fine mind, and I think he has a very oriental turn of mind too. So he is an interesting guy and I think to some extent that gave me another aspect of my personality that I want to work with, you know, the Four Corners project and other things which are coming out of that. As I see my life forming now, I have no way of knowing for sure how it's going to go, for a long time there was a commitment ninety percent of my work was doing reliefs, structuralist reliefs, but always doing at least some models and some full sculpture as well. And I see it now shifting a little bit more doing some full sculpture, too. And that's always been very frustrating. I've got hundreds of models and hundreds more that I've destroyed, have to destroy

because I can't store them, pieces that I want to build. That's the reason I bought this land so I could put up big pieces here and work outside with a different character of work that I can't store. But also I want to do social pieces, you know the Four Corners Project, pieces along international borders.

LA: Is that a definite outgrowth of....

DB: Yes, structurist, yes, definitely. Because I think all the things, I can still quickly talk about them in terms of being space, form, color, experiences, as being things with internal structures, invisible structures, that which is inside, that which is underneath what they are that they will reveal themselves in that way everything still coming in some way or other from natural experiences and looking at nature. And so I think that the same ideas, it's just taking this vocabulary and fanning out with it and....

LA: Expanding.

DB: Expanding, yes, and deciding with my life. I want to do, I'm finding I very much more want to do world pieces, I guess, things in the world, not just objects, things that may be permanent, may not be permanent, working with human beings all over the world. I want to do that. I want to do, I mean these sound like very grandiose things but I want to have a segment of my life more involved as a humanitarian really, you know, out there with people day by day with people. I've spent most of my life, I feel, alone, most of my life alone in the studio and a heavy percentage of time. And I want to do more things of a different character. My children are grown and through college. I hope to see my life take a different kind of turn involved in different societies in some tiny way. It won't be major I know, I'm not going to be Mother Theresa or something, but I would like to person by person working for people. People without, you know, with huge social needs.

LA: Do you collate this new concept, new outgrowth, with anything that happened in your life, in your work, in your expanded philosophy? How do you account for....

DB: I think certainly some of it is due to a happy marriage. That's part of it, emotionally cared for, a good wife. A lot of it has to do with maturing, growing up as a person, realizing a lot of the things that I've wanted to do. I've been lucky. I never dreamed I'd have a nice house and a nice studio and the ability to work. And those things not having them, you know, were things that I was working to do, to have a good studio to work in, to have materials. I remember a time, it still seems fresh to me. When I got a master charge card for the first time and I didn't have to wait until I sold something or made frames for somebody in order to go buy some paint to work with. You know, gee, I can get it now and in a week from now I can pay for it. Which I quickly abused, of course. But the idea, you know, that was so liberating to not have to be withholding all the time. In that sense I really feel fortunate. I find I can express myself, I always find something. If I don't have this material I have that, and I don't feel withheld in that way. I feel very fortunate that every day I get up I can decide which project I'm going to work on, not can I work at all. That feels good, feels very good. So out of that, out of luxuriating in that I expect to feel, I'm starting to feel my debts more heavily, I'm starting to feel not financially, but spiritually how indebted we all are to so many different people who've helped, who cared and in various ways trusted and invested in you as a human being. That's probably a pretty natural and pretty familiar kind of development. I find that I want to do, I mean one of the things I want to do is do a sculpture, do various pieces, any non-profit situation in the world I'd do it. Let's just say a children's orphanage in New Delhi or something. I mean if that was something that would be of any interest, use, or excitement that we could do it in some way to translate it into tangible things for the people there. I would go happily for nothing, go there and do it. I mean I would just love to do that, go and be part of it and meet people there, generate excitement through interest. I'd like to use part of my career if I can, if it's possible. But that all sounds, since it hasn't been done yet it all sounds grandiose.

LA: David, can you talk a little bit about your public pieces and your relief pieces, the differences and your feeling about public commissions?

DB: Yes, working publicly has been one of, I'd like to do more of that certainly, I don't like the idea of doing exclusively any one thing, working only publicly or only privately. Both things are good. So the public pieces have been nice opportunities to work on sites and things. The first major one that I got was the piece I did at Fairlane Town Center, which I did a model for it and did it larger on the site. That was the only one that I didn't do myself. I didn't have the facilities to weld and do it all at that time so I hired some real nice guys and we worked on it together. It was just exciting to realize a piece out of a small model and that kind of scale. However, it wasn't until I started building things of that scale myself that I had a different kind of courage maybe, you know, building my own house. After you do certain things like that then suddenly you're not intimidated by large size any more, at least that's the way it's worked for me. And that feels good not to be intimidated, you feel differently. So at one point in there how I got involved in that was, I proposed a piece for Macomb County. Initially my idea was, I said, to them, "Look I've got these models and we've got welding classes here, why don't we have the welding classes if I can line it up." I had to go through the administrators, all of this took a year or two, letters and the formal kind of agreements. I said, "If you'll buy the steel I'll get the welding students to do it and we'll have a piece of sculpture and we'll put it up." Well, they thought that was an okay idea. I had to show

models to committees and all that sort of stuff. The welding teacher said yes they'd do it. So they sent out for the steel, finally bought the steel. I had already committed to do it. And the welding instructor said no. So all the steel arrived and they said, "No we're not going to do it, we're not interested in it." Which was pretty frustrating. So then I found a maintenance shop there on campus that had a welding setup. I asked one of the welding students if he'd show me how to weld. So he came over and in about an hour showed me what to do. And so for nine months I built it myself. I did the piece. I felt I had made this agreement and they had ordered the steel. It was an interesting experience. I started out in a maintenance shop was totally hostile to me working on this, many of the administrators though it was something that either I was not going to finish or they didn't like the idea to start with of what I was doing. Everyone thought there was a scam of some kind involved. It took me nine months and I finished it. By the end of that time the guys in the maintenance shop were helping me move things around and were excited about it and were glad to see it coming along and on occasion even holding something in place and helping me work. It turned from hostility into satisfaction.

LA: That was gratifying to you.

DB: Yes, and it was nice. And the same for the administrators they ended up everyone involved through it. And that's something I've learned about art all along, it does change you and it can change you. And more and more what I like about public pieces is exactly that. That was the first time that it happened that way. But understanding myself that you are often doing a work in a way that opens you to ridicule or complaint or people being hostile. But that doesn't mean that it's going to end up that way. People tend to respect energy and ideas and, you know, in the end they come around. And I like that idea.

LA: And that piece, the whole process and everything that you had to go through is important to the actual form that you ?

DB: Not as important, but it is important. The piece is called Transformation. It's meant to capture the spirit of something starting closed and opening up. That was the idea beforehand. As it turned out

LA: Ironically.

DB: Yes, it was perfectly appropriate. But it was meant to be for an educational institution, in that sense it's something receiving and slowly opening and unfolding. So now, however, more and more what I am enjoying, as a young artists I think I liked being insecure. I would develop my ideas and sort of want to impose them in various places on someone's wall or whatever. Now probably one of my greatest pleasures is to be given a completely new problem, an unusual space, an outdoor site, a situation, you know, that is very specific that I go out an well, the daylight hits it only at this angle, the terrain is this, the surrounding environment is this, the character of the light in this part of the world is this, and so on. Have all these specific restraints, and to to that site with a complete emptiness on my part, to go to it without a preconceived notion of what I'm going to do, without any idea at all. Because now I trust my creative processes, I'm reaching some level of belief in myself, I guess. Because I don't have an idea doesn't frighten me. It's exactly the opposite. That excites me. When I go empty now I will generate something that could only have been generated in that particular context and in that particular set of problems.

LA: So the site sets up a problem solving situation?

DB: Right.

LA: And that's how you approach public sculpture?

DB: That's certainly, if that's possible, you know. I'm working on a piece now for Battle Creek and that is certainly coming out of a set of constraints. You know, it's really the way architects have worked for centuries, they have all these constraints and they worked with it and I don't feel it's necessarily to what they do. It's one of the reasons that artists have gotten very indulged. It's separate from that. They're used to being removed. And yet at the time when you look at cathedrals and we look at the way art and architecture and the society interacted and it was because people were willing to accept these constraints, in fact being excited and stimulated by them rather than frustrated. And that's the way I'm beginning to find myself going. I like them.

LA: Is that very different from your approach to, let's say, working on reliefs?

DB: Yes, except that with the reliefs the restraints are self-imposed, they're there, I impose them and one is feeding the other. I used to feel, there was a time I know when I felt, oh, well, if I fully exhaust this idea of working with stars or constellations or with the spiral or with plates of the earth what am I going to do? I mean, I'll reach a point where I've exhausted this concept or this particular premise that I'm doing. And that was a very real fear. I never was consciously withholding and I would work with it and work with it and work with it and then there would be a small miracle. I would realize, gee, now I'm interested in this and there was always more and it was like I would keep manufacturing more somehow. Where it comes from and everything I don't really know.

But I just trust that it goes on now and I didn't used to trust that it would.

LA: So now you go to the site and, again, this aspect of nature is really posing the problem for you?

DB: If it's an outdoor natural site, yes, sure. And then I begin searching and thinking about it and sometimes I'm not sure what I'm going to do for a long time. And sometimes I'm wrong, you know. Sometimes, as an example of not doing it that way I had a show down at Kent State. And I went down there. As I went down there I had made up my mind that I wanted to do a piece and offer it to Kent State as a memorial to the slain students. I had a preconceived idea of what I wanted to do. I went down there and walked over the hill where the students were shot and the idea just seemed absolutely wrong. And the piece that I wanted then and still want to do and that I offered to do. But for a whole lot of reasons they're not doing anything really, the memorial. What I wanted to do, for the next few days after walking over that hill I kept having the same image and the image, the thing that I wanted to do there was nothing on the site at all, absolutely nothing, a small hole in the ground, a tiny hole and coming out of that hole would be a cable and if you got down on you knees and pulled on this cable you'd strike once a Japanese which is a big bronze bell and it had a deep resonant sound. What I wanted is that you're there in a position on your knees with this commemorative mourning sound emanating from the ground. And I kept hearing it over and over and I still hear it. I'm going to build it here on my land if nothing else. If I can't place it, I'll build it here.

LA: What was the reaction to

DB: Oh, some people were interested, some not, you know. I left it with some people that were trying to see it through, but as I've said, they're not building anything. I don't know, probably nothing will ever happen. But one of the interesting things about that was that about six months later I talking to a guy who had been to Kent State and I told him about the piece and what I wanted to do. He said, "Well, don't you know about the bell at Kent State?" I said, "What bell? I don't know anything about a bell. There was no bell there." He said, "Oh, yes. It's been removed." The major this that was on that campus, it was known for it's bell. The day of the demonstration they all met at the bell. It was a huge bell and fraternity pranksters used to ring this bell like a school bell in the middle of the night and that kind of thing and they'd draw, for the meeting they came and they'd ring this bell. Well, there was no bell there when I went. And I kept having this image of a bell. Well, that was a very, at the moment I started to trust some of my instincts. And that's what I do more and more, I trust those things. I trust not that I will always do the right thing, but that it's all right to be empty.

LA: Now that wasn't, you said that was a preconceived notion?

DB: No, that wasn't preconceived.

LA: It wasn't until you got

DB: No, I had a complete other piece, much more familiar structurist, a piece that you would recognize right away as mine.

LA: And it wasn't until you got to the site and walk on that hill that you

DB: And it wasn't even then. It was like the next day, you know, twenty-four hours, I remember dreaming the entire night about the bell, hearing the bell, hearing it again and again. I've struck one of those big bells, they're used in Zen temples. I struck one once and it's an incredible sound. And that was the sound I kept hearing. That was the sound I wanted.

LA: So was it at that point that you decided to trust your instincts, or

DB: Yes I think more and more I do now. I believe in that. I find myself, if I look back on my reliefs, at critical works, at critical moments in my reliefs and critical moments in my whole development as an artist they've been every time

[Break in taping]

LA: This is a continuation of an interview with David Barr for the Archives of American Art. Okay, David, you were talking about every time you

DB: Yes, every time that I would come to a, not really an impasse but an inclination, you know, it's wondering should I do this, could I do this? What happens for all kinds of artists and all kinds of creative people is that ultimately your footsteps are alone in the snow, you're out there and nobody has been there before and you're not sure what you're doing and why. That's a most exciting point. And, of course, it's fearful, you have nothing to rely on but your own judgment and that could be stupid. I mean we all have silly ideas, too, we all have ideas that aren't very good and we all do things that end up and when we look at them and it was a waste of time. So

with only your judgment to rely on you're never real sure. But I must say that when I look at those things obviously coming out of influences that I'm happy to acknowledge, you know, all those people and obviously then spending a kind of an apprenticeship doing work that was recognizable in that influence. And that to me is the way of the world, you know, that's quite all right. For instance, Biederman painted like Leger who he was friends with. There comes a point where you're weaned and there comes a point where you're risking and breaking off on your own and doing something. And of course, that's very uncertain. I must say that it's been at those moments that when I follow that through that eventually even if it's for a long time really fumbling around that eventually it's led me to my greatest satisfactions. I wanted to build my own house. I've wanted to do that since I was a child. I thought about it not for the reasons that I hear a lot of other people give. Well, that's the only way you know it's well, built or anything else. That's not true. I mean I don't know it is true even that it's better built than somebody else would build it. It's much more a matter of not wanting to feel dependent. I want to go through my life not asking people to do anything that I'm not willing to do. If I have to use a plumbing system in a toilet I should be willing to put it in. If I have to get water out of the earth I want to know how that happens. If I want to keep the wind and rain out I want to be in some way involved in how I do that. Electricity is a mystery. That I wired my whole house, at least it isn't something that I'm totally mystified as to how it gets from here to there. You know, I have some level of information about it. To that extent I feel it's liberating. You know, having built my own house I can walk away from it. I can probably walk away from it faster than most people think because it's not fearful. Well, I could do it again, or I could choose not to do it again. But you know, I find people getting emotionally attached when they have done things like that in a way.

LA: It's survival.

DB: Yes, it's a sense of surviving, looking at the planet and what's necessary. There's nothing really glorious about it. Humans have been building their own houses since the beginning of time. It's only been in the last century that they've gotten detached from that really. However, having done that, again I feel eager and excited and confident to take on a lot of things that are overwhelming, that I can take on that which I don't know how I'm going to do it, you know, that I can begin that which I cannot predict how I'm going to end. In talking to other people and people near me who will often be cautioning and anticipating the worst. Well, how can you do your four corners project when you don't know how you're going to fund it? And how can you do this and how can you do that? And I find I don't have to know how. Yes, I can start, I can at least start. I can begin. So that's had a big effect on me as a So I can begin a piece of sculpture and not know where it's going to end. I mean I plan out all that I'm doing but I can begin things that I don't have the means to finish.

LA: You can go to a site totally empty and come up with an idea of design?

DB: Right. Exactly. And that's for me in a different way it's also, I've started to produce a level of serenity and a level of acceptance.

LA: Confidence.

DB: Yes, they say you know, that people who are most afraid of death are those people who are leading the most incomplete lives. You're more afraid of it the more your denial, the greater your denial of it the more you feel that you've never led your life. I feel like I'm living fuller and fuller all the time you know, that I don't feel deprived in that way at all. A lot of it has to do anyway from that kind of risk taking, that kind of risk taking in my work. Now I say that some other person is going to walk up to my work and say, "All your work looks the same to me David." Which I think some people, you know, I think I'm doing some huge big thing in my reliefs and it is, it's a departure from what I was doing. I've worked with the starts for a period of time and that was real important and I loved it. And then I stopped. Not because I felt it was unimportant, but because I'm into some new issues and things that I want to work with that are different. To me that always takes, there's an act of some kind of aesthetic bravery to stop, you know, I'm going to stop now and do something new. Because when I start my work, for me, and I don't know how figurative artists or somebody else works, I mean I can't speak for them, but for me it's whole cloth each time. There is nothing, everything I do has to come out of my imagination, I don't have something in front of me that is making any decisions at all, there's nothing there making a decision.

LA: It's coming out as you're doing it?

DB: I have to invent the problems. I have to invent the systems to solve that problem. I have then to create with that system something that I haven't done before. I have to create form, color, space, arrangement, concepts of time like concepts of all the things that I've been talking about and like layer them time after time after time. If I were real young as an artists I would be interested by something I would find. You know, artists will go through things, maybe they'll find an old engine block and they'll say, well, I'm going to turn that into a hippopotamus or something, but I don't work that way.

LA: Okay, let's be very specific. Let's go step by step. Can you do that?

DB: Yes.

LA: Can you verbalize that. Why don't we take

DB: Sunset Cube or something like that?

LA: Well, let's take something that, you know, the public saw.

DB: Yes. Sunset Cube or....

LA: Or a relief panel. Or what you're working on now lets, well of course you're involved.

DB: Well, let's say Sunset Cube or the Macomb piece because

LA: Okay.

DB: Or both. The Macomb piece was based on crystals, each of the units. At that time, that was about 1975 I think, 1974 or 1975, something like that. But I had been working for a year or two before with the models. Often those things cover a big period of time. And I was looking at crystals and intrigued by the fact that the angle of crystals in their formation is an indication of their chemical content, how they're formed, and that they're very rational. So I developed this whole sequence of cubes that were cleaved on a particular angle and reassembled in particular ways. And I had something like forty models which were variants of that which would go back together again, forty unique models and a configuration of those were in the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them. And I still have many models of other configurations other than the one piece that I did. But I came up with that particular one for that site. It was a low hill and they were landscaping the hill and I worked with the landscaper. We put one tree down that became lie the center of an arc. I came out from that and I struck an arc for these little crystal forms to sit, they went from small forms, they went from a form that is twenty-four inches on a side and they increase in three inch increments, the next form being twenty-seven and thirty, and thirty-three, and thirty-six up to forty-eight. The distance between the forms was five times the base measurement so if one twenty-four inches five time that was ten feet, the next one and so on. But the next one being wider the opening would gradually progress as well. So the forms increase in size and increase in character from a closed form to an open form. The color changed, the progression of space between them, all on an arc and all of the numerical involvements were five matching numbers which I've been doing for a long time, three inches, five times, and so on. All of those things. So underneath the piece that seems to be, maybe to a casual observer fairly random, is this great organization in my mind. And that's what I do in all my pieces. I enjoy its being an apparent randomness but then slowly you start to see that it isn't.

LA: The redision of your mother and father.

DB: That's right, yes. Well, it's the, I find invisible structures. Human beings are walking invisible structures after all. I mean who we see and what makes them purr inside are invisible to us. And what intrigues me most about Bach for instance, is that far more than I will ever know all the invisible structuring he's got going inside are what move the most. But in music, novels, and so on. All the things inside. Virginia Woolf I remember being so excited by her books because at the end the lighthouse and the waves and realizing the tremendous inner structure that she has in her books, they weren't just, it was far more than the stories, this mountain that she built underneath it. Yes. Now Sunset Cube. I'll talk about that for a minute. First of all, that was a sloping, fairly steep little hill and it was facing west and it's a festival ground and people are out there at sunset. So the first sort of conditions that occurred to me was that that would be a nice thing to do something that would be keyed to that in some way, maybe not in an obvious way, but nevertheless there. So I designed a piece that would face west and then setting up a structure that was based on a grid of a cube and warping that somewhat and cleaving it again and then having these alignments of different units and making it The sensation of being that it had been there a long time, that the hill had drifted up over it, you know, over a part of it and burying part of it and that part of it had been removed. Then using color also to express that kind of progression of great age. And I wanted to make a piece that calls to you, that you want to walk up to it and around it and that it shows different qualities and characteristics from different perceptions.

LA: I was going to ask about the interaction on Sunset Cube, the interaction of sun and shadow.

DB: Well, so many of my steel pieces have come from my involvement and admiration for megaliths that are all over Europe. I've been to a couple hundred sites in Europe. Stonehenge, in Brittany, Mallorca in Spain, Southern England and Holland.

LA: What is the relationship between the large stones?

DB: Well, I'll tell you for a long time I didn't know and I couldn't see it, I couldn't understand why. I could see all these wonders, I could go to a museum, I could go to the Louvre and seldom an I in a so profoundly emotional

mood, I have been, you know, Rembrandt's Self Portrait moves me more than any painting ever, you know, that kind of thing, or certainly as much as. Or Monet's Water Lilies in the Orangerie or something. But when I go to those megaliths, I'm not a great believer in psychics or all the rest of it, but I come, I tremble, I physically tremble. I've wept, they do something to me that nothing else does to me. No other piece of sculpture, nothing does it to me like some of those megaliths. And for a long time I couldn't figure out why. And one day, it's one of those things again, that is so obvious, that in a sense here were these anonymous people who are now anonymous, or at least people who even in their lifetime didn't feel inclined to have to sign it, it wasn't an ego project at all, who were fundamentally trying to understand the structure of their world and their universe. All of those things are operating, at least one aspect of them is that they are operating, at least one aspect of them is that they are operating to sunsets and sunrises, to star observations, to moon observations. But they are also social, they are also functional, probably ritual and ceremony of various kinds. They are complex things. And it's one of those things, again, that the structure is hidden to us and it reveals to us slowly. But the way it was done, these weren't built by slave cultures. I never get the same sensation out of a slave culture in art. You know, where people were forced to reach the vision of some other, some dictatorship or something. These were people, those cultures were all people who could wander away. It wasn't fundamentally useful for them or it wasn't fulfilling to them. They had no reason to do it. I mean just leave it and go on. But they all felt so inclined to do it.

LA: So there was commitment.

DB: There was commitment and faith and, you know, deep purpose in what they were doing. We don't even know all that today, but it doesn't matter. I mean it would be nice to know, but it isn't crucial. What is left is evidence of a tremendous involvement in what they were doing.

LA: A feeling?

DB: Yes.

LA: Is that what you hope people will get from your sculpture?

DB: I'd like that, yes. Certainly I'd like the fact that, I mean I hope some day to not sign anything ever again. No, no really. But I mean there's, you keep different kinds of records and things. But I mean I love the fact that people would preserve something. You know, the thing that moves me with those things is, some people destroyed them. Certainly the church sent out people to destroy them, but also some people preserved them and they knew, I mean there was a sense even that this is something to preserve and the only reason was just keep it, this is good. And I like that. Those are some very fine things that survived. People will, you don't have to be a trained art historian to know that people will sense, whether it's a commercial art object, or a work of art or anything. If you give them time and don't bother them with a lot of hype and don't push them people will begin making pretty good choices sometimes. This is something nice and I think we'll keep it around. I don't know what it is, but it's okay. And something else is offensive and not nice and you get just the and changing and self-serving and we can do without that. I hope something I do will survive.

LA: This is a continuation of an interview with David Barr for the Archives of American Art on January 13, 1983. David, you were talking about, you ended the last interview talking about various influences on your work. I was wondering if you could talk about some key pieces in the evolution of your work that perhaps mark directional changes.

DB: Okay, they tend not to fall into specific ones. In the reliefs for instance, which I just number, I wouldn't be able to point to a specific number and say that one, number 89, or something that was the one. But they certainly fall into groups of pieces. In retrospect, the key pieces are revealed to me rather than at the time. What I've come to see is that nearly always it's involved for my perception taking some kind of a risk and departure, breaking away from what was familiar in any way at all, even to me and trying something new. Sometimes of course, that doesn't work out and I destroy the pieces. Sometimes where it goes seems kind of empty. And sometimes it's going in a direction that is very fruitful.

LA: Are there some very specific things that you can point to?

DB: Well, in the real early pieces I think the pieces tended to, the very early reliefs, I have to talk about different aspects of my work, both reliefs and full sculpture having quite a different history. Full sculpture, for instance, not being able to realize anywhere near the amount of ideas that I've been able to realize in reliefs. In reliefs when I work out the idea because of its scale and materials. In full sculpture I have far more models than I have finished pieces just because there's so much effort to build them, so much expense for materials and ending up quite often with huge objects that I don't have any place to put. Which is why I bought the land, I have a few acres so that in the future I can build them and I can put them out there, I can realize them in some way. So there's quite a different history. The reliefs tending to be fulfilled as the ideas mature, and the full sculpture often jumpy. I'll have a series of ideas that I'll work out in models and maybe only realize one out of twenty of

them. And so they mature at a different kind of accelerated rate.

LA: Well, why don't we talk, shall we separate them and talk about the reliefs and then

DB: Okay, yes. In the reliefs, I think the earlier pieces tended to be more conservative. The very early pieces were kind of densely packed and they were more concerned with kind of surface. The departures I remember having there were kind of opening the pieces up and giving them some air and space and working with them in a completely different context very early.

LA: Was this achieved with color or with form?

DB: Both, both color and form. But it was a different way of seeing. I think it was instead of seeing just frontally from the front sort of seeing all the way around it and suspending the pieces quite a bit differently in a way of confronting the work. I think the next major departure that I see happening in the work was trying to incorporate conflict instead of avoiding it, that the work was trying to incorporate conflict instead of avoiding it, that the works initially were these very peaceful kinds of chords that interacted. And I began to see, as I've probably stated that it reflected my personal life really, the same thing I was doing there was avoiding conflict. I found that not appealing and as I matured began to see that conflict is inevitable in life and trying to find a way to deal with it. So the work itself started to have that. By that I mean that I would have various systems underneath the relief that would be placed there and that these systems would create clashes, the layer of the system would create a clash of some kind.

LA: What do you mean specifically by a system?

DB: Well, let's say one system would be a logarithmic spiral, let's say that was laid underneath the piece and another system would be on top would be a fibonacci system of progressions, and another system that might be laid over that might be a spatial arrangement of a constellation. When you put all those together certain of those areas would merge or overlap or conflict with each other.

LA: These are all aspects of your relief sculpture that appeared in a series, in different series of reliefs as you've progressed?

DB: That's right.

LA: Can you define that more specifically, the logarithmic system?

DB: Well, the logarithmic spiral is a very old pattern. It can be developed from a simple square, a method of cutting a square and developing out of it what amounts to the golden mean rectangle, and out of that you generate another square, and so on. It is a graph kind of thing I would have to show you, but it's easily available in all kinds of books. The Greeks did it even in the proportion of the temples and vases and sculptures and everything else. So there's nothing especially new about it. But it also can contain and generate the spiral which also is found in nature. It's in a parrot's beak, your fingernails grow in a logarithmic spiral, all kinds of plants grow in spiral formation, sea shells, shells. It's a fundamental growth pattern.

LA: And these are basically in your early pieces, your early relief pieces?

DB: Well, to this day nearly everything I do contains it. It's often in a very submerged place, but it's there. And as my interests varied throughout my career I think I started off having the kind of interest that I had seemed to be almost botanical, you know, that the things that were moving me most would be flowers and plants and things. Monet has a wonderful quote, "flowers taught him how to paint." And I think I was looking for a single object in the beginning. That's the way we're trained in the west. We're trained to see a single object and focus on that. Then I began to see more in terms of the relationships of objects. The flowers plus the sky, plus the pond, plus the worm and seeing various layers to that. Then I began seeing in terms of time, that those very same things over a period of time growing, budding, blooming, dying, and a new life form. Then I began to sort of leave the earth and went to the sky. I began an interest in astronomy. All of this in a very non-scientific way, looking, studying, reading some thing, but not ever thinking of myself as doing anything of any scientific significance at all, but responding to what I considered interesting visual aspects of all of that.

LA: So you created a more or less visual equivalent to these basic systems that you find in nature?

DB: Well, yes. I think one of the things I just came across recently was a realization about myself as a boy I was a magician and I only remember it because a friend of mine, Larry Booth, said recently some place in print that I was a magician and that I make things appear that hadn't appeared before. Which I liked very much. And then I thought about the fact that I had been a magician and I had done tricks and I kept them all, I've got them some place. And I thought about doing what magic was as a kid, doing magic. I hated to perform, I hated being on stage, I hated that aspect of it, hated to perform. It embarrassed me then and it still would, being on stage in any

way still embarrasses me. And so I thought, why was I attracted to it? What did I like about it? Well, a magician does illusions. But I dislike illusions. And the interesting thing is that I thought about all of the art that I've done all my life. Anything that I have done that gave me any sense of fulfillment has nothing to do with illusions. I never liked drawing and painting on a two-dimensional surface very much, I never enjoyed it, it always seemed to be so false that I was trying to make something look real, when it wasn't. When I wasn't dealing with anything in a real way, that I was taking something that was three-dimensional and making it two-dimensional. I just didn't get any, I could never get adrenal going over that. I could do it, but it just never was this forceful kind of thing for me. And then it came to me. I feel that I've always been doing in all of my work, and I can say this about every aspect of my creative life and there are not many things that I find that I can, threads like that I can say about all of it. And that is that I've always been trying to make the invisible visible, that which you cannot see give it tangible, visual reality, that I've always been trying to find an invisible reality. How does this work? What is underneath it? What makes things grow? What makes people behave the way they do? This is true for me in my writing and in anything else. It's true for me in the four corners project, it's true for me in my interest about sculpture that will reflect around human boundaries of various kinds. It's true for me about writings and concepts about how artists work and why, it's true for me in my reliefs, it's true for me in my sculptures. As a magician one of the things was that my fascination wasn't with performing, wasn't with fooling people, wasn't with creating illusions. It was, why does this work? What is this invisible structure underneath this trick that makes this other thing happen? And so again it was the invisible thing. The reason I got into magic was to know that, not to do that. So that's been an interesting little thing that kind of came out of that. The reliefs for me are always things that have, I can't see them the way other people do. But I suspect they have, that someone at first appearing them might think there's all kinds of randomness going on. That there's random placement, random color, that the choices that have been made are kind of arbitrary. But I also hope that they quickly realize that isn't true.

LA: Is it that revealing process that's important?

DB: Yes, that slowly reveals itself, that to me is what holds me whether it's in a good book, a good movie, or a good work of art is that it reveals itself in time and that it's the and that there is substance and that it can continue to reveal too. That you don't know all that there is to know quickly.

LA: So that you can look at something visually but it's not titled the constellation that slowly it is revealed to one that this is indeed a constellation of stars that you've presented in the relief?

DB: That's right. But there still might be another polarity that just when you think oh, the whole piece is about stars, you find out no, it was also about the plates of the earth and the way the earth moves or, no it was also about the way the fading color of a blossom, you know, that it was about a number of things simultaneously. That it wasn't about just one thing, but that it does certainly relate to some very real things, but real things that were previously unfamiliar. You see, I find a kind of arrogance in an art that says I noticed this thing and that you didn't notice it and then it's visible. I meant that to me is, whether it's been a photographer doing that or a painter doing that to simply call attention to that with the idea that, it's as though you're saying to the world, you're so desensitized you didn't appreciate this. I find that very arrogant. On the other hand, artists who truly are noticing something that wasn't seen before or who are already probing beneath the surface of things and finding something that was previously thought to be ugly or uninteresting or unrepresentable and presenting that, that to me is very interesting, that to me is what I find has meaning in art. That's additive. That's constructive, that's truly new.

LA: So the philosophical part is really part of what you're doing, more or less?

DB: Oh yes, definitely.

LA: I wanted to ask you, I want you to go into more detail about your theory of color because in many ways the departure from some of the same kind of constructivist concerns that you have had in your work, but really structurism and that whole idea of color and relationship is very innovative and very different and I wanted you to discuss that a little bit in terms of your own work too, and you depart even from the structurists concept of color.

DB: Yes, right. Well, the structurists, I think most the people who seriously began as structurists began with a very limited palette and are coming out of the neo-classicists. This was deliberate working for extensive periods of time with just primary colors, black, white and grays.

LA: So the idea was to focus on the form, not the

DB: Right, therefore you were deliberately working with great limits. Frank Lloyd Wright has a nice quote. "Your limits are your best friends." And working with that limit was a way of learning. And I believe in that. I did fifty reliefs without color at all before I started on with

LA: What made you change your mind? What made you decide that you should use color?

DB: I felt that, well one thing one looks at in that is, "how long am I going to live?" I mean you can go on endlessly plus you do look at other people's work and you do learn from that and that there were other structuralists working. Fairly early on my main correspondent for a long time was Biederman who was certainly the main influence as a structuralist. But I did begin to expand that circle too, to include people like Liz Wilmt who lives in Toronto who I became friendly with, Eli Borenstein, who publishes the magazine Structuralist and who once was influenced greatly by Biederman and they had a split in their faction. I would not say I have been influenced by Borenstein at all only by the sense of contributing and I'm glad it's there. But the structuralists kind of divide us between those people who have been influenced directly by Borenstein. Borenstein in Canada had a lot of students and people studied with him and he's had influence over them. Biederman has drawn a lot of artists to him as well. So there's been one faction, there's also been European artists people like Usbaya who has written a book on Van Doesburg who is Dutch, who also studied, he and Borenstein both me Biederman. Biederman is clearly the oldest and most influential. And all of these people interpret structuralist art quite differently. None of them speak to each other. Many of them wish the other bad feelings.

LA: What about Goran?

DB: Goran was really with the, the European, was really with Mondrian and neo-classicism, he is even earlier yet. But he was really more a neo-classicist and not a structuralist, that is, the nature was never really crucial to what he was doing. And then there are the Polish artists Stajewski and Stravinsky and other people who also nature wasn't necessarily a part of it but they were really vital and important artists in terms of relief art and did some wonderful things.

LA: Getting back to color.

DB: Okay, I'm sorry. Well, I just wanted to mention that I did go to England and Holland and met a lot of the relief artists over there too. All of whom, again, aren't really interested in structuralist art, more in a constructivist kind of direction.

LA: Who did you meet?

DB: Anthony Hill, Gillian Wise, Kenneth Martin, he is kind of the patriarch of that whole language, Kenneth Martin and his wife, Mary Martin.

LA: Did they influence you? Or is there any single

DB: No, not especially, not directly. But intellectually they're very stimulating and I enjoyed them tremendously. But they're interested in somewhat different things. They're very suspicious of color and the use of color for instance.

LA: You're not suspicious of color?

DB: No. And I'd say that's the main way I vary from all of the structuralists. I think history will bear me out. If it's proven to be of interest, that either I will be faulted for it or given credit for the fact that my use of color has tended to be somewhat more expensive than some of the other artists, and that I began with the same kind of discipline. But the more I looked at nature, the more I saw that the arbitrary selection of just primary color and that sort of thing was very artificial.

LA: Where does your color derive from? Where do you get your inspiration?

DB: Nature, everything. Everything comes from nature. And it's difficult when we're used to examining art as something that mimicked or was an illusion of nature, which is the vast history of art and therefore ninety-nine percent of the artists around today can talk about it with that history in back of them. The structuralists can't do that because they're talking about it in quite a different way, color and form.

LA: How are they talking about it? Wait a minute. You were just talking about how the structuralists cannot view nature in an illusionistic way and you were also talking about how color fits into that and how color fits into your work and the whole system of structuralism.

DB: Well, if the structuralist is looking at it as color, form, light, space, time as a unified experience.

LA: Okay, you were telling about color, form, light, space, and time and how they fit into structuralism.

DB: Right, well, so if the structuralist isn't trying to create a reality, not use it in an illusionistic way at all, and therefore color, for instance, applied to a real form, let's just imagine it's a simple rectangular solid. If you put the same color on all of the surfaces and assuming one of those surfaces is a background or adhering to a

background, then you have five surfaces receiving the same color but they're not receiving the same light. So even with one color you have five different colors that are being revealed to the viewer. So that in itself is somewhat a different problem than that which a painter is doing by putting on a color and giving the illusion of light to the space falling somewhere.

LA: You're creating the light?

DB: I'm doing an actual piece that you're going to experience the way you do a branch of a leaf or the petal of a flower that you're experiencing it in a somewhat different way. And light and atmosphere is also experiencing it in a different way. In a sense structuralist color is atmospheric. If you have a three-dimensional form of yellow and you have a three-dimensional form of green and the two are placed in such a way that the atmosphere between them receives light, then the atmosphere between them is going to be yellow-green. Each one is modifying the other in a real way.

LA: Modifying and intensifying?

DB: And changing, and shadows are changing that yet again. So all of that is a hint that it's quite complicated even with something, the elements being very simple. Structuralist relief to me is much more akin to music in that a musical note itself has very little significance or interest, the note itself is, in fact, often deliberately dull. Therefore the relationships of the notes become everything. In structuralist relief all the people working with relief began working with rectangles and very simple form and very simple color, the idea being you liberated yourself for complex relationships.

LA: Would you say that the relationship is everything in terms of color in your work?

DB: Yes, that's what I feel, that the complexities that you'll see entering my work even in terms of form and space have been a result of moving through earlier, simpler kinds of forms. The hardest thing for me to do then was to spend a lot of years doing things that seemed very easy to duplicate. Very easy for someone else to do again, very easy, almost a kind of obvious experience. But it was the only way I could build up a history for myself of learning. What I was doing was paying dues, in a way, so that you could go on. But I didn't feel obliged, as some structuralists did, to stay with that vocabulary forever. So both the color and the form began to become more complex to in some way or other reflect what I consider the complexities of nature, the fact that so many systems are operating at once in terms of color, form, space, light and time. And I still feel that way. I feel access to the full range of color that I see in the world around me, which is of course, infinite, and the full range of form and form expressions.

LA: Did you have to work through that complexity of form before you were able to open up to a full range of color?

DB: To some of it, yes, but I tried to make them synonymous and tried to put them together in some way. And so if I had forms that I was trying to use to express decay, then I certainly wanted the color also to express that decay. And so one aspect would be doing that is I would be trying to express regeneration in something else, I would be trying to express something in full maturity with something else again. If one aspect of it is botanical and another is geological and another is astronomical then all of those things have to me a color code or a color vocabulary that run along with it. For instance, in stars there are all these wonderful universals. The brightest stars you see are the smallest, they're not the biggest. As a star collapses it gets brighter as it goes more dense. To some extent that would reflect what I would do when I was representing, not representing, when I was working to express my constellation.

LA: The smallest form might be the brightest in color?

DB: It might. Or I might invert it deliberately. And the other way would be, it would certainly relate to the magnitude of the star. And the same with the color, that the color of the star indicates different properties about it, different properties about that star. Some stars are yellow, some stars are magenta, there are all kinds of different colors to them. Once you stop seeing them just as little spots of light you start to notice that really they contain color.

[Break in taping]

LA: This is a continuation of an interview with David Barr for the Archives of American Art on January 14, 1983. David you've been talking about color and how important that has been to your relief work. Can you talk about the richness, the density of color that's so obviously present in your work, how that evolved and when you felt comfortable about using that kind of color?

DB: Certainly I feel the dimensions of colors. Well, to deny yourself the dimension of color seems to me a great loss. If I look at the history of art, the recent history, by that I mean five hundred years or so, it's been dominated

by color usage by painters of course. And I think the main innovations in art have been heavily on the side of painting, and that color in sculpture which is used so vividly and importantly by tribal cultures and probably by early cultures; Mayans, Greeks, other people, painting their sculpture too. It was kind of discarded until sculptors were working with just the raw materials. We see this very much in the twentieth century too, still the great proportion of artists working mostly with materials. The color of the material whether it's a piece of steel or whatever, and that if color is used, to my mind it's always been used very much as a skin stretched over that and painted over it the way it is over a car or something. I've never enjoyed that very much. I've always, the color I like and that I try to use in my materials is to have a sense of that if you cut it, it would still be there just the way it is in a natural object, it doesn't just go away. It isn't just a membrane that's wrapped around it. I can't make that be true, technologically I can't do that yet, but certainly that is the sensation that I want. I'm looking forward to the day when, I know that some day someone will invent a color, a pigment or a form that will change due to the amount of light that it receives. That would be wonderful, you know, to apply something that whatever piece of sculpture it was, it would be one thing in the spring and another thing in the winter and another It is anyway due to the light but to have it also change in other ways would be wonderful to be able to control.

LA: So that's a big consideration in your choice of color? Light changes it.

DB: Absolutely. Oh yes, you have to have all of that be there. I had to you know, kind of train myself in the use of color that way I wanted to work with it.

LA: How do you use color? In a technical sense how do you apply it?

DB: Oh, with air brushes and mechanical spray devices of various kinds. I prepare the surface first with sealers to stop anything that's underneath, oils or any material that's underneath coming up through. Then it's given about a dozen coats of gesso which gives it a real lovely, soft, deep surface, and sanding in between all the coats. That's what allows the pigment to such in, to dry into the materials so that you don't sense it just as a skin. I feel that it's very much, that it becomes a part of the material.

LA: There's a purity about it.

DB: And then it's sprayed on. And I've always tried to resist any of the gimmicks of spraying. You know, they use all kinds of ways of spraying things that are gimmicky.

LA: How do you?

DB: Just as an act of mind I guess, you know just as a philosophical decision. I try to build everything that I do so that theoretically it could be reproduced after I was dead if someone wanted it and wanted to do so. That it could be conserved and re-done, that every color could be read with a spectroscope, that every form could be measured and reconstructed. That by drawings and notes and plans and everything I've left that theoretically it could all be put back together again.

LA: You were talking about how you really wanted to be able to have all your forms measured and reproduced, the color reproduced and everything reproduced.

DB: Right.

LA: That goes along with your philosophy about mass production of art not being restricted to the elitist.

DB: The machine can liberate, just as it does with film or anything else. I feel that the creative element, the creative part of it, or at least the significant creative part of it is in the human mind, not necessarily in the hand, that the hand is the extension of the mind and not the other way around.

LA: So it's the idea or the concept that's the most important?

DB: Right. And that's where the resonance occurs in the human mind.

LA: Is that a structuralist idea or a David Barr idea?

DB: No, I don't think it's strictly structuralist. I think a lot of art is around that idea really. It's not even that new an idea. But I do feel strongly that since that's within my means I think that we all operate within our time and that if I were living in medieval Italy I'm certain I would be working within the framework of the ideas that were there and if I were very innovative I'd be pushing somewhat that framework, but I certainly wouldn't be leading it by thousands of years. And I'm living in a time in which we've got the means of reconstructing work and

LA: Do you think someone could actually reproduce your color? I mean it's so carefully thought out and it's obviously so much

DB: Oh, sure. I think there are people trained on museum staffs and things that could do it, yes.

LA: That could reproduce the quality of color, the intensity, the

DB: Yes, I think so. That's a funny question. One part of me wants to say yes and the other part says no, of course not, they couldn't. No one can do it. But, yes, I think they could, I think they could, whether they would or not. I don't know. But I think it's technically possible, yes.

LA: Would it be the same though really if you thought about it? It could be measured, one could determine how many coats of paint, but would it really be

DB: Well, in the end they could provide the same experience. Whether they could provide a new experience would be different. I mean whether they can provide a new, you know, that's always the question about a forgery. The ultimate limit of a forgery is that if someone can forge a Vermeer or someone can forge a Cezanne in the end, so what? The significance of Vermeer or Cezanne was that they didn't have anybody to forge, that they were new.

LA: So the idea and the concept is important. But you really think that someone could actually take a David Barr relief sculpture and reproduce it authentically and it would be as good as the original David Barr?

DB: I think that there are people that are skilled enough, sure.

LA: To do that?

DB: Yes.

LA: Okay. We are talking about some key inspirations in your work and in theories of works in relief sculptures that perhaps showed a change of direction or showed some major

DB: Right. I think I got off the subject there. I started with the idea of avoiding conflict and then introducing it and working with it. I think it's a matter of adding layers to the work in a way. Starting with the simple object and relationships of objects, then simple systems, then layers of systems until I think there are more and more elements there and that the invisible is probing deeper and deeper into a subterranean kind of sequence of ideas. What I find is that in one sense, when I'm doing a piece myself it's quite obvious to myself. But I've now done so much work and in twenty years of making reliefs and things when I look back at them I myself have to remember what was it I was thinking and what was I doing at that time? Because while it all seemed obvious to me, it of course has levels of obscurity now to me as well. I'm enthusiastically involved with what I'm doing now and I tend to quickly move through the past and leave it behind.

LA: Well, you can look back and for a moment, if you can, separate perhaps some, make some divisions about things that you're working on and what the inspirations were and what your feelings were and what you were trying to accomplish at that point.

DB: Well, I guess I can look at the sculpture. I can look at that separately for a bit. I can see the same kind of thing dealing, first of all, with the single object and even, you know, in various complicated elements to it, and then the relationship of different objects. That was a growth and a change of some kind.

LA: And the conflict, introducing the conflict was another change.

DB: Introducing conflict of some kind. Then leaving a sense of pedestal or mounted object of some kind and started to work with the earth in some way. I started to work with, interact with the site. Which is very much more where I am right now, thinking of it in that way. When I look at the development of most artists what I start to see is that the artists that are interesting start to incorporate more and more aspects of themselves, I think, into their work as they gain confidence, control, discipline.

LA: Can we talk a little bit, this brings us up to a good point, can we talk a little bit about your personal life and perhaps also discuss how that's reflected in your work? You've talked about the avoidance of conflict and that was

DB: Yes, there was a sequence of works and I do remember the time. The reliefs were numbered 1-10, 1-14, 1-15. In that period of time what I was calling rifts were appearing and there were sort of splits and fractures in the work. And of course, a few years later when I looked back on it I realized that that was right about the time of my divorce and it was this really obvious metaphor. There wasn't anything obscure about it, but I didn't see it at the time at all. I thought it was a completely intellectual decision. I think I've alluded to that earlier.

LA: Do you think that's true of most of your work?

DB: Yes, I think that a lot of it has got to do with that. It certainly does. I certainly can see my personal life changing a lot. I was fooling myself about myself perhaps for a long period of time.

LA: What do you mean fooling yourself?

DB: I think as a teacher I think I was in a, I learned very quickly as a teacher that I was very persuasive. And that frightened me that I was too persuasive, that I could very easily have turned out discipline, students that would follow me or would do what I suggested. And I immediately stopped talking about my work altogether. And I still, I don't to this day really talk, I don't know that I can keep myself or my attitudes out of it but for the most part they don't know directly what I'm doing. I'm so enthusiastic, for instance, about structuralist concepts, which I feel are misunderstood, and a very small part of the discussed art world that there's a part of me that yearns to talk about it and promote the ideas. On the other hand, if I'm falsely being an evangelist about it, then that sickens me and I don't like that at all. To convert people to that point of view seems to me to be the wrong thing to do. So I stopped. As a teacher therefore I found that I had a certain kind of power and impact. And there are nice things about that and there are frightening things about that. And it started certainly to affect my personal life. I began to feel, apparently, when I look back on it, that I was constantly trying to save people or to help them, that I could help anything, that I could do anything. I've come to the conclusion that I can't you know, that I'm

LA: Was that always present that you always thought?

DB: No, I don't think so, I don't think so. I just think I went through a period of time with that, and that as a consequence I was drawn to sad people and I was drawn to troubled people and I was drawn, that these people that I could help or do something for. The consequences of that was, I don't feel I'm without compassion for those people now, but I don't pretend to have the solutions for them. I can offer what I can offer but I can't solve for them. I can offer what I can offer, but I can't solve for them. They can solve, I find that if you feel you are solving for other people that you weaken them.

LA: Did you try to solve for them?

DB: Yes, and I think that, now whether it's aesthetic things or personal things or emotional things what's more useful is that what is communicated is that they contain the solution, that you encourage them to find the solution within themselves. And I believe in that more and more, you know, that that's a better thing to do. Anyway I find that when I look, that there are certain friends that have continued for a long time. Jim Pallas who is a wonderful artist, Bob Caskey has been a dear friend for years and he's got one of the best minds I've ever faced in my life.

LA: These are other artists?

DB: Yes, and is one of the finest human beings, just a beautiful human mind, poetic and gentle and very perceptive, Larry Booth who I think is maybe the one genius I know, really a fabulous architect, one of the most gifted. These are people who also to me represent health. These are people who also to me represent health. I know when I'm looking I'm talking about a twenty-year span of my life, have represented health and constructiveness and growth and change.

LA: And support.

DB: And support and mutual support I might say. I've supported them as well.

LA: Are these people who are other structuralists or are they different in their

DB: No, they're quite different. I find that with the exception of one or two of the people that are involved in the same direction I am that on so many other things that we don't have in common, so many other things that don't work. In fact, I like the fact that they aren't structuralists. I find that much more energizing and far less incestuous.

LA: More of a dialogue.

DB: Yes, there's more of a dialogue and we do quite different things. And when you get artists that are really pursuing the same goals then you get tremendous jealousies and too many confused personal things get in the way. It's much healthier this way.

LA: What are some of your personal interests aside from your vocation which is making sculpture? What are some of the personal interests you have?

DB: Just a big part of Well, I love sports. I love to play. The cultural things I love, of course, are literature and music. It changes from time to time. There will be a period in my life where it was Miles Davis and then there was a period in my life when it was Billie Holliday. Now it's Ben Webster. And that also changes, then Ben

Webster and Bach. In literature that changes too. For a long time early on it was Henry Miller, then it was Lawrence Durrell, and then it was, oh, well, so many different people. Right now I think the writers I like are as much as anybody. A lot of non-fiction too. Wishoshky and things like that are very important to me.

LA: What is a typical day in the life of David Barr?

DB: Well it depends on what time of year it is, I guess. I think in terms of sports, just to finish up that thought, what I like about them is that they're mindless. For a long time I sort of apologized for liking sports, they seemed non-productive. Well, I try to work at least fifty hours a week in my studio. Week in and week out and often more. And I don't like it when it's less. I feel that that's I feel I'm average, really that I've got average capacities and I've always felt that when that's true for one, that the only course left open was to work as hard as you possibly can to bring out of yourself whatever you can. So in consequence I've found that sports, an hour or two of absolutely mindless involvement is really wonderful. I feel good and I feel cleansed afterward.

LA: Therapeutic?

DB: Yes. I love to really sweat and I love to really work out hard and I love to be free of it. I seem to feel much sharper and keener and I love to have something matter so much that matters so little.

LA: What happens when the baseball season is over?

DB: I'll play racquetball or basketball. For a long time basketball was really an obsession. It is the most poetic of body movements.

LA: Why is that? Because of all the stretching and

DB: You use every conceivable muscle. Team sports to me have more meaning than individual sports.

LA: You like the competition?

DB: Yes. I like that too. I find myself very competitive. I'm short, I was always small in sports, well in the male world of sports I'm short.

LA: Well, basketball.

DB: Well, basketball I was always the smallest. I played in touch inner city leagues and often leagues in which half the teams were, yet we played in ghetto areas and everything else.

LA: Do you have to be better in order to

DB: You have to be better. You have to be smart to survive and not get beat up or not get before or after the game, or before or during the game. And I had to learn how, I wasn't somebody who was going to get into fights and do very well so I had to learn how to survive in other ways down there. But I would play a whole season for that thirty-second moment at which the team would jell into such symmetry and poetry that it was this Zen enlightenment, you knew you were going to, you knew this play was going to happen, you knew what was going to happen. It has nothing to do with winning.

LA: What does it have to do with?

DB: Excellence and coordination and timing, and a sensation. I mean to this day I can feel in my hand the ball dropping in just the right way or being released in just the right way. I feel a tremor going through my body when I knew a base hit was going to happen and it did. I knew where the ball was going to be and I wouldn't know how I had got to second base but I'd be standing there, I'd gotten there and the game would be won or whatever.

LA: Is that true of everything? Do you have the same feeling in everything in life?

DB: Uh, sure, certainly moments. I have moments. It relates to other things, you know. One of my favorite quotes is by Karl Wallenda, the tight rope walker. He said, "On the wire is life all the rest is waiting." For me love and making love and making art are real similar. Since I can't make love all the time I make art all the time. I think there's a similar sense of immersion of self and ecstasy of self, you know, all sorts of contradictions.

LA: Realization?

DB: And fulfillments. I think they're the same kind of narcotic, you know, they're wonderful narcotics. And the great moments the great ecstasies in sports are certainly compared to that, relate to that. I think they're all coming from the same sources of things. The same generation, the same spot deep in yourself that's motivating

all of those things. And they're sustaining. And you work a long time to regain them. You can't make them. You can't force it, you can't make that sensation either. But when they're there it's worth an awful lot.

LA: Can you talk a little bit about your wife, about the relationship you have from the beginning?

DB:With Beth? Well, Beth is by far certainly in recent years the most nourishing relationship I've had in that she knows who I am and likes what she sees. I think and so do I of her. She isn't competitive with my work, which is nice. She doesn't seem to feel dismissed by the fact that I'm so deeply involved in my work. She understands that. She's deeply involved herself with her own as a dancer.

LA: And isn't she part of your work?

DB:I think so. I certainly look at things such as the four corners project and other things I couldn't have realized what I've realized of that and other things without her. Because she's so actively helped financially and emotionally, you know, with ideas.

LA: And also in terms of

DB:And she's certainly dancing at the things and helping, modifying the ideas. It's an excellent editing process back and forth, kicking around ideas, you know, that idea is corny and this one is good. Why don't we work on that? So it's a real healthy kind of partnership. I'd like to do more of that again with Beth and with other people. I enjoy that, the mutuality of ideas. And certain four corners project which are clearly the contribution, become the contributions of so many people. It's great. That's wonderful and I want more of that. And my girls Heather and Gillian are with me now for four or five years and it's been really, the last couple of years since Beth has been here it's been important and really good for them and for me.

LA: Well, your children have been part of the four corners project, they've been part of the process involved in that?

LA: This is a continuation of an oral interview with David Barr on January 13, 1983 for the Archives of American Art. To conclude this interview segment why don't we talk some more about some of your personal interests and some of the things that really inspire you on a personal level and maybe how some of those things are reflected in your work, but not necessarily reflected in your work. Just David Barr as a person, a human being.

DB:All right. I think at one point you asked me how I spend the day or something.

LA: What is a typical day in the life of David Barr, let's say in the wintertime?

DB:Well, I'm a slow starter in the day. If I have, I don't often have control over it, but I like to sort of start by reading or something sort of slowly. My studio life is kind of organized in such a way that I have mindless jobs to do and thoughtful jobs and there are times I need a hundred percent concentration and there are times I can just kind of work away. In that way I'm fortunate in that there are days when I feel dull or tired or not full of anything but still plenty of work to do. It might be just mechanical tasks, sanding, gluing, mounting, that kind of thing. There are other days when I'm planning a new piece, conceiving new work or when I'm writing something, when I'm mixing color, then I have to feel like a samurai. I have to feel very sharp and I have to feel really with it. And I won't approach that job dull, I won't approach it sluggish or stupid or confused. I've learned not to do that. I've learned that when I've done it, that when I've slipped, slipped into those jobs in any kind of mechanical way then I turn out really empty work. So I listen to what's going on inside of myself and if I feel singing there then I do things that will bring that out.

LA: If not you'll do the sanding and gluing?

DB:Yes. If I'm building a piece of sculpture, for instance, the thing I've noticed about sculptors, the kind of work I do at least, passion has to be sustained, you know, that what people call passionate work and I've had people call my work coldly intellectual or whatever and I think that sometimes they're confusing a geometric form as opposed to an inorganic kind of form and making the association. And yet from my point of view somebody who can do a gesture drawing in thirty seconds, for instance, as opposed to a sculptor who might have to work two years or six years on one project, the one doing the long term has to sustain passion for a long time over one idea. And that's almost different assurance of passion.

LA: Where is the passion?

DB:Oh, I think it's everywhere in what I do, in the idea, in the realization of an idea. Once a long time ago I wrote about ideas that art works for me are like fossils in that they're evidence of where you were, of where you walked and what you've been going through and what you've been thinking of. In that sense I think that's evidence of a life of passion. But a passion can be for ideas as well as for images and color and shape. It can be

for all of those things.

LA: So passion is sustained until you've realized the concept?

DB: Yes, I think it's I love to work and I love to do my work, inseparable from all of it.

LA: What part do you like the best? Do you have a favorite part to do in the work process?

DB: No, I think they all have I'm tired of the mechanical jobs. I don't, I mean I'd love to have physical assistants for that but I also distrust it. On some jobs it's really good to have it, but on a lot of the other things I've felt, you know, if you get too efficient with your time and too productive then something bad starts to happen to the work and it can go empty on you again. So it's important to be in touch with that aspect of it as well. But anyway, an average day, I like to spend fifty, sixty hours a week working in my studio if it's at all feasible. And good times for me to work are throughout the day into late evening. I often like to work until one or two in the morning when it's really quiet and I'm able to concentrate fully. But I'm less delicate about that than I used to be. There was a time when a phone call or a child running into the room or something was very disruptive to me, that I couldn't take it and was real impatient with it. And now I find I've got such a momentum over a career that I can't break my rhythm, you know, that I can maintain my rhythm through a lot of that. Certainly not major things, but through a lot of things that I'm all right, that I'm more patient with it, that I can regain it again, I have confidence of regaining it. So I like to do that. And I love films, it breaks away from my work. I listen to music during most of my work. I'll even have

LA: In the studio you mean?

DB: Yes. And if I'm doing really stupid mechanical tasks I'll have a ball game on or television or something. I don't mind that at all if I'm doing things that aren't creatively involving.

LA: What kind of music do you listen to?

DB: More classical all the time than anything else. I listen to all sorts of things, some days an opera, a lot of times jazz, but mostly just straight classical things.

LA: Do you have any favorites of those?

DB: Each who is filled with invisible structures that I don't begin to understand. Each by far. And it's funny I knew Bach from the time I was a young man and I saved him until the last five years, I'd say. I knew that I wasn't ready and I always knew I would be.

LA: Do you see any similarities in Bach's musical compositions and your own?

DB: I don't know enough about music to know, but I suspect so. But he is unbelievable. I see Bach to music as Shakespeare to literature just like somebody apart, somebody just worlds apart. But next to that in terms of contemporary so many of the great jazz composers. And I find myself slipping back through time in that way too. It's odd that starting with somebody like Miles Davis and then preceding backwards I'm liking now Duke Ellington, you know, I'm liking some of the older people a lot. And that whole period of time almost for me it was an unappreciated time and I'm sort of going back and learning about that whole period of time. And there are some contemporary things I like too.

LA: Anyone else, like Duke Ellington or Miles Davis? There's a range in between there.

DB: Oh yes. Well, let's see, Brubeck and Desmond are people I like a lot. Even sort of jazz classical performers like Claude Bolling and people are nice. I like some of the new people, Philip Glass, Stephen Wright, Gloria Dean are people I like a lot.

LA: If you were to see a film of your work, or your relief sculpture let's say, with a musical score behind it, what would you choose?

DB: It would depend on the piece, I guess. I would say it could vary from all those people. There's also occasionally, I think, a piece is flamencan, I like flamencan guitar, classical guitar.

LA: What about the four corners project? To digress a little bit, a musical score for the four corners project, what would you

DB: In that case I think mostly tribal music.

LA: Mostly the music from different cultures.

DB:From different cultures yes. It's so rich and varied and I think that that's what I would want more than anything.

LA: Something like?

DB:Yes, with throat songs and music played with conch shells. Each of the cultures has, you find certain music. There are tendencies all over the world, every culture has a drum, has a pipe, has a voice, has a horn or a shell or something. Those would be the instruments I would want.

LA: Okay. Getting back to being in the studio and listening to music and your personal life, you say you spend about forty, fifty hours a week working and you enjoy going to films. What other things? And you played baseball and are interested in basketball and sports. What other aspects, what other kinds of things do you like to do? Do you like to travel? Do you like to

DB:I like to travel some. I'm not, I like to travel for short periods of time. I find that I get pretty restless if I'm away, and I get overloaded, I can really go to a place in a week and it seems a long time because I almost don't stop when I'm there. I don't like to just lay on the beach or something. I like to just see. So just coming back from Yucatan and seeing the ruins. On each of four days out of the seven days I went to a different ruin, Chichen Itza, Kubat, Tulun, and El Rey and that's a lot. And I'd like to, my way of doing it is then to go back. It's the same way I do an art show. I'll often go very quickly to an art exhibit in a museum or in a gallery and spend just a few minutes, twenty minutes or something, sometimes I'm almost running through a museum. But then I like to go back, go back three time and slow down and take my time with one object here, confront it if it interests me in some way.

LA: It's revealing.

DB:I find that if I don't do that I'm so eager in anticipating what's going to be in the next room and the next and the next painting or the next sculpture that I'm not able to give any concentration to it anyway. So I go on. Sometimes that's made it difficult because I'll travel a long way to see one thing and then come all the way back and then decide I've got to go back again. But that seems to be the way I want to do it.

LA: But doesn't that tie in with your whole idea about revealing things and having them?

DB:Yes, I believe it does come to think of it. Yes, it might. Then I have to read about it. I've changed so much from early on wanting to see and experience only those things that I could clearly see a relationship with my work and finding everything else kind of a waste of time, to now having gone through a long history of that being very intrigued and drawn into works that are really alien to me and wanting to understand what that's about a lot more.

LA: Just wanting to know what it's about.

DB:I think so. I don't know how it shows itself in my work. I'm not sure how it's going to reveal itself. I've learned that things do, by trusting my own creative processes I've learned that I don't have to justify. I think there was a time in some middle-class illness having to justify everything one does and justify every experience you're going to have and justify everything you're doing. I don't, I find that if my life isn't justification, then it isn't, that I don't have to prove it the next day or the next month, that what comes out of it is something that I think it will show itself. Chichen Itza will probably show itself in my work at some point. Maybe it won't but I suspect it will.

LA: Is it subliminal?

DB:Something just gets processed there.

LA: And as in the case when you were having difficulties with your marriage the conflict won't come out until much later?

DB:We are what we are you know. Art to me is only intellect is empty. Just as art to me that is only feeling is empty. What we are is an embodiment of all of those things really. We're thinking, feeling, moving, sometimes mindless, sometimes sexless, sometimes sexy, sometimes We're all of those things. Structuralist reliefs to me are sensual. There are a lot of, you know, as well as being intellectual, as well as having ideas, they're clear elusive logical and they're mysterious, elusive, and uncertain, they're all of those things at once.

LA: A mixture of everything. Is that true in all of your work?

DB:I think so. It is for me anyway. At least in the best of it. I hope that's true. I feel these things are, that artists are sending out harmonics, you know that touch other people's lives. And again, that they take this invisible world and they make it visible for somebody else. Now if somebody else didn't have that harmonic in them, then nothing would happen, you know, there wouldn't be anything of any meaning. It's only when the message is sent

and received, which might be in that lifetime, might be in another, might be by one person, might be by two thousand people, but ultimately the whole experience has to happen for it to have meaning.

CC: Chuck Cirgenski is also present

[Brake in taping]

CC: Chuck Cigrenski is also present

LA: This is an oral interview with David Barr for the Archives of American Art on January 24, 1983. Okay, David, we want to talk about the "Four Corners" project and I'd like to know exactly when the idea was conceived, where were you, what were you think of, what were you doing. Can you, are you able to pinpoint exactly the moment?

DB:No, I'm not. The best I can do I know it was around 1976 or earlier and really it comes from working with form. The first, I'd been working with the tetrahedron already at that time for at least fifteen years just as among several other simple geometrical forms. The Detroit Institute of Arts has a piece I did in, I think, 1962. It consists of a tetrahedron inside of a cube and the edges of the tetrahedron touch the edges of the cube.

LA: Can you explain exactly what the tetrahedron is?

DB:It's four sides; the basic form is four equivalent triangles; it's the least-sided form that exists, geometric form. It also represents the most stable because of the . . . It's a form that many people, of course, have worked with: Aristotle, Kepler, Buckminster Fuller, and so on. It's not a new form by any means and the combinations of them are also ancient, combining things together in various ways.

LA: Why did it have such significance for you?

DB:Well, I felt there's something so pure about it, I guess. It's trying to express these simple things in a new way and to make us see them and to make us aware of them.

LA: What are some of those simple things? You said it expresses simple things clearly so that we can see them.

DB:to express simple combinations of them but to try to give them new life in a new way. In the whole early period of my work as a Constructivist I was very interested in it. I still have some of the very early pieces I did with tetrahedrons because, as I say, it's the most stable form. You can exert great pressure on it and so on. And yet even though it's ancient and it's surprising how little has been done with it really. I think there's a mass of opportunities. So I've worked with it inside of the cube and a variety of other kinds of things. The Four Corners project began as a series of ideas. I suppose the first idea was thinking about: if I combine a least-sided, a tetrahedron, with the most-sided, a sphere, what happens, what occurs? Well, two nice combinations immediately happen. You put a sphere inside of a tetrahedron and it touches at four points; or you can put the tetrahedron inside the sphere and it touches at four points. The moment, of course, if there's a moment at which something special has happened, and I can't find those things on the calendar, it's an extending an idea out of its normal context. Of course, most of the work with sculpture and reliefs and things that were of a particular scale, usual art scale, something you hang on the wall, something you mount on a pedestal.

LA: like about how large would you say?

DB:Well, you know pieces of sculpture maybe three feet or two feet or whatever. A big piece is ten feet. I suppose the moment of recognition in this was that thinking of the tetrahedron inside a sphere realizing it will touch at four points and then suddenly realizing that the sphere could be the earth and that . . .

LA: Did this come after you have created a piece such as this in your work?

DB:No. Not the sphere.

LA: So this was all mentally organized?

DB:Yes. I think I always have two or three different kinds of lives going on: one, realizing reliefs and realizing pieces as I work, periods of time when I'm then doing mechanical work in order to realize it in which my mind is usually working on things that are in an idea stage. I have notebooks and writings that I always keep ideas going. And I probably am greatly frustrated by the fact that even though I realize a lot of my work, I just realize only ten or twenty percent of what I would like to do.

LA: A lot of it is still up there in the mind or in notebooks?

DB:I just don't have time, energy, facilities, money, to do it, to realize it. I get done what I can. So there are

many more things. So there's often ideas like this exist. Well, at a certain point I think I was frightened for a long time by the arrogance of the idea of the Four Corners project. It frightened me. First of all, it seemed logistically impossible: how would I do it, how would I get around, how would I go to all these places. I couldn't pay my gas bill. So, first of all, that seemed pretty frightening. And then for a long time I felt that I didn't have a right to do it.

LA: Why?

DB: Oh, it just felt like: who am I to do such a thing? As my friend Bob Caskey said, "You know, if you do this, it will always change my idea about the earth because I'll know it's there." And that felt pretty arrogant to feel that. It felt like I would be arrogant to do it.

LA: Too grandiose?

DB: Yes, too grandiose and too much. But then the more I thought about it the idea started layering with all other ideas and other realizations. And it this was at that point, let's say 1976 or 1975, this is among a number of ideas, a lot of them . . . The way I work is by editing out; certain ideas I'll act on, certain other ones I won't. And there's a hot time of ideas and that's usually right when they're fresh.

CC: What environment are you usually in when you get . . .

DB: It seems to vary widely. I now find in the last year or so I seem to be having a lot of ideas that are coming to me almost in dreams. it's very strange. I've never had that before though. This did not come to me in a dream. A lot of problem solving that are coming out of dream states.

LA: When you think . . .

DB: I think early in my work almost every idea seemed a deliberate drawing together of my resources to have an idea. Now I find that I have an abundance of ideas and I have to choose. I seems to . . .

LA: When you think of the Four Corners did it become a preoccupation that you thought about continuously?

DB: Mhhmm . . .

LA: And where were you, and what would you be doing when you would be thinking of it? Can you sort of, if you can go back in time and try and remember exactly the process that you underwent thinking about this? What were you doing? And how did the ideas evolve and how did they emerge and how did they . . .

DB: Well, I remember, first of all, it was talking with some friends and then talking with some . . . Oh, I talked to a chemist out at Macomb and I was mentioning this. The problem that I had early on was trying to calculate how to do it. I built a crude model very quickly. I did that back in 1976. Just a wood model that I could make pointers and show on the earth, I could rotate a globe inside of it and pick out four spots.

LA: Do you still have that?

DB: No. I've got a facsimile of it, though, that I build for the show. And the idea of it was, I quickly came to rough in the locations that I ended up in. But, of course, these little tin globes that you buy are very inaccurate and having a pointer that points to a continent or something, or even an area on that continent, or a city still isn't accurate, still doesn't tell me where I want to go exactly. And the mathematics of it were involved. So I talked to a couple of, I talked to a chemist at school and he was the one who said to me, "You know, this is the model of the carbon atom." Which was really nice. Things like that started to get me very excited. I mean there was a certain layering, more and more information, more and more insight about what I was doing and what it could mean, what it could represent. And at that point it started to appear to me that the project was bigger than me and I started to feel less arrogant about it in the sense that other people could get involved, could get excited, that its meanings would vibrate beyond the own ego reward of: gee, I built this largest sculpture in the world.

Then I'm a conduit to the piece; I am not, you know, the piece exactly. I think a lot of the meaning and understanding of the piece and what I want to do with it in defining it came by building my house. That during that year that I was working on my house which was, it must have been about 1978, and I was out here constantly working alone ninety-nine percent of the time living, even when I finally moved in and I was sleeping on the floor here without heat and everything else. I was frustrated because that was the longest break I had ever had out of my studio, not being able to realize pieces, not being able to work because I was working sixteen hours a day on the house.

LA: And you were constructing something . . .

DB: Planning and other kinds of things which are hard to work and they're involving but they're also mindless. In

the end it's mindless. It's not something that was taking my creative energy at all. So my creative energy went inside and I found myself just thinking and being preoccupied about the project: what would I do and what does this mean and having all kinds of ideas and then discarding them. I mean initially the Four Corners project thinking was: well, the thing to do was to go to each of these points and build some . . . I started with the idea of some twenty-foot-high stainless steel structure on each of the corners. And then: no; no, I won't do that, I'll lower it down, it should be the height of a human being, it should be six feet high, you know, so your eye will line up with the top of it. And: no, it shouldn't be stainless steel; what I should do there is go without any materials and build it out of whatever is there; if it's vegetation I'll use vegetation, if it's sand it's sand, and if it's ice it's ice; and all that. Then not liking that, then starting to, I remember it came out of a conversation with Larry Booth who has many nice insights. We were talking about it and between us, I can't remember from where it came, but it really became the idea that it had to be: that I was taking the four points from what was once one, that it couldn't be constructed on the side, that I had to have something that was one, that was divided and dispersed on the earth. So that creates a different kind of tension.

LA: And creates another whole . . .

DB: Yes. And then making a case to carry that. So one thing starts leading to another. A lot of ideas then were refined while I was just working away.

LA: So you would be working on the plumbing or hammering and in the process you would be thinking of these ideas?

DB: Yes. Right. And I think a lot of it is: what I found with my work was that it's coming, there's something about building a house that is really so elementary, "elemental" is a better word.

LA: It frees you.

DB: And you're working with the earth, you're putting a house on the earth and taking it out of the earth, you're drawing water out of the earth, you're protecting yourself from water and elements and you're doing something that's pretty primary that people have been doing since the beginning of time. And I think that that started to connect me to the earth in a different way; that if I had never built the house, then I never would have been connected in that way. And it made me humbler in a variety of ways. There's something very humbling about building a house. You realize all that you don't know and all that you have to learn and yet all that so many people have known all along and a lot of things. And the project for me has been, again, that kind of contradiction: one of a tremendous sense of achievement about various things but also constantly humbling, constantly running into things and really realizing how tremendously naive I am about Indonesian politics or about Easter Island politics or Easter Island history, whatever.

LA: It's not just conceiving a shape and executing it but a multitude of other things that you weren't aware of.

DB: Yes, that's right. And it takes me into other people and other cultures. Things such as feeling very superior about South Africa's racial policy, you know, feeling very much that this is objecting very much to everything that goes on in South Africa out of an American context. Going there with my own ideas and being confronted at the site of the point with white farmers who had what we would consider would resemble the American plantations of the past and then realizing that I was prejudiced against them. And it was, you know, that these people who I probably don't agree with politically in many ways were on a person-to-person, one-to-one very nice human beings. They were generous, they were open-minded. We came in, we put the project. They touched me to the point where I kept thinking about it. And I thought: how dare I go there with these ideas; how dare I go any place with these ideas. It's humbling in that sense that we set up things and then we are confronted by our own self. You see what I mean?

LA: Mmhmm.

DB: And so it's been a project that in design transcended a lot of those ideas. The realization certainly has transcended it.

LA: Okay. We're going ahead a little bit because I think there are things we want to get into if we talk a little bit about the placement thus far of three corners. But going back in time a little bit, when you first came up with the idea what was the response that you had?

DB: I'd say that nearly everybody thought it was a good idea and one that if I was smart I would just let drop that.

LA: Because it would be too difficult?

DB: Well, almost anyone could immediately see how expensive it would be, how difficult it would be to overcome

a lot of those things. Most people felt that since there is a great deal of conceptual art that remains just as idea or written statement that this piece would be just as well "you're done it, you've stated it" . . .

LA: You've thought it.

DB: You've thought it, you've printed it, you've put it into writing. Why do any more?

LA: Why wasn't that enough for you?

DB: Too easy. That it doesn't have any resonance; that that is ego. Now that I think of it, I think that that is . . . it's like somebody saying, "Well, I've thought of a cure for cancer so I won't have to do anything about it." I mean that's not right.

CC: It's like the importance of original thought and that's all the further it goes.

DB: Yes. It's just your own, it's like your own self congratulation.

CC: Yes.

DB: I felt that the piece is about the peoples of each of the areas and the histories of those people who are, we'll let's say, "primary" people rather than "primitive". They're often not literate but with a really intense art history. I wanted the piece to be . . . That's why I chose those areas as opposed to several other coordinates, coordinates that I could have used. So, in my mind, the piece had to be acted on a ritual way to kind of harmonize with those cultures, to acknowledge those cultures. If I don't do that then it really stays a white, middle-class artist's idea. Which I find we have an abundance of.

LA: Okay. This is a good time, I think, to define exactly with the Four Corners project is.

DB: Well, I see it as a metaphor for human connection, that it's a metaphorical symbol, that the enactment of it, the completion of it, even if it's temporary, is that it's a symbol that we can carry in our mind; that ultimately all art all art experience, visual, musical, kinesthetic, whatever, reside in the mind anyway. That's the destination of them all is the human mind. And we gain them in a variety of ways. I'm hoping that through a film, through documentation, through a journal, through exhibits, that we can provide routes into that destination, a variety of routes into it. And perhaps in some tiny way, I don't think it's going to change world history of anything, it certainly isn't going to cure a lot of social ills or anything else, but it seems to me to be a part of the obligation of artists art in general to sensitize us, to make us aware of things that we tend to gloss over. It's an invisible structure; it does exist. I, as an artist, am obligated already to the sculptures of Easter Island, to the Inuit dancers, to the fabulous history of African art, to the amazing and varied New Guinea culture. I already have a debt to those people. I am who I am already partly because of them. So the project is just calling attention to that. It's just acknowledging it; not to take any more because I think those people have an awful lot already taken from them; but in some way to try to return it, try to draw attention to the fact that these cultures, that we as human beings in the Western world, a technologically developed world, are still tremendously connected to them and indebted to them and share far more with them than we're divided by. So it's a way of . . . You know, I feel humans nearly always share more than they're separated by and yet focus on what they're separated by.

LA: It's a beautiful thought. Can you pretend for a moment that I know nothing about the Four Corners project and talk, first, in a very technical way exactly what you're setting out to do, and then the philosophical implications of that? You know: what the Four Corners is about, what you are physically trying to do and conceptually trying to do . . .

DB: You're trying to keep me off my digressions . . .

LA: No, it's just that I think it's important for those people who will be listening to this who don't know at all . . . Pretend right now that I know nothing . . .

DB: Well, technically the idea was that there are logistical problems, there are financial problems, there are political problems, there are physical problems. It's a matter of solving all those things one thing at a time. And I might just digress for a minute: part of the way I function as an artist is to set problems for myself and they to solve them. I mean that's part of what has kept me intrigued. I've never been interested in performing and reperforming the same kind of thing for very long, you know. So I like to set up a new problem, a new challenge. That to me is really the main fuel, I guess, or why I keep working as an artist: that there's always a new set of problems up there to work with. So there's that. And that's in all my work. This has certainly been a completely new set of predicaments. When I began this I already had debts from my house and everything else. And I'd never made, any money I'd ever made on the selling of my work has always gone back into the work: buying machinery, buying materials, buying a space to work in, whatever. so financially I just didn't, I was just

overwhelmed by it. I reached a point where I just got angry, said: I'll sell what I own, I'll make sure that my children are fed and have a school to go to and everything; but beyond that I would make whatever sacrifice I would have to make. I began selling some of the things I had in my collection to help finance it. And a woman friend of mine that's been interested in my work that works for one of the bands here said that she could get me a gold card with American Express and a line of credit and she believed, she knew I'd eventually pay it off. And she did that. and some other people said that they would buy some prints I did before I even did them, before they even saw them. They would advance me some money on that. So that got me enough up to go on the first leg of it anyway, to start and get me off the ground. Then there were logistical problems. Going to Machu Picchu first and to Easter Island and Africa. And part of the impetus for choosing the time I went was that I submitted the idea of what I wanted to do to a sabbatical committee at Macomb. I was due for a sabbatical. They approved it and then I had the time and then I felt, of course; now is the time, I have to go now, you know, to do it. I was grateful for that; I was glad of that. That gave me the final nudge for that moment as opposed to some other moment to go. And I began organizing it around that. Then there were the political problems where I felt there were two ways to go on the project: one, I feel that I probably could have accomplished it a lot easier, with greater simplicity because really what I was doing could go so unnoticed that I could just slide in and out of these countries and do it, just go there surreptitiously, step off the road, plant my little corner and go home. And I decided that was wrong. That whether or not I approved of the governments, whether or not I like the cultures involved, whether or not I knew how to do it, that that was dishonest and that would be somehow shaming the project. That the thing to do, even if it would stop the project which I felt that it might, would be to contact all the governments involved and notify them what I intended to do; try to go through, just writing on my own stationary and no other commitment by anybody trying to present just what it was about. Well, to receive such a request you can imagine the government of Chile and government of South Africa and the government of Greenland and the government of New Guinea Indonesian Irian Jaya is a very confusing thing. They don't know what to do. I don't know how they handled it exactly. But it would often be six months before I'd even get a letter back of any kind that they even received my letter. but I felt that still I had to notify them.

LA: To get yourself going?

DB:Yes.

LA: What did you tell them was your main objective when you were writing these letters defining . . .

DB:I sent the essay that I had written about it.

LA: What was in that?

DB:Well, basically that was the essay that was published in Coevolution.

LA: I know but I'm trying to get on the tape exactly what your main objective was.

DB:Well, the things have been stated really. You know, that the objective was to tell them what I would be physically doing . . .

LA: Placing the Four Corners, the tetrahedron.

DB:Placing the corners. It would also be telling them that it was a symbol really of what I felt was international good well of some kind.

LA: Uniting . . .

DB:That I was trying to transcend the politics, that I wasn't commenting on the politics. In all cases I feel I had been talking about the indigenous people, the indigenous history, not what I consider very transitory governments that happen to be there at the time or that had been there for one hundred years or ten years of a thousand years. I'm not interested in that at all but in the human beings on the sites, historically renowned sites.

LA: The idea is to place Four Corners to create an invisible geometrical structure, the tetrahedron, which is inside the earth and is imaginary and links various cultures together.

DB:Mmhmm.

LA: What role does ritual play?

DB:Well, first of all, I have always been greatly interested in the ritual of other people particularly of non-industrialized people. Ritual is almost no point, has no part in my own life. I was raised in such a way the trends in various churches and things and say what was going on, later in life I went to synagogues, attended all kinds of religious and other structures. To me I was always very much of an observer of those things, very detached from them. On the other hand, in my own life I've found that I created my own rituals that had great meaning for

me. For instance, before I started building the house I came to this land, this piece of property that was here and I decided to sanctify it. I had a mustache and a beard or something; I've forgotten what I had, I think it was a beard.

LA: A mustache.

DB: And there was a little marsh out back that I have since turned into a pond and I got water out of that and I shaved on the spot and I read some D. H. Lawrence poetry about earth and sensuality and other things. And I planted some flowers, the first flowers that were planted here. And I played my saxophone. One of the things that was nice about it was about a year and a half later before some neighbors who had witnessed that told me that they had witnessed that. Anyway, that's the kind of thing that I've done, invented my own ritual whether it was about . . . designed it ourselves, designed the ritual ourselves. That for me has always been far more intense than having an imposed ritual. There is something I feel about institutionalized rituals that have become devoid of meaning for me. So I wanted to design rituals for this, that the piece itself, the traveling, the problem-solving was about ritual. I wanted rituals to involve all the arts, not just me, not just a sculpture. So on each of the sites I've read poetry or my daughters have read poetry on each of the sites. There have been nearly always American Indian poetry or Apache or Navaho or something from the Far East or whatever. We've read things from different cultures, poetry. Dance has been involved. Beth has danced at each of the sites. There have been drawings made. It's kind of trying to involve, you know, photography, everything, as much as I can, incorporate all of the arts into the realization. And that to me starts to shape the ritual itself. After I gave up the idea that the piece had to be done with the vegetation and the natural materials, I felt that the piece had final realization for me is that the piece had to be placed in the earth and out of the earth and didn't have to go down ten feet or a thousand feet or whatever distance you put it down would still be trivial compared to how far apart from all it was. But I felt it had to be done on my knees.

LA: As a part of the ritual?

DB: Yes. So all of the things I've done I've been on my knees, touching it, sort of sensing, plunging my knee into the earth in some way and I felt that had to be part of it. It's been curious, it'll be interesting to see what happens in New Guinea, but so far they've all been on Sunday; it always ended up on a Sunday afternoon about three o'clock. That to me has no special significance but it's just been curious. Because I haven't been able to control each of the times. It was when I finally got permission, or the weather, or whatever. I've always gone when the pulse seemed right. I do like to go and find a spot . . . to me it's very solemn, it's a very solemn activity. I find going to it has been very solemn. It's usually been difficult for me to sleep before, to eat before, to do anything like that. Easter Island was especially wonderful because the morning we went, Beth and I and Booth said, "Let's go to a Mass up at the church." It was a Sunday morning. On Easter Island there's a little tin-roofed church up there. And it was Father Sebastian, one of the great missionaries who was there for thirty-five years and he's the one that preserved a lot of the art of Easter Island, catalogued it, kept track of it, wrote down the myths from the lepers and the leper colony. That's where we were, you know, for the side; it ended up in the ancient leper colony of Easter Island. And it was his church. He's dead but it was his church and his parishioners were still there. And it was a Polynesian Mass so the whole thing was done with Polynesian singing and it was unbelievably moving, just a beautiful, beautiful ceremony. You know, we were listening and the next thing I knew the people were hugging us at the end of the ceremony, it's a thing they all turn and hug each other, embrace each other. It was just wonderful. And that was the day we went, you know, from there we went on to put the point in. So it was a real nice day. And that was the first point put down.

LA: So the ritual becomes spontaneous depending on what happens?

DB: Yes, it does. I have a loose plan but I certainly don't feel like . . . I try not to make it theatrical either; it's something that has to feel right when I try to do it.

LA: You've talked about the placement of the corners being almost a celebration. Can you . . .

DB: I think the celebration is certainly the release of it. I know that right up until the moment I put the first one down on Easter Island I had doubts whether or not it was going to happen. I mean I've always had doubts about whether I could complete this thing. It's now 1983 so it's seven years since 1976. And I've had doubts about whether or not it was ever going to get done. So part of the celebration is about that. It's also the piece has had a personal heaviness for me. It's dedicated to my sister, before I left of Easter Island, two weeks before I left just before Christmas I found out she was dying of cancer. That's the point at which I dedicated the project to her and I was going to cancel and not go to Easter Island. She was insistent that I didn't do that and that I went. And it became dedicated for me personally to my sister. And to me that is also part of the meaning of the project in a different way, not just in a personal way. My sister wasn't an artist, wasn't even especially an art appreciator but was a marvelously decent human being, just a real good person and represents to me a lot of people that are in a larger social sense perhaps fairly anonymous but that are good human beings. And so the project is a lot about that. So there's often been a heaviness about the whole project for me personally as an involvement. I

remember in my journal the first thing I wrote on Easter Island is "Never so up never so down" and all the meaning of that. When I went to Machu Picchu on the way to Easter Island it was the highest I had ever been off the face of the earth, two miles up into the Andes Mountains. And Greenland also is up two miles off sea level. So you're up very high. Also "Never so down" physically that is I had never been that far in the Southern Hemisphere going down in that direction, too. And then, of course, the exact things were true emotionally, "never so up: in the sense of realizing what for me had become an important part of my life's work, something I very much wanted to do and to accomplish and I was an end to a level of obsession with it that I hope other people will appreciate it and enjoy it, that it adds to them in some way. I would do it, if no one else on the face of the earth cared I would still do it. So in that sense I had become such a drive to do it. However, certainly my feelings about my sister went with me wherever I went. And when I came back from that one, then I talked to her and everything. And when I went to Greenland just before I went to Greenland was the last time I saw her. I remember one of the things that was interesting was on the entire way out to the point in Greenland, Jim Pallas and I were on this plane that was loaded with extra gasoline that was slopping around inside loose in the plane, you know, flooding the plane and this incredible view of Greenland, and making this whole thing, and I don't know, Jim and I still have not talked about it, but I know his mother had died fairly recently and other things had been going on in his life, too, and it was interesting that we were both crying nearly the entire way there, and that when we got there we were both so busy doing it that we weren't.

LA: Why were you crying?

DB: I know why I was crying, it was because I was thinking about my sister. I was wearing a sweater that she had knit for me and that certainly was very much on my mind. But it was also Greenland itself. The icecap does not support life and it just is a, it's exhilaratingly beautiful and also the most barren place I've ever been, just absolutely devoid of life.

LA: So that was solemn?

DB: It's solemn, it's very solemn. And add to that just a rawness about it all and the difficulties of getting there. And Greenland was very hard to arrange. It was a year or two of calls, letters, frantically trying to find somebody that would take me there, trying to find a way, trying to understand the way to get there right up to the last minute with things that I will tell you some other time. After the project is all over I want to tell you some other stuff. But not knowing if we were going to be able to do it. Financially it was an incredible cost to charter the plane and we never knew, after the chartering came forth we didn't even know if we were ever going to get to the point, if we'd ever be able to get there, if we'd ever be able to land, if we'd have to cancel it and try another year. Some charter services were telling me it would take two and three years to set it up, petrol drops and everything. So it was very hard, it was a very hard thing. And there was the release of that, we were on our way, we had great faith in our pillar. So there was that emotional thing.

LA: Your overcoming the obstacle?

DB: Yes. Then once we had done it we weren't heavy, at least I know I wasn't and Jim certainly didn't seem to be. We were so relieved to still be alive and the plane flopped flying back. And the same barrenness. And he flew a slightly different route traveling back. We saw a geyser squirting up out of the top of the thing going about 150 feet in the air which was an amazing hole going right down into the icecap and streams of this cobalt blue water just pouring down and the geyser squirting up. It was an amazing sensation.

LA: Exhilaration.

DB: Yes. We flew through it, the pilot just few down, dipped the wing in it and flew through it half a dozen times. We looked down into this thing. and then came back. We came back and picked up the rest of our party, Beth and my daughter Heather and Lars Ressen of the Danish Consulate office, and Bill Mackintosh, this retired chemist. And we all Bill Mackintosh had been an R.A.F. pilot and he loved this little plane and we went up in it and our pilot Doyle flew us down all the fjords, flew us into the fjords and up it. And it was like a Cinerama ride where you're skimming along just barely missing everything and banking and coming out. Bill Mackintosh said he hadn't had a flight like that since World War II. It was just fabulous. And that, too, was this great celebration. We went back and got incredibly drunk all of us. Greenland at that time of year didn't get dark so we just were up, we were in another world. It was just marvelous.

LA: Is that part of it too then, the adventure? Is that all part of the project?

DB: It's become part. I don't know that I designed it in. I mean I don't think I'm doing anything needless. I'm not looking for the adventure.

LA: But it just happened . . .

DB: But whatever it takes to do I will do. I'm not going to do something added, added risk. I'm not giving off on

the first part of it at all I don't think. The fact that it is there I'm willing to do that. It's like there's risk involved in all sorts of things. The meaning for me outweighs the risks so I do it. But I'm not looking for thrills.

LA: Can you talk about some of the other anecdotes that occurred in the placement of the three corners thus far and the meaning that it's had on the project itself?

DB: Well, certainly one of the nice things was meeting a wonderful man on Easter Island named Mario.

[Break in taping]

LA: This is an oral interview with David Barr on January 25, 1983.

DB: It comes down to people, I think most of the anecdotes involve human beings that I liked and continue to like. Mario Arevalo was our guide on Easter Island, he is really a beautiful man. He had been up with, he had been involved, I guess, with Thor Heyerdahl when Heyerdahl was there years before. Mario married an Easter Islander and lives there. He's Chilean himself. He ended up being involved in the project. He like it, You see, I must confess that when I began this I was so paranoid at the resistance. Finding resistance even among people I knew, even people in the art world thinking, "oh, it's ridiculous" or "you just want a vacation, Barr", or "who's funding you, you must be getting money from some place" . . .

LA: Did you come up with that a lot?

DB: No, I never got any grants; you know, everything I either paid for it or the people who have been generous in supporting me on the project have gotten something in return, you know, some art work or something like that. So in that sense I feel it's been paid for in that way rather than a grant or anything. At this point for my part of the project I'm now obstinate about it and I wouldn't accept, a donation, yes, but not a grant about this. It just sort of, it doesn't confuse it, I don't want to confuse it. Anyway . . .

LA: Mario.

DB: Mario, yes. Mario was trained somewhat as an architect, I guess. There isn't deliberately a story or anything to tell except that it was just a real meaningful relationship and it was a good thing. I continue correspondence with him, I mail things to him. I feel that he's very much a part of it and that he's there and I would like to go back to Easter Island for a variety of reasons but certainly one of them is Mario. I'd love to send some exhibition materials of the whole project to Easter Island. In Africa I think one of the things that I ended up, that meant a lot to me was the tiny little village of workers on the farm, on the Bosman farm. First of all, the Bosmans themselves were very nice . . .

LA: It was their property?

DB: It was their property, the farm of Karee Boom, it was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Bosman. And when we went there they invited the mayor of the town of Reivilo which is the nearest town there. A businessman, a South African businessman was there, too. All three could talk English enough and they were very warm and open and had never met Americans before. I guess the businessman had, that was it. And they had thousands of questions to ask and they knew the most obscure levels of American, of Washington's cabinets, the member; people I didn't know. I mean they asked questions of things I couldn't answer. I felt very humble and stupid and here I am going in and pretending, thinking I know about their country and they knew far more about ours out on the middle of this farm than I knew about it.

LA: That was humbling.

DB: Yes, that was humbling. And so then on leaving we went to the village which is also right on the property, the African village that was there that consisted of farm workers. I went in. Beth and Gillian and Susan Hauptman who had accompanied us there went in and they were taking Polaroid pictures and giving them to the people who had gotten all dressed up because they knew they were getting their pictures taken. It was a nice kind of thing. but the thing that I remember, one of the things that I remember nicely about that was that I was trying . . . One never knows when you go into another culture whether you're being kind and understanding or patronizing or obnoxious. You don't know, you know, not knowing what to do and I was trying just to be a person, but you never know. You're not sharing the language a lot and other things so subtleties are lost, a lot of subtleties are lost, and trying certainly not to be offensive. Anyway, from what little I know of African traditions it used to be that if you wanted to enter an African village that in many of the cultures you went to the village elder and kind of asked permission; you just didn't barge in. And so whenever I was in Africa in anything that would look like that circumstance I kind of tried to look for the oldest African. There was an old man there in the village, what I saw to be the oldest man. While Beth and Gillian and Susan were photographing the other things I walked over to the man and bowed in front of him and took his hand. We didn't have the language or anything to communicate in some way to get permission, you know, to be there, acknowledgment that I didn't have the

right to just walk in. So many of the blacks in Africa walk with a kind of stooped over, defeated, dejected kind of walk that I found very sad. This was in Johannesburg we found it. He was all bent over like that when I walked up to him. I grabbed his hand, shook his hand, smiled and bowed. Suddenly he stiffened up and straightened up and two tears came out of his eyes and rolled down his face. That for me for a real nice moment.

LA: It was nice.

DB:Yes, it was nice; it was a nice moment. One of the things I want very much to do . . . In Greenland there wasn't anybody there on the site. On Easter Island there wasn't anybody near the area. It was the old leper colony and no one has ever inhabited that area. It's a deserted part of Easter Island really, they don't farm it or anything. In New Guinea in my own mind I've made a . . . if I am to make a piece and place it other than where it should be by a few feet, you know, or half a mile or whatever, I would welcome it if we could use, if we could do it in a place where there are people. At that point I would like to have people there I think.

LA: Because?

DB:Because I think that it's about people and I would like to involve and incorporate them. The New Guineans have a tradition of burying stones and magic stones and power in stones and that seems like an awful nice opportunity and that's something that . . . it may not come to pass, it may not be part of it, it may not be possible. But I found in the beginning of the project I tended to have a greater sense of privacy about it. I was more paranoid that; "gee, if I do this they'll dig it up and remove right after I leave, or if I tell people what I'm doing they'll think it's ridiculous, or they'll devour us, or in various ways distract us from what we're doing." I intended to want, and indeed we had in all of the sites so far, tremendous privacy. Now I'm thinking this final one I would welcome it not being private.

LA: And that's because of what happened in Africa?

DB:yes, and I think it would just be real appropriate on the last one not to have it too, I think . . . It was okay on the other ones. In this case I wouldn't do anything set up, I wouldn't go and get some villagers and force them to come or something.

LA:

DB:dance for us, you know. But if it was there and if it was possible and if they could participate in any way then I would welcome it. I would have at the other points, too, if it had been natural and a part of it, but in each of the other parts there were unique conditions in which that didn't seem right. And this one, no knowing at this point, it still seems like it would be nice.

LA: You say this is a piece about people, about uniting people. What about the whole idea of collaboration? Can you talk a little bit about the people that are involved who have accompanied you and the significance that they play in the process and what that means to the whole project?

DB:Sure. One of the things that's been nice about this is that as it has gone on, perhaps not . . . in the beginning I think only my greatest intimates believed in the project. Bob Caskey right from the start believed in it, he was probably the first one.

LA: He is your friend, another artist.

DB:Yes. And Jim Pallas, a friend, another artist. They have each accompanied me on parts of it. Donald and Florence Morris eventually believed in it. I think they thought it was, they didn't think it was a bad idea, they just didn't know what to do about it until more recent years but they certainly have made commitments about the project.

LA: And they represent the gallery that you're represented in.

DB:Yes. And Beth, my wife, ever since I've known her has been involved, has helped financially, has helped pay off debts and other things, too. I probably wouldn't have been able to go when I went without that.

LA: Can you talk about that a little bit? Can you talk a little bit about what Beth's involvement has meant?

DB:Well, we're going to get off.

LA: All right . . .

DB:I just want to answer those first ones before we get lost. The project has been bigger than me in so many ways. Part of it has been because it started to draw people to it. It became a magnet for a lot of these human beings and the word I've found that best explains that it's one that's like a "detonation", it's like something an

idea goes in . . . I called the geographer at University of Michigan, John Nystuen out of the blue. I had never met him, never heard of him or anything. I called the department and said "who is head of the department of geography or the best one." I've forgotten how I stated it. They gave me him. I described the project. There was a long silence on the phone while he was probably deciding whether or not I should be institutionalized. And I said, "Please don't give me your answer now. I'll mail you some material." I mailed him the essay and some other things. And a week later he was interested and he got involved and since then he's been a very active part of it. I can't separate them from it. And unlike a lot of other things I've done which have been my ideas from beginning to end, I've been more than willing to incorporate other people's ideas. This has just added to it, not detracted from it. And I like that. It's blossomed out of my control and I like it. In this case, in this project, it's something I welcome. That has been . . .

LA: I was just going to say, you know, could you address specifically the various people that have been involved and what their involvement has been?

DB: It's a long list but certainly it's been: Donald and Florance Morris have been helpful; Alvin and Lois Spector, I met them at a party, described the project, they were very enthusiastic and lent some financial support; Margo and Walter Cohen the same thing, believe in my work for years and have been very active in supporting it in that way. There's a list of people that are in the document I don't have that . . .

LA: Or you can talk about the people who have gone with you and their roles.

DB: Yes. The first leg, Larry Booth, an architect friend of mine from Chicago whose ideas helped in some of the refining of it and who . . . Well, that's an interesting case in point. As an example; what I had felt was that I could have saved a lot of money by going alone to all of these points; it's logistically simpler. I've traveled alone a lot, and it's real simple. If you're crabby for three days who cares, you know. And if you're exhausted . . . You eat when you want to, you don't eat when you don't want to. It's real easy to travel that way and there are things that I like about it. It's much more complicated when multiplied geographically depending on how many people you have. On the other hand, that seems to be the meaning of it. I also felt that it became very important to believe in these experiences that what would come out of the project would go back into the world, that if I go alone I'm having my experience and it sort of begins and ends there. This project is meant to be shared. So if I can involve other people that's better. Secondly, if I take somebody like Larry Booth, as a for instance, who is a wonderful architect, that I know the result of his being in Machu Picchu and in Easter Island that some day something will detonate in that way and even if it has nothing to do with the project it will go back into the world, that something that he gained there will be delivered back into the world. And I believe that for every one of the people that I believed are positive, have a creative look at life, who want to give back to the world and not just take from the world. And everyone that's gone I believe, Bob Caskey, an artist, also went with me on the first leg to Easter Island and to Machu Picchu. Susan Hauptman, an artist from New York, went to Africa and she already did some drawings and some other things for an elaborate journal that is amazing. Jim Pallas who went with me to Greenland. I know these things will have, in terms of history and down the line, for people other than myself, you know, fruits; that it will be fruitful. I have taken each of my daughters to one of the places. I think it's too early to see where it all goes. And they're hard to measure; I think these experiences are very hard to measure. But something does come of it. Beth has gone and I think she and Denis Sepula already they've worked on a Four Corners dance; they've become interested in tribal dance and, you know, I see incorporations of those things. So it's a pebble-on-the-water kind of image, rings come off of it and then expand and becomes bigger than itself. It certainly becomes bigger than me in that way.

LA: Does it have a special significance, Beth's involvement, she's your wife and can you talk about that a little bit.

DB: Yes, I think it's been, it certainly has brought us close. You know, she went to the first parts when we weren't married. It was an enormous commitment on her part. At that time in her life she hadn't traveled much at all and was nervous about it and had a lot of fears of even going. I showed her the map I had of Easter Island which was about five feet by five feet with this little dot about one inch big and it was all ocean. She physically cringed at the idea of dropping down onto it. She had a lot of fears about it, about traveling. She certainly has overcome them now. But it wasn't something that she could easily do, that was casual for her. She did it because she believed in me and believed in the project and has been tremendously supportive for it and that has helped a great deal. I have helped, too, because of the way she is when she travels. I don't have to worry about whether she's having a good time or not or whether she's got enough rest or, you know, she won't take care of herself and she won't make it a good experience for herself. so that's been . . .

LA: What about the creative collaboration?

DB: Yes, I think she has a . . . I think her main strength has been editing ideas, you know: "no, that's corny", or "no, that's not good enough", and "what about this?" and in bouncing ideas off of her. I think that's been a real important thing and throughout all my work a way of refining, a dialogue, as a means of dialogue that's real

important. And I think that's what I share with my intimates in general. My favorite way to be in the people I like to be with are people that allow speculation. If I have to, if every statement that I say has to be immediately defended and every ramification thought out, I find that such a tense situation I don't want to be around it. I enjoy free speculating a lot and just kicking around ideas and trying this and trying that and playing with ideas. And that to me is real important and Beth and I have that kind of relationship. We can speculate and try out things, you know. I find it healthy.

LA: If you were going to summarize, this probably is going to be a toughie, but if you were going to summarize, imagine yourself ahead of time and having place the fourth corner, what would you have accomplished?

DB: Yes, that's, I wonder about it because I see two sets of feelings that are possible and, you know, I'm constantly surprised that the more you try, the more I try to consciously construct ahead of time, is when I'm going to feel the more tricked.

LA: Is that not a question you can answer?

DB: No, let me . . . I'll be glad to take a try at it. When I went to Africa the thing that stunned me I had no idea I would feel . . . I was putting in that second corner 6464 miles away right through the earth, just feeling a tension and a space. As a sculptor I work with a lot of space and feeling those kinds of relationships but never anything like that. And that was unbelievable. Well, that set up a pre-condition to which I was going to feel something in Greenland "ah, well now I'm putting down: . . . You see, the first one, you've put down the first one it's like creating a history of form, put down the first one you've created a point; you put down the second one you've created a line; you put down the third one you've created a plane; you put down the fourth one you've created a solid. So when I put down the third one I didn't feel anything. And I think it was probably because the airplane had taken off and left us there and it was silent and we were 400 miles from anything and two miles up on the icecap and it was five below. And we were wondering if our tushies were ever going to get off of there. So it was probably blocked by a whole lot of other things that were going on at the time. So I have no idea about that, what it will feel. Usually on the completion of things, of projects that I've been involved in, as I have been in the past, I feel a great deal of relief and a great deal of release. And it's often followed by postpartum blues of some kind, a feeling of "now what?", "now what kind of thing am I going to do?", or "what was that all about sort of thing?" and, you know, feeling robbed of the process that's been with me for so long. So this process has been with me now for so many years that I may miss it. On the other hand, I've got so many other projects that I've been given that I now feel the courage to attempt because of this project that I think I will also be just excited to turn in to those, to get going on other things. Because seven years is a long time. I'm glad that so far the idea hasn't run out of energy for that I would be real hard to think that when a whole lot longer the energy, you know, to do it might be lost. I mean what if I had lost faith in the idea . . . [interrupted by bell ringing]

LA: If you had lost faith in the idea.

DB: Yes, if I had lost faith in the idea or if I had been distracted by another project that I felt was more immediate of that character, I can imagine things sort of just tailing off. On the other hand, I'm pretty compulsive and I finish almost everything that I do start. And that has given me a lot of motivation to keep going with it. It's as a point now that I can be more patient. When I hadn't done anything I couldn't be very patient at all. But when I'd even done just the first two I didn't feel very patient. somehow doing the first three it became like an exquisite torture now completed it's something really to . . . As long as there's progress being made and I'm working on it I feel very patient. When nothing is happening and I haven't gotten any responses to letters then I feel frustrated again. but as long as the process is going . . . And I now see those very same delays as a blessing. Now that the Archives is interested other things have happened as a consequence of the delays that, had they not been there, had I been able in 1976 to go to all four places, bang, bang, bang, bang and be done, a lot of things would have been missed that now are present. So there are some good things about it. I think in terms of what I hope the project will do is that it will echo a bit. I hope that, I would love to have exhibition materials, or a film or documents on it to share, I would like it to go everywhere that the project has been, each of the countries the project has been, other countries as well, you know, Europe and other things simply to share what it's about. I feel that the sculpture then continues to be built person by person by person. I'm amazed now at how many people know about it and that people tell each other, and even if it's a garbled idea, that it exists in some way in a surprising amount of human meanings. And that's really very rewarding. It feels great.

LA: I'm going to ask you to do something now that's very difficult but I'm going to ask you anyway: If you were to think of yourself as a film maker making a film about this yourself, could you come up with about five or six very strong visual images, not philosophical, but visual images that perhaps are key points that could serve as a springboard for your whole concept and how it came to be and how it evolved, some of the strongest imagery that you can think of?

DB: Well, it would be the images of the implanting of the corner, the dance at the corner. Those would be important to me. a lot of the other images would be the faces of people that were seen . . .

LA: People involved you mean.

DB: People involved in the project both people here and people on the sites. And then certain historical art works of each of the cultures, you know, the heads of Easter Island, the African art sculpture, fabrics, materials, Ekoi wood pieces, New Guinea pieces; there's just an abundance of that.

LA: Those images are strong. What significance do they play in relation to the project?

DB: Well, they're part of lives. The Four Corners are drawn to those sites as opposed to some site that's devoid of it. It's acknowledging the cultures that created those pieces rather than industrialized cultures that may have overwhelmed those cultures.

LA: Can you talk a little bit about that: why those four particular points?

DB: Well, again, when I began the purely technical problem was that the world is two-thirds water. So in order to locate it you start with one corner. When you fix one corner on a sphere then the other three corners of the tetrahedron would rotate and they describe a great circle.

CC: Now you did this through just working with a model?

DB: That's right. Just working with a model, playing with it and experimenting and wondering what it would be. Well then, the problem that anyone would quickly notice, anyone who set themselves this problem would quickly notice that the world is two-thirds water that the South Pacific which is a huge proportion of the world and that we tend not to think much about because there's not much out there geographically that holds our interest. But that's going to give you the biggest problem that you're going to end up in the water all the time. And I wanted this piece on land because while the world is covered two-thirds with water still the water is insignificant. If you reduce the earth to the size of a billiard ball it will be smoother than any billiard ball and the water would be like the faintest vapor on that. So the earth really is still just this big rock, you know, a perfectly smooth rock. And I've found that I conceive of it completely differently now. So when you're locating it down in there the thing to do then, at least it seemed to make sense to me, was to locate it somewhere in the South Pacific on an island. So thus Easter Island, which seemed to me to be a very powerful culture in terms of its art, was logical. From that I did other things. Then it was to choose among other possibilities.

LA: So Easter Island was basically the corner?

DB: Yes, it was the first one. And it's known as the "navel of the world" and that seemed a good spot to give birth to the project. And that's why I went there first; that was very important to me; that was the most important part of the sequence of doing it. The other things had flexibility but going to Easter Island first was important. And going to Easter Island first also made me think of going to Machu Picchu as a "gate" and go there and have a . . . It was a place that wasn't discovered by the Western World until 1911 at which time it got a little respect unlike a lot of other places that had just been looted and destroyed before a more appreciative culture to look at it. So Machu Picchu is intact in a lot of ways. So I wanted to go there. And that's where we had the first ritual.

LA: And that's again a symbolic meaning?

DB: Yes. A place of, a place that's been kept kind of pure, it was a kind of cleansing place for the kinds of cultures that I'm talking about, cultures that produced levels of greatness.

LA: What was the ritual that you performed at Machu Picchu and what significance did it have?

DB: Cleansing. The whole idea was to go and to be cleansed. The dance that Beth did was one of opening, beginnings, you know, expanding, that kind of imagery. The things that we read there were about that.

LA: And you washed . . .

DB: I went there. I washed myself, I washed the corners. I felt that it was just too, something too fraudulent and easy and technological about it for just to get on a plane and go to Easter Island and put a piece down in the ground. There seemed to be something really wrong about that. So the ritual for me was very important, at that time to demarcate this beginning, again to make . . . At that time when I designed it I didn't know the other things that were going on but I wanted to make sure that it would bring a kind of somberness to what we were doing, a solemnness. I mean for me that's what it's been. It's like a solemnness and a celebration of that, two things.

LA: And what about an exit?

DB: I'm now changing my mind on the "exit" from its being at all public. I've decided that I'm still going to, that for me the resolution of the piece will be in New Guinea. I've decided that what I feel sometime after that, which may be a year, two years, maybe six months, I don't know, but what I feel sometimes after that will be

meditative, reflective. And I want to deal with that with other people but not in a way that has to be publicized or exhibited or anything else. And I want to do that in the Zen garden of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto and it may not be doing anything but sitting there.

LA: And reflecting?

DB: Yes. But I've decided that there are some things, that not everything has to be, you know, drawn into it in the same way. I've decided that was one thing to pull out of it. So I've changed my mind about that. So in a sense New Guinea will be the culmination of the piece. The afterthoughts on it will be for those people who are involved and I hope everyone who has been involved can manage to get there. That would be nice.

LA: Getting back to some of the strong images, visual images that you were talking about before, can you think of some others that are very significant?

DB: I think that would be it other than works that have come out of it of myself and other artists, you know, things that they are doing that are a result of it. I know, for instance, the project took me into doing prints and lithographs which I had never done before. That's been an expanded thing. It's certainly affected my reliefs, my other art work and it continues to show itself there. The thing I've learned about my own creative process that I didn't know was there is that after twenty years I've got at least enough understanding about what goes on is that you pull yourself through experiences; if they are new experiences so much there better; and that something goes on, something mysterious goes on, it's digested, it's worked with, it's played with, it's recombined. A chemistry occurs and it comes out and you don't know when and you don't know how. But it will come out. And now it's an act of faith; my creative activity is much more an act of faith that it will come out instead of how is it going to come out. As I've said, the earlier ideas were always, there was a deliberateness about them. And now when I look at, this is true for a lot of creative individuals, I've noticed that for good work it gets less forced and deliberate the older they get. It may not be true for an author, that's developed a diet that's dependent on a quarter of a million dollars a year in best sellers; they may have to force themselves.

LA: Are there any other images that you can think of, I'm not necessarily talking about creatively now, but very strong images that you have in your mind in recollecting your thought processes about the Four Corners since 1976 that you can recall had a bearing, a strong bearing on the project itself?

DB: No. I think that's it. I mean for me it would be faces and names and photographs.

LA: Do you think that anything happened spiritually when you completed . . .

DB: To me?

LA: Individually?

DB: I think it already has. Some things, yes. I find myself turning out to the world more and more all the time. I find myself wanting to devote myself more and more to others. Which is unique. I've led a pretty selfish life I guess. Unique to me.

LA: How do you see, how do you visualize the end of it? I mean in terms of just . . .

DB: Of the project itself?

LA: Yes. I mean do you see what it's going to be in your mind? I mean without thinking about the model or anything like that, is there a feeling that . . .

DB: I feel like, what I see is what I have done in each of the sites is I've wanted to be alone with the corner for just, for at least a brief few minutes and then walking away from it and I will be back kind of thing. You know, just knowing it's there. Whether it's been plucked up again a day later or whatever I don't know. I mean at that point I don't know . . .

LA: Do you think it's like all the images of the whole thing will just like flash before you and you'll . . .

DB: I think so, I don't think they'll flash in front of me now; I think they're just there. The scenario is more, you know, in sequence, I guess, for me. I'm sure I'll feel a certain amount of self-congratulation in a different way not just that I've accomplished this, which feels good, but more that so many people have proven to have faith in me, I mean that believe in my ideas, that this idea that event the people that were having trouble with it ended up liking it and involved and committed. What more could I ask of other people? So that's really been rewarding and has drawn me very close. All the people that are in it are people that I feel . . . I mean what more could I ask from them other than marrying me, you know. And that's a lot, that's just a tremendous act of commitment, of time and energy and sacrifice. Because everyone has had to do that. Everyone has done far beyond . . . You know, they certainly haven't gotten any financial award, reward out of it. So that's been one of a sense of

community, I guess, on which I build the project in a certain amount. In terms of spiritual thing, I don't think in any conventional religious sense, but in terms of sensitizing, yes, I think there is that, there has been that. I don't know whether I've mentioned it here or not but at this moment the next project of this character that I can see myself getting into will be working on international borders. I want to do a piece on Israel and Lebanon, on Canada and the U.S., and several others as well, a number of others that I find interesting. And what interests me there is like the Four Corners just doing it, you know, nothing else. I don't want anything. I'm not looking for anything else out of it other than the sense of achieving it, of doing it either in a permanent way or even a temporary way. What is more important would be dealing with people on either side of those borders.

LA: Can you talk a little bit about psychological changes you've gone in yourself as a result of this? You've talked about wanting to devote yourself . . .

DB: I think I'm calmer, I think I'm more patient and that is certainly an added part of it. I think it's contributed somewhat to some confidence, although I certainly have great periods of time with no confidence, you know, doubting whether anything I'm doing has any worth or will it be recognized as having any worth. It's contributed in that. I think I have more courage than I used to have.

LA: To go on and do other things.

DB: Although I don't have as much as I'd like. Yes, I think I will attempt things I never would have attempted before, at least take them on and struggle with them. I think for the first time I feel I'm in the prime of my ideas, that this is the, that I'm entering . . . I feel like I've been doing a long apprenticeship with my work, that I'm now entering a time when the ideas have some worth in them and that I want to take them out into the world, that I want to interact in various ways, and that maybe any of our lives are only measured by, you know, two or three things. There's not a whole lot that we can do. I think we ask too much of people, you know, "so you wrote one great novel, why didn't you write thirty?" I think one great novel is an awful lot, an awful lot. And if somebody does one or two pieces that are good then that's a nice thing. I don't know if this will be one of them. I'd like to think so. But certainly it's a piece that has moved me into another realm in my own mind where I'm considering, I'm conceptualizing in a different way. I think that for the first time through this piece I'm able to conceptualize on a whole different level. The world has become very tiny to me, very much smaller than it was.

LA: Because . . .

CC: Be it figurative . . .

DB: Yes. It's not trivial. It's just that you can start, you know, to think . . . I mean I just think that artists perhaps for the first time in history have the ability to . . . After all, the tribal artist was somebody who had to think in their region, then you move from that into larger communities and even, you know, if you think of the European artists who were aware of art that was going on in Europe but may not have been aware of art going on in Tahiti. But then you get that kind of image in it. We now have global artists; we now have artists who are globally aware. So I feel that it's time for artists to reach out of that a little bit more and try to deal . . . I guess what I'm after, and this to me sound pretentious when I say it, it sounds pompous, but artists that interest me on the level that I'm talking about is somebody like Christo who is saying that: on the one side it's all right to make, it fine to make something that somebody can hang on the wall; he does that, I do that. And I will continue to do that, if it has meaning for me I will continue to do it. But artists now have the opportunity to deal on different levels, you know, than they did during the Renaissance or they did during the nineteenth century, that artists can be involved with social issues, with political issues out there and with human beings, and less remote, less cloistered . . .

CC: Bigger.

DB: Yes. And I find that that to me is an exciting possibility not just to . . .

[Break in taping]

LA: This a continuation of an oral interview with David Barr on January 25, 1983. David, you were in the midst of talking about artists that are significant to you, Christo being one because it involves social and political issues and that art is not as remote as . . .

DB: Cloistered, yes. It's saying that an artist doesn't just have to react to the aftermath of something, that you can be sensitive to things that are going on, that you can play a more active role in the whole society. I guess I'm finding that I'm not relating that well to artists who are into just their private, mystical suffering or something. That's all right and I think an artist like Egon Schiele who think is a great artist, a wonderful artist who did that. I mean there are people who did that. But they also are striking responsive chords in a whole lot of other people and that's where the meaning is.

CC: bigger than themselves.

DB: trembles over just themselves. But where I would then like to be alive is have an art alive in the world in a different way working with these people, devoting some time for them. I mean the kinds of things I want to do are going to communities, getting the community involved in realizing a piece and doing it, taking the resources that are at hand whatever they are. If a community happens to have a crane and makes steel then I would use that. If it's a community that has farmers and all that we can do is orchestrate the plantings of their crops in a way that is aesthetically interesting then I would do that. If it's a region that it's a matter of ecologically planting trees that we could do something different, then I would do that. And so on. Going, as I said in an early part of the interview, going empty to a social situation and responding to that with what I can give to it and making that, that whatever attention I may generate out of that, making that impetus for something that can happen that otherwise couldn't happen.

LA: Is that what the Four . . .

DB: Well, it's like in the Four Corners project, on the one hand you look at this and see all this tremendous amount of money and somebody could say, and rightly so, it's a legitimate complaint, "Look, why didn't you just give that money to somebody who needed clothes or somebody who needed food or community?" And that's something you have to think about; that's right. Maybe I should; maybe I am being indulgent. I don't have an exact answer to that. I can't one hundred percent defend it against . . . I have my doubts, too, about that. The one thing I can say is that none of that money existed before. I'm not a wealthy person. No one is going to buy my work for a project that didn't happen. I mean it's like this is the way the world works, is that people have ideas that stimulates something that otherwise wasn't there. And that's a hard thing to see and I hope it isn't just a rationalization. But what I'm saying is that to a large extent we all have to do what we can do. I am not a doctor, I am not skilled in that way. The things I am skilled in seem to be along this line so I'm trying to give them some kind of social relevance. At the same time, I don't want to fall into the trap of somebody who withdraws. What I saw with the Russian Constructivists, for instance, who people respected tremendously, is that they became so concerned about trying to be socially relevant and they stopped doing architecture because after the Revolution people didn't want what was truly revolutionary art and they made clothing, they made stoves, they made furniture, they made other things. But the sad thing was that the people didn't want that because that was too revolutionary. So these people ending up really castrated and really helpless in what they could do.

LA: And denied what they did.

DB: And denied what they do do. And that seems to be another kind of trap that you can, in a sense, say that you are operating out of a highest conscience but end up completely ineffective.

LA: Yes.

DB: So I'm trying to be effective in some way and it's humanitarian, I hope.

LA: And this has given you the opportunity to reach out in a medium and expression that you do best?

DB: Yes, I hope; I hope that's true. I'm not the one, in the end I won't be the one to judge that. I can't be sure that that's true. It's been a real hard, I mean it's been an education for me, too, it's been real hard with each of these governments and everything that's involved to sort of just get through it without being, without preaching something, you know, trying to transcend at the same time that I, too, am a person, I am involved, they have their reactions to me as a representative of Western technological culture and try to tread my way, you know weave my way through that with some awareness. I don't know if I'm succeeding but I'm certainly changing.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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